



AVIATOR

FIRST TO FIGHT SERIES

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Aviator

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DEDICATION

*If you've ever wanted to be stranded
with a grumpy hero, this is for you*

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CONTENT NOTICE

Content: Violence, graphic sexual situations, description of injuries, mental health struggles, death

Tropes: Grumpy / sunshine, forced proximity, opposites attract, military romance, small town, romantic suspense

CHAPTER ONE

CHAMPAGNE, NC

KENNA

I TRUDGE into the bridal salon, my heart heavy with dread.

This should be one of the happiest days of my life, but the voice in my head is screaming at me to turn tail and run. I press a hand to my churning stomach. Maybe we should reschedule. For another six months, when I can come back and feel more confident.

As though she can sense it, Riley tightens her grip on my arm as the doors close behind her and three of my sisters. She towers over me at nearly six feet to my five foot two, and I crane my neck to meet her stern gaze. Her brilliant blue eyes narrow at my no doubt petrified expression. “Don’t even think about it. If you don’t get your dress now, you won’t have it in time for the wedding. You’ve put this off long enough.”

Bless her. She’s never been a huge fan of my relationship with Garrett, but she’s been a rock since we got in the thick of wedding planning. I don’t know what I’d do without her. Everyone needs a bestie like Riley to bully them around. Even if it makes you hate them a little.

“I just wish Kady were here.” I keep my voice in a low murmur so my younger sisters can’t hear the worry in my tone.

Riley shifts to wrap an arm around me and guide me further into the bridal shop. I let myself be steered toward the attendant, who is busy waiting on another customer. Sometimes it’s nice to be taken care of instead of being the one doing the caring. “Still haven’t heard from her? She knew we were going wedding dress shopping today. When were she and Jamie supposed to be back? It’s not like Kady to be late.”

That’s an understatement. As a librarian at the girls’ school, Kady’s attention to detail is unmatched. She’s the sort of person to arrive where she needs to be a half-hour early. Lists are her best friend, and her calendar makes me insanely

jealous. She's so organized you want to kill her a little, but this is only to combat the fact that if she weren't so organized, her head would be permanently in the clouds—a side effect of always having her nose stuck in a book.

I bite my lip and check my phone for any messages or missed calls. Nothing. Worry mixes with the self-doubt swimming around in my stomach. She should have called by now. “They didn't really give a timeframe. From what I gathered, it was last minute. She only sent a text saying they were going out of town, but she didn't say where or how long.”

It wasn't abnormal for Kady to get in an introverted loop where she only wanted to be alone at home, hyper-fixating on her latest obsession. Jamie is the only person—aside from me—who has ever inspired her to step out of her comfort zone. But it was abnormal to go more than a week without word from her. Even when Jamie managed to tease her into going on a last-minute getaway, she would always check in.

Always.

Riley's frown deepens. “Still, it's not like her to bail on you when it really matters. I bet you'll hear from her soon.”

I'll probably give her the riot act when I do, but I'll forgive her.

I always do.

Time to change the subject so I don't completely ruin the mood. “Are you sure we can't order something online?” I whisper so the petite saleswoman holding up a finger in an “I'll be there in one minute” gesture can't hear me. Giving her a tight smile, my entourage and I move to a small reception area at the front of the salon.

The soft, romantic atmosphere of *Wedded Bliss* in Champagne, North Carolina, a small suburb just outside Charlotte, boasts pale blush paint, delicate white lace accents, and crystal chandeliers. It should have swept me off my feet. The gleaming hardwood floors and plush white rugs are nothing short of perfection. Racks and racks of dresses, each

more luxurious than the last, are displayed in a sea of silk and satin, glimmering under the soft lighting. My heart should be fluttering with excitement, maybe a little dash of nerves. Not threatening to explode right from out of my chest because I'd rather be anywhere else.

Riley takes me by the shoulders and forces me to look into her eyes. I blink a little wondering how she gets her damn eyeliner to look picture-perfect every single time. The bitch. "You deserve to be here, Kennedy Lynch. Now put a smile on your face and look less like you want to die. This is the happiest moment of your life." Riley turns me to face the consultant, who looks as though it's the happiest day of hers. I plaster on a smile and hope it doesn't come across as forced as it feels.

"Kennedy Lynch?"

I nod at the consultant's brilliant smile. "Just Kenna," I answer.

"Lovely to meet you, Kenna. I'm Amanda, and I'll be your consultant today. We're so happy to have you at Wedded Bliss. Would you ladies follow me?"

The girls chatter excitedly behind me, and I give them a stern yet nervous glance and motion for them to behave. Amanda leads us through the swarm of dresses, and I follow in a haze of ivory and cream. How in the hell does anyone choose one of these? My stubby legs work double-time to keep up with her long strides as she marches us back and to the left of the salon, where there's a more secluded area with a runway of sorts, a wall of angled mirrors, and creamy couches for spectators.

Riley and the girls huddle behind me as Amanda stands in front of a room labeled with an elegant gold number eight and poses with paper and a pen that looks like it costs as much as one of the dresses hanging around me. She gives herself a little shake as though she's getting into the right mindset. I wonder if she teaches lessons because I could use some of her poise and grace.

“So Kenna, tell me a little about you and your fiancé. What sort of look are you hoping to achieve?”

I can't tell her one where I'm fifty pounds lighter, so instead, I opt for the safer answer, a.k.a. I lie. “Something that flatters my body and makes me feel beautiful.” There. That was acceptable and less embarrassing. “I'm not especially traditional and love texture and alternative styles, so I'm open to most anything.” That's an understatement. While I may not be comfortable with my body now, I still love to look pretty. Makeup, accessories, hair. That's where I really shine. I may not be a size two, but damn if I don't show out in other ways.

Riley shoots me an encouraging glance and says, “Something sexy that shows a little skin. But tasteful,” she adds when she sees my pointed look.

Amanda scribbles something on her clipboard. “Do we have any budget concerns?”

I feel a twinge inside but push it away. “Nothing too outrageous. I'd like to keep it conservative, but I think I'd be willing to splurge on something if it was the perfect dress.” The swirling vortex of anxiety in my stomach says nothing here will make me feel any better about myself. The most I can hope for is a dress that doesn't make me want to burst into tears.

Amanda either doesn't notice my inner turmoil or politely ignores it and beams at all of us. “Excellent. Why don't you ladies look around and write down any styles that speak to you. I'll pull a couple that I think may suit your needs. If you find something you like, jot the number, and we'll have an attendant bring it to your room. Would any of you like refreshments?”

I glance back at my sisters. Fifteen-year-old Klaire, twelve-year-old Krystal, and nine-year-old Kenzie all nod enthusiastically. Amanda gives them a warm smile and promises to return with drinks and snacks shortly, giving us room to wander for a while. The girls run off before I can give them a stern talking-to about how to behave in public, but I'm

too freaking nervous to chase them down. I'll know if there are any issues if there's screaming or crying.

Riley disappears to browse and give me some space. Thankfully, we've been friends so long that she knows exactly when I need to be pushed and when I need to be left alone with my thoughts. I shake off my nerves as best I can and start flipping through the gowns. As I peruse, I catch sight of myself in a mirror and pause with a gown held up and to the side.

The woman in the mirror isn't bad-looking. I've learned how to work with my looks instead of against them. I've had to. My shoulder-length brown hair frames my face, slimming the round shape. With the help of expertly applied contour, I have sharp enough cheekbones. My eyes are brown, too, but flecks of gold in the center give them a little flair. Like I said, not bad-looking. My body, on the other hand... That's been a constant battle my whole life. Growing up in the nineties meant thin was in, and I've never been "in." Stress eating is my go-to coping mechanism, and I've had a lot of stress over the years to cope with. I'm on the low side of average height-wise, so any extra weight is even more visible. My job keeps me on my feet, and the girls keep me active, but so far, that hasn't been enough to combat the late-night self-medication of bingeing TV and chocolate.

I straighten my shoulders before one of the girls can catch me frowning at myself. They've been more excited about dress shopping than I have, and I don't want to ruin it for them. Besides, with the sheer number of options here, there has to be something that makes me look and feel beautiful.

I'm trying on what feels like the millionth dress when my day goes from dreadful to straight-up hell on Earth. A beautiful redhead bursts through the front doors of the bridal salon with riotous laughter. She doesn't see me, but my head popped up the moment I heard her telltale hyena laughter. Riley notices my forced smile fall completely and turns toward the front of the salon. All three girls have long since given up looking and are all playing on their phones, so they don't notice the tension sweeping through me.

Riley sneers and flips her long, blonde ponytail over her shoulder dismissively. “She wishes. No one would marry that snake, even if she was the last woman on the planet. Don’t let her ruin your day.”

I nod, but inwardly, I’m cringing. Fiona Ainsley works at the same dental office as Riley and me, and she’s the veritable bane of my existence. She goes out of her way to demean and ridicule me, so having her here when I’m feeling my most vulnerable makes me want to throw up in the nearest trashcan. A wave of greasy nausea rolls through my stomach.

“Shit a stick, Kenna. I’ve never seen anyone turn that shade of green before. Here, drink this.” Riley shoves a glass—holy shit, is that crystal?—in my face, and I drink deeply. The water is blissfully cool and soothes my dry throat.

“Thanks. I’m okay. I just wasn’t expecting to see her here, that’s all.” There, I managed to keep my voice steady and more confident than I felt.

Riley sidles up to me and gives Fiona the stink eye. “Yeah, she’s not seeing anyone that I know of. What the hell is she doing at a bridal salon? I wouldn’t put it past her skank ass to come here just to be a bitch. Ignore her.”

Easier said than done. I try my level best and go back to the changing room to let poor, hardworking Amanda cinch me into another gown. This is one of Riley’s choosing, a trumpet style with a deep plunge in the back that may as well render it backless. I don’t know what magic Amanda works, but she gets me into it without a bra and still manages to make my generous D-cups perk up into a decent amount of cleavage without looking raunchy. I don’t have much time to look at myself in the mirror of the changing room before my little group urges me to come out.

“C’mon, Kenna, let’s see it,” I hear Krystal call.

“I’ve been *dying* for her to try this one,” says Kenzie. Her sweet, innocent voice is all I need to push me the rest of the way through the door.

The lights pointing toward the little runway in front of the seating area are so bright they're nearly blinding. I stumble to the steps and perch in front of the mirrors, still trying to clear the dancing colors from my vision.

"Well," I say in the general direction of Riley and my sisters. "What do you think?"

The responding quiet has a finger of panic sliding down my spine. A cold sweat breaks out on the backs of my knees and on my hairline. "Guys?"

I blink rapidly, and my vision finally clears. Riley and the Ks are sitting a few feet away on the couches, dumbstruck. "Is it that bad?"

I turn to study myself in the mirrors and see someone beautiful staring back. "Whoa," I murmur at my reflection. I've always had curves, but the way the material of the dress clings to them makes my tits and ass look phenomenal. I twist to get a look at the back, which I thought would be a disaster but somehow makes me look like I have a long, lean waist. Is this dress made of magic? I look—

"You look hot as fuck," Klaire says, her eyes wide and jaw practically on the floor.

I can't even correct her because I'm as shocked as she is. "You think so?" I say breathlessly, and not only because I'm wrapped up like a mummy.

"Wow," Kenzie says with stars in her big brown eyes.

"I second the brat." Riley moves to my side. Klaire is so distracted she doesn't even mouth off to Riley. Miracles. This dress is made of miracles. "If Garrett doesn't shit a brick when he sees you coming down the aisle, he's either blind or dumb."

I turn to Amanda. "I think this is the one," I say before I can second guess myself.

She beams at me, and I swear I see the dollar signs in her eyes.

I didn't even ask for the price.



I'm still riding on a high when we move our brood to the register to schedule alterations and put down a deposit. It takes me a moment to realize that Fiona is in the group standing to our right trying on bridesmaid dresses. The light inside me dims a little, but I try to focus on the conversation between Krystal and Riley about Krystal's latest middle school crush. I wasn't even aware she had a crush, so I should be riveted, but my gaze drifts to Fiona and her equally beautiful friend.

"... I'm just saying," Fiona sneers, then does a little hair shake. Her perfectly coiffed auburn curls tumble down her perfectly toned back. The plunging line down her back doesn't have to work any miracles. She's gorgeous without any help from the dress. "No one needs to see *that*."

As the attendant at the desk schedules my fittings and takes down my credit card information, I try to tamp down the wave of melancholy. Klaire and Kenzie are now riveted by Riley and Krystal's conversation, so I have a moment to myself to breathe, but still. It turned out to be a pretty alright day, despite my fears. I'm not going to let Fiona, of all people, ruin it.

"Seriously, like, go to a gym or something."

Ice coats my veins, and my stomach clenches. I lose the conversation thread with the attendant and have to tell her my email address three times before I get it right. My head is swimming, so I miss what Fiona's friend says, but all I can hear are Fiona's words. "*Like, go to a gym or something.*"

Oily shame washes over me, and I feel my cheeks go hot. I wish I could turn around and confront her because I have no doubt her comment is directed at me. I wish I could be brave and strong, but most of my strength goes to being there for my sisters, and sometimes, I don't have enough to use for myself. Fierce tears prick the back of my eyes and burn my throat, and I excuse myself to the bathroom to splash some water on my

face before anyone notices. The last thing I want is for the girls to see me upset, and God knows Riley doesn't need any provocation to go toe to toe with Fiona. Riley may be a *Dungeons and Dragons* nerd with a penchant for vintage video games, but she also goes to Orange Theory and taekwondo and will kill a bitch.

Fiona's a bully, that's all. Someone who hasn't matured past middle school. I know that, yet her words always seem to get to me. In every other situation, I'm the one standing up to bullies. I'm the one making certain my family is protected. But when it comes to me? I freeze.

I stay in the bathroom until I figure the coast is clear, but Fiona is waiting for me in the hallway the second I step outside the door. My eyes fly to hers. If they weren't pinched in a permanent scowl, her clear, translucent blue eyes would have been a beautiful combination with her dark red hair.

"Hello, Fiona. Crazy to see you here," I manage to get out.

Fiona crosses her arms. "Kenna. I forgot you were engaged. Find anything that fits?"

I nod because I can't trust myself to keep from saying something I may regret. We have to work together, after all. I have to be civil. For Garrett's sake. I wouldn't want to put him in an awkward position. Especially not with how hard it's been to find a reliable receptionist. Fiona's the longest one in two years that he's managed to keep at our fast-paced dental office.

"Yes," seems like a nice enough answer.

It's hard to remember that I thought maybe we could be friends when Fiona started at the office six months ago. It would have been easy to become bitter toward prettier people—my own twin sister could be a model if she wanted—but I knew what it was like to be judged on appearances and always tried to never be that person.

Until Fiona.

"Think Garrett will like it?"

All I can do is nod because, for some reason, my throat clamps down on my response when I hear her say his name. It

sounds like something dirty dripping from her lips, and suddenly, I want to get as far away from her as I possibly can.

I push by her and say, “Have a great rest of the weekend. See you at work,” before I do something stupid like cry in front of her.

Riley and the girls are waiting out on the sidewalk when I emerge, the blast of cold air clear and refreshing. I force myself to push thoughts of Fiona, her words, and our conversation to the back of my mind, but I know they’ll linger there. Festering. Waiting for my vulnerable moments to creep back up and needle me until I break.

“Finally,” Klaire says. “I’m starving. Can we go get something to eat?”

I nod and follow them back to the minivan. At lunch, I eat a double serving of ice cream, and each time I think of Fiona or me in my dress and Garrett’s reaction, I eat another spoonful.

All I can think is, *I wish Kady was here.*

CHAPTER TWO

CRYSTAL MOUNTAIN, NC

DEAN

ALL I'VE WANTED since I got up in the air with a group of chattering billionaire brothers was peace and quiet. I've got enough voices in my head. I really don't need them shouting over each other to make me feel the need to peel off my skin. It was a long three-hour flight to their business meeting and another three-hour flight back. Only, on the flight back, they were plied with liquor and the thrill of some deal going through that they seemed ten times as loud.

Gramps would have been over the moon to know I got to play chauffeur to the infamous Kincaid brothers, who make their home in Crystal Mountain. Their family owns most of the mountain itself, not to mention the lucrative lumber business, and real estate mogul Weston Kincaid regularly makes headlines in our small tourist-centric newspaper. But all I wanted was to get back home to the peace of my cabin.

The steady hum of the engine finally cuts out as I bring my charter plane to a stop. The sweat beads on my forehead are a testament to the long flight and the unexpected turbulence we encountered. I can't help but feel relieved to be back on solid ground. As I taxi the Citation CJ2 to its designated parking spot, the clients still chatter away in the back, celebrating their new deal. I'm just happy to be done with them. I can already picture myself relaxing on the porch of my grandfather's house, enjoying the view of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance.

I shut down the engines and disembark the aircraft. The quiet of the airport is a welcome relief from the noise and chaos of the flight. The brothers bound and, in some cases, stumble from the plane with a friendly wave and a goodbye before heading for the hangar and their waiting cars.

I look forward to the next time I get to take the CJ2 up into the skies, with quieter clients, of course. For now, I want to get back to spend time with Gramps before his eight o'clock lights

out, but it looks like I'll only get there with enough time for a quick drink and a little bullshitting. I'll take what I can get. The old man may be spry mentally, but physically... well, the years are starting to catch up with him.

The shouted conversations I listened to all day ring in my ears as I grab my overnight kit from the lockers in the office area of the hangar. I almost make a clean escape when my boss and the airfield owner, Lawrence Darcy, peeks his head out of his office. His face is round and jolly, with rosy cheeks, a bulbous nose, and deep-set, friendly eyes that crinkle at the corners when he smiles. But he's not smiling now. Spotting me, his round face droops with relief.

"Dean, thank god. I thought I'd missed you."

Lawrence takes good care of himself, with his well-manicured salt-and-pepper beard and hair combed back in a neat, professional style. He wears a pair of spectacles perched on his nose that add a touch of intellectual charm to his appearance, but he doesn't look put together now. His hair is ruffled like he's been running his hands through it constantly, his glasses are askew, and there's a light sheen of sweat over his forehead.

I brace myself for bad news as I approach him.

"What's up?" I ask, hoping he isn't sending me out on a last-minute flight. I can always use the money, but I hoped to get a few days' rest between jobs.

"It's your grandfather," he says, his voice low and serious. "Margaret just called. There's been some sort of emergency. You need to get to the emergency room as soon as possible."

My heart hammers in my chest as if it's trying to break free, and I struggle to breathe. My grandfather has always been a rock, a father figure who's guided me through the darkest moments. The thought of losing him now gut-punches me, leaving me reeling.

"Is he okay? How bad is it?" I ask.

"I don't know," Lawrence admits. "Margaret didn't say much, just that he's unconscious."

I nod dumbly, trying to process what he's telling me. I feel an overwhelming sense of guilt for not being able to be there for my grandpa when he needed me most. Margaret often stops by the house to check on him for this exact reason if I'm gone overnight.

"Take all the time you need, Dean," Lawrence says, briefly placing a hand on my shoulder before stepping away. It's an unusual show of support from him but one I appreciate, nonetheless.

"Thank you," I reply hastily, already moving towards my truck. My only focus now is getting home to Gramps as quickly as possible. Thoughts of my last deployment in Afghanistan and losing my friend, Ryan Tate, who was killed in action, flicker through my mind like ghosts. A stark reminder that life can change in an instant.

The wind from the open window rips through my hair as I speed along the winding road, and the roar of my truck's engine drowns out all other sounds. Trees blur past me in a green haze, and the sun dips low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the asphalt. My heart pounds in my chest, fueled by adrenaline and fear for my grandfather.

"Almost there," I tell myself, trying to hold on to the hope that I'm not too late.

As I pull into the hospital parking lot, a familiar dread rises in my chest, a stark reminder of the countless hours spent visiting wounded friends and loved ones in military hospitals. I shake my head, momentarily pushing aside the painful memories and focusing on the task at hand.

"Please let him be okay," I murmur, leaping from the truck and striding into the hospital.

"Excuse me," I say, interrupting a nurse bustling down the hallway. "I'm looking for my grandfather, Lucas Pascal."

"Are you Dean Tyler?" she asks, her brow furrowing with concern. "Next of kin?"

"That's right," I confirm, a knot forming in my stomach as I take in her expression. She nods, directing me to the waiting

room where a doctor will meet me.

“Thank you,” I mutter, my breath catching as I go to the sterile room. The walls close in around me, and suddenly, it feels like I’m back in Afghanistan, surrounded by the smell of blood and the sound of screaming. I close my eyes tightly, willing the memory away.

“Mr. Tyler?” A voice cuts through my thoughts, pulling me back to reality. I open my eyes to find a doctor standing in front of me, his face lined with fatigue but his eyes kind.

“Yeah,” I tell him, rising to my feet. “Tell me about my grandfather.”

“I’m so sorry to tell you that Mr. Pascal suffered a major stroke.” The doctor’s voice is steady and calm. “We’re doing everything we can to treat him, but it’s too early to determine the extent of any possible damage.”

“Can I see him?”

“Of course,” he replies, leading me down a maze of hallways until we arrive at my grandfather’s room. The sight of him lying there, so still and vulnerable, sends a wave of sorrow crashing over me. My vision blurs with emotion as I take his hand, gripping it tightly.

“Hey, Gramps,” I whisper, trying to sound strong despite the tremor in my voice. “You’ve got to fight, okay? I need you here, you old bastard. You’re the only thing keeping me together.”

I sit by his bedside and watch the steady rise and fall of his chest. I can’t help but feel guilty. I should have been there. I should have been taking better care of him. But I was too busy taking every possible job, so I didn’t have to think about... *anything*. Because if I had a spare minute to let my ghosts catch up with me... *No. Not the time.*

I make a silent promise to be there for him every step of the way and make sure he gets the care he needs and deserves. I won’t let him down again like I have so many others in my life. Sleep doesn’t take me quickly, but when it does, it’s haunted by ghosts.



The gunfire was loud and constant, like a never-ending drumbeat in my ears. I could feel the vibrations of each shot in my chest, making my heart pound. Ryan was up ahead of me, shouting orders to the rest of his team, trying to keep us all together and focused. And then, out of nowhere, he went flying. He didn't even have time to scream. I almost didn't realize what had happened until our combat medic, Ford Collier, started shouting over the radio.

I remember the way his body fell to the ground, lifeless. The way the blood began to pool around him, staining the dirt in a dark red-black shadow. It all happened so fast, but in that moment, it felt like time had slowed down. The gunfire and explosions continued around us, but everything felt distant and muffled. All I could focus on was Ryan's body and Collier frantically trying to stop blood flow.

But there was no way to stop it.

Once blood loss reached a certain point... there was no coming back.

Especially not in a hell like this.

Collier was damn near catatonic when we transported what was left of Tate to the helicopter I'd radioed in for. James Murdoch was being held up by Killian Burke, who'd also taken shrapnel, though quite a bit less than Tate.

Callum Reece took off his helmet and threw it on the floor between us, pressing his head between his knees as we took to the air. An unspoken conversation happened between Jamie, Kill, and me.

"What happened?" they both seemed to ask.

I lifted a shoulder in response. Because I had no fucking clue. All I knew was that one of my best friends was dead.

Gone.

And I'd seen what Collier had done.

I'd heard about it happening before—medics giving a killing dose of whatever they had on hand. But I'd never witnessed it. Never thought I'd have to.

Never thought Tate would be on the receiving end of it. Or that a man I trusted with my life would be the one doing it.

Somehow everything had gotten so completely fucked.

We'd survived the night. There was that, at least...

But the cost of our survival had been paid in Tate's blood.



I wake with a start, my heart pounding in my chest. The familiar weight of guilt and grief presses down on me as the images of that fateful day play through my mind: Ryan's face as he looked at me the split second before the gunfire hit him, the screams of my teammates, and the deafening roar of the helicopter as we tried to escape.

I glance at Gramps, his chest rising and falling steadily in his sleep. The hospital room is quiet, save for the beeping of the machines monitoring his vitals. Margaret and Lawrence went home for much-needed sleep. I run my hand through my hair, wishing I could just shake off the nightmare and the memories that come with it.

I get up and walk to the window, looking out at the dark night. I know I should try to get more sleep, but my mind is racing, and I can't shake the feeling of unease and helplessness.

A doctor rushes in with a nurse who helps check Luke's vitals. Hovering by his bedside, I watch with my arms crossed over my chest. The nurse keeps glancing at me with a worried frown. I know I'm intimidating at nearly six-four with a near-constant scowl underneath my thick growth of beard, but I don't give a shit.

The doctor, a different one this time, either doesn't notice or doesn't care. She says, "He's stable for now, but he's had a serious stroke. He's going to need a lot of physical therapy to recover. For now, he'll need lots of rest. And you should get some too. We can call if anything changes."

I leave my information at the desk, knowing I should go home, but I can't face my empty cabin. I need something to numb the pain and guilt, so I find myself at a bar, ordering a whiskey. As I drink, the memories of my last deployment flood back, Ryan's screams echoing in my mind. I throw back another drink, trying to drown out the past. But it's a losing battle, and I know I'll never truly escape it.

The smell of stale beer and cigarettes fills my nose, but the burn of the whiskey takes away my ability to care. I find a quiet corner to be alone with my thoughts and nurse my drink, trying to forget about everything that happened.

But my peace doesn't last. It never does.

A woman approaches me, her eyes scanning my body hungrily. Another man may have wanted a beautiful woman to lose themselves in, but it's never been my thing. My scowl deepens.

"Hey there, handsome," she purrs, sliding onto the stool beside me. Her scent fills my nose, and it's so *wrong* I physically shy away from her. Exactly what part of my scowl says I'm looking for some action? "Can I buy you another drink?"

I shake my head, feeling a wave of apathy wash over me, deadening me to everything but the insistent *need* to get this person away from me. "I'm not interested," I say curtly, turning back to my drink.

The pout is plain in her voice when she speaks, her hand trailing down my arm. "Come on, don't be like that," she says, low and seductive. Taking a generous swallow, I hope the alcohol will erase the memory of her touch. I don't know why I bother. It doesn't do a whole hell of a lot when it comes to erasing memories.

I shrug her off, my temper starting to rise. The feel of her hands on me makes me want to shred my own skin. “I said I’m not interested,” I growl, my eyes locked on hers.

She huffs, her face twisted in anger. “Fine, suit yourself,” she spits, storming off.

I sigh in relief, feeling the weight of her presence lifted off my shoulders. I have no interest in romantic relationships and no desire for the mindless sort of sex that would give momentary relief. All I want is to be alone, to try and make sense of the chaos in my head. I take another sip of my whiskey, feeling the warmth spread through my chest.

Naturally, that peace is short-lived. Not even five minutes after the woman vacated the stool, Felix plops down with a smirk. “Hey man, you mind if I make a pass on that chick you just turned down?”

I shrug, not really in the mood for small talk. “Do your worst,” I grunt.

Felix shakes his head, his gaze on the woman shaking her long, dark hair in irritation where she sits with her group of friends. “Preciate it. You doin’ alright? I heard about Luke through the grapevine. How’s he doing? Any news?”

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I sigh. “None really yet. Thought I’d come here for some of my own medication. Just left the hospital. He’s resting now. They’ll know more in a few days, I guess.”

Felix is a good man, so he buys me a couple more beers and doesn’t care if I don’t talk much while he mostly rambles. He was one of those guys who shit always seemed to bounce off. He did his own tours while in the Army and managed to make it out relatively unscathed. Now, he flies as a helicopter medic for the county and occasionally with the North Carolina Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team, NCHART.

As though he can read my mind, he says, “You know, NCHART is always looking for good pilots. You could apply in the next round, get the training. Get back to saving lives instead of flying around rich dudes in suits.”

I shake my head. The thought of going back to being responsible for anyone's life makes my stomach churn. "No chance in hell. I'll leave the heroics up to you and stick with the billionaires."

"This is because you can't handle dangling from helicopters anymore, isn't it? Pussy. I knew Marines were pussies."

I slap him on the back, causing him to choke on a swallow of beer. "You've got me there. That's the reason."

Felix chuckles. "Knew it." But he lets the subject drop and orders us another round.

When we've both had enough, he lets me share an Uber home to make sure I get back okay and offers to give me a lift back to my truck the next day. I thank him and pass the fuck out the second I lock the door behind me. The alcohol gives me a night without any nightmares.

For now.

CHAPTER THREE

KENNA

THE PHONE RINGS at the same time I hear a blood-curdling scream.

Oddly enough, the phone ringing is the anomaly, not the screaming. As a loud and proud millennial, I don't call anyone... ever. And no one I know ever calls me.

Well, with one exception.

Which is why my heart begins to race as I navigate down a hallway strewn with clothes, backpacks, discarded shoes, softball gear, and a lone acoustic guitar. It's probably nothing. Robocall or something. God knows I get enough of those these days. I pass by the kids' rooms, valiantly ignoring their spats. I can't deal with them *or* robocallers *or* telemarketers until I've actually had the chance to finish the cup of still-full coffee I've been carting around all morning as I try to complete last-minute chores.

Seriously, there isn't enough caffeine in the world to endure a Monday morning with three kids. *Girl* kids at that. When the scream isn't followed by another by the time I reach the kitchen, I know no one has been seriously injured. I continue my search for my still-ringing phone to no avail.

"If you're not in the car in five minutes, you're going to be left behind," I shout over my shoulder as I sift through pages of homework, bills, and empty cereal boxes littering the counter. The phone stops ringing, and I curse under my breath, then heave a sigh that has my short and in terrible need of a new dye-job bob fluttering into my eyes. A quick search through our junk drawer yields a hodge-podge of birthday candles, spare batteries, random tools, wires for mystery electronics, stubs of dull, forgotten pencils and dried-out pens, school pictures, and toothpicks, but no phone.

"Kenna, Krystal won't give me my shirt back. She's always stealing my stuff." Klaire sends a venomous glare at

Krystal, who grins back at her. Krystal adjusts the crop top that's too short for either of them with a sassy flip of her hair as she flounces off.

The phone rings again, and I look heavenward before saying, "How about this? Whoever finds my phone first gets to choose a shirt from my closet for tomorrow?"

The two share a look and then sprint from the doorway. After a mad search, Klaire emerges from the fridge with a victorious smile and my phone in her hand. "Thanks," I tell her as she hands it over. "What the hell was it doing in the fridge?" But they're both already darting out of the kitchen and toward my bedroom, the telltale sound of an argument in their wake.

I decide that is a problem for Future Kenna to deal with. Right now, whoever thinks seven a.m. on a Monday morning is a dire emergency takes precedence. "Hello," I say without looking at the caller I.D. I wedge the phone between my chin and shoulder as I reach for the coffee pot to top off my cup. Next, I need to find my Apple Watch so I can't lose my phone again before work. I'm already late enough as it is.

"I can't believe I trusted you!" The shout blares through the speaker and straight into my ear, causing me to wince. In my shock, the phone clatters to the counter. The shrieks continue, loud enough to hear them at a distance, though I can't make out the words.

What in the world?

Pressing the phone back to my ear, I say, "Who is this?"

"I should have shot you when I had the chance. This is going too far. You're crazy. You're a lunatic. This can't be real. For goodness' sake."

It's the 'for goodness' sake' that does it for me. Without a doubt, the screaming woman on the other line is my twin sister. "Kady?" The adrenaline from my initial reaction is still coursing through me. I press a hand to my heart and will it to slow its frenetic pace. "Kady, what the hell? You scared the shit out of me."

“I mean it,” comes the voice again. “Stay away from me, or I’ll... I’ll beat your brains in.”

Now, Kady has done some... interesting things over the years. A faerie-themed ball celebrating her favorite fantasy romance series. Obsessively hoarding books and arranging them in a massive, rainbow-colored library. Constantly trying to repair the relationship with our father. But she’s never done anything violent. She’s the softest, sweetest person I know. Constantly forgiving everyone else’s shortcomings. Going the extra mile for students at school, even if they’ve tried her one too many times. The last thing she’d ever do is threaten to hurt someone. Those shouted threats, plus not hearing from her in a week, have me paying attention.

Our three younger sisters are all yammering as I attempt to herd them into my car for morning drop-off. Klaire and Krystal must have already forgotten their fight because they’re both bowed over a phone, giggling as they watch some chick shake her ass. Since when did they have access to that app? I file that away for Future Kenna as well. Poor girl, she’s gonna have her hands full.

“Kady, what’s going on?” A gusty, frigid wind blows my long bangs into my face. I swipe them away with a frown. I really shouldn’t have gone for the severe bob that is probably a few years past being trendy. But Garrett likes the style, and I like making him happy. Only, it’s the middle of winter, and we’re about to be hit with an arctic front. But, man, I wish I had those couple extra inches to protect my neck. I should have packed a scarf, but there’s no time now to run back in and grab one.

Our neighbors, a young family in their late twenties with a baby boy around six months old, bounce out of their house—all smiles. Their happy voices carry over the wind as they load up their car with the car seat, stroller, and diaper bag. That should have been the life my sisters had. Two happy, caring parents. Not me. The girl who has no idea what she’s doing on a good day.

At the sound of Kady’s name, the three girls stop getting into the car, and their eyes focus on me. I’m pinned in place

with my keys in one hand and my phone pressed against my ear in the other.

“What’s going on?” Klaire takes this step away from her sisters, worry now etched on her too-young face.

I have to keep calm for them—story of my life. It won’t help anyone if I start freaking out. “Get your sisters in the car. Everything’s fine.” Sweet Klaire, who is much too old for her age, seems to read the tone in my voice. Her mouth firming, she softly says, “C’mon,” and her sisters follow her without resistance.

Turning back to my phone, I realize there’s silence on the other end of the line now. My stomach begins to quake, the coffee churning sickeningly. “Kady,” I plead into my phone. “Please talk to me. Tell me what’s going on. Who is with you?”

Because certainly, the man she’s screaming at can’t be her boyfriend, Jamie. The thought is incomprehensible. Sure, he’s got mysterious secrets and is broody as all hell, but he’s gentle with her. That’s what I called him the first day they met—the gentle giant. Hands so big they could practically wrap around her slight waist and a deep-gravelly voice that seriously makes her swoon. Jamie would never do anything that would make Kady so frightened...

Would he?

Dozens of memories play repeatedly in my mind as I begin to panic. Meeting Jamie at a July 4th celebration our town throws every year. Him coming back from deployment a different man and breaking it off with Kady. Now Kady texting to say they were going on a trip to sort things out. I thought it was a good thing; I’ve never seen Kady so gone for a man. But had I made a terrible mistake assuming she’d be safe with him?

My ears strain for something, anything. I swear I can hear a struggle: a rustling of clothes and a body colliding against something solid before the phone clatters to the ground.

Then I finally hear one word, but it's enough to make my stomach squeeze. "*Kady*."

Then the line goes dead.

My heart tumbles to my feet. Because the voice I heard wasn't Kady's, but I still recognized it.

Jamie.

"Kenna, c'mon. We're going to be late," I hear Krystal say through the buzzing in my head.

Her voice spurs me into action. I put my phone in my pocket, climb in the driver's seat, and reverse out of the driveway, all while my brain is trying to sort through everything that just happened. The girls' squabbles are like white noise as I drive to school by habit. I try to call Kady's cell again—at least a half dozen times—but the calls all go straight to voicemail.

Christmas decorations that still haven't been taken down sparkle in the corner of my eye. The school bell rings, and I watch the girls split off on the front sidewalk—the two younger ones to the elementary school building and Klaire to the high school—in a daze. Finally, a horn honks behind me and snaps me out of it. I see an irate mother still in her pajamas and messy bun, gesticulating wildly at the empty space in front of me. The car in front of me has already pulled through the stop sign.

Focus, Kenna. What's your next move?

The girls are my priority. I text my dad to see if he can pick them up after school, but I don't hold my breath. He may live in town, but we see him at most once every few months. For someone who has a bunch of kids scattered around the area, he doesn't seem to have much interest in them. At least not in the five of us.

Because I don't know what else to do, I just drive to work. Garrett will be there, and he'll know what to do. He always somehow knows how to make my thoughts shuffle back into order.

While sitting in the parking lot waiting for the office manager to unlock the building, I bring out my phone and try her number again—no dice. I look up her social media but have no luck there either. She’s never been one to post every detail, anyway. Kady was always too busy *doing* things to take time to post about them, and I had no time due to the three other mouths to feed.

As a last resort, I video call Riley. Naturally, she answers immediately, her half-made-up face filling the screen. My insides immediately unclench, and I breathe a little easier. “Don’t tell me you’re already at work,” she says as she widens her eyes to swipe on mascara. “You’re making the rest of us look bad.” Riley curses as she gets mascara in her eyes, and they begin to water. She fumbles to prop her phone up so she can have both hands free.

“I like to be early. But that’s not why I’m calling. Kady called me this morning.”

Riley snorts as she takes out a thick pair of lashes and starts applying glue. I knew I’d forgotten something this morning. Lashes. I check my reflection in the rearview mirror and curse under my breath. I may as well be naked without them.

“She better have a good excuse for missing dress shopping. Really, you should let me be maid of honor.”

If it were anyone else, I would have ripped them a new one, but Riley has been my friend for most of our twenties, and she may as well be family at this point. “She didn’t. Riles, I think she’s in trouble.”

Riley blinks rapidly, checking her appearance in the mirror somewhere above her phone. “What kind of trouble?”

“I don’t know... I mean, I can’t be sure. When she called, it sounded like she was fighting someone off.” I gulp in air, trying not to relive the panic I felt. “Then I heard Jamie’s voice. I think they’re in trouble.”

Pausing her lipstick application, Riley’s brows furrow. “Is this some sort of joke? Are you and Kady punking me or

something?” The half smile on her lips fades as she studies my expression. “You’re not kidding, are you? Honey-butt, they were probably just messing around and butt-dialed you while they were doing it.”

I dig my fingers into my eyelids and wince, hoping I didn’t ruin all the work I put in making my makeup perfect B.T.C.—before the call. “I’m not kidding. She sounded terrified. I’ve been trying to call her back all morning, but I just get voicemail. What if they’re really in trouble?”

“Look, let’s be rational about this. Do you guys share your location with each other?”

Letting out a huge breath, I press a hand to my racing heart, then swipe up on my phone and open the app. “You’re so smart. This is why I keep you around.”

I can’t see Riley on the screen, but I hear her self-satisfied huff. “Damn right, I am. You’d be lost without me.” The sound of her smacking her lips echoes in the car as I scroll to find Kady’s phone in the list of devices I can access. “Well, what does it say?”

I study the app for a minute, trying to make sense of everything as my mind races. “Her phone isn’t currently picking up a signal, but her last location was in the mountains. Some cabin up near Thunderhead Mountain.”

“What the hell would she be doing up there?” Riley asks.

Thunderhead Mountain is a remote area in the Blue Ridge Mountains. There’s not much there, really, other than it being along the parkway and a center for tourists. I study the map, but nothing pops out at me.

“Kenna? You still there?”

I swipe back over the video chat. “Why would she be in Thunderhead Mountain?”

Riley’s expression grows serious. “Isn’t that where Jamie said he was from?”

I gasp, meeting Riley’s eyes. “Now do you believe me?”

That area of the mountains is a touristy area that caters to the nearby mountain resort imaginatively named Crystal Mountain Resort, named after the range where it's located. During the peak of the winter season, they offer snowboarding, skiing, and ice skating. But the name rings a bell. Hadn't Jamie said something about a friend living in Crystal Mountain? I'd thought it was weird at the time, considering they were no longer friendly.

Darren? Derrick? Dwayne? Something. Maybe he knows where they could be. Maybe he can help me find them.

"Don't move a muscle. I'll be there in twenty. And whatever you do, don't listen to Garrett when he tries to tell you that you're overreacting."



A short while later, Fiona and Garrett arrive and walk into the office together, almost as if they'd planned it that way. The knot in my stomach unclenches somewhat at the sight of him. He'll know what I should do next. No matter what Riley says about him, Garrett has always been there for me.

The frigid chill pierces the thin material of my scrubs and light jacket as I cut across the parking lot to the office. Neither of them seems to notice me as I increase my speed from a quick stride to practically a jog. They look so happy from a distance compared to how absolutely ragged I feel inside.

I'm not slated to come in until nine, but I couldn't wait any longer. I have to talk to Garrett. Urgency propels me through the double door entrance and dark waiting room. Voices trickle down the hallway, coming from Garrett's office.

Almost there.

"Hey, Garrett, I have to talk to—"

My question is cut short as Fiona and Garrett spring apart, their lips making an audible sound as they disengage. Fiona's

perfectly sculpted cheekbones go cherry red. Her blue eyes flash with feminine satisfaction at the growing horror on my face. She makes a show of wiping her mouth before sauntering past me as I stand frozen in the doorway with my heart stuttering to a stop in my chest.

Is it possible to die from a heart attack at twenty-nine? Because that's exactly what it feels like as I stare at the man I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with. The man I'd been with for most of my twenties. The man I thought loved me.

I just bought a wedding dress for him. The one thing I've dreaded most of my adult life. I was going to *commit* to him. The one thing I always swore I'd never do.

He takes a step toward me, lifting a placating hand, and his mouth opens, but I slash my hand through the air.

"If you say this isn't what it looks like, or it's not what I think, then I'm going to kick you in the dick, Garrett Anderson." My voice comes out throaty and thick with unshed tears, but I don't dare let one of them fall. I won't give him the satisfaction.

His mouth snaps shut, and my hand drops back down to my side as we stare at each other in silence. All the words, fears, and pleas for reassurance die in my throat, along with the life I thought we were making together. It hurts so much I'm terrified it will swallow me whole, but I can't let it. I can't let my grief consume me.

I have to think about Kady.

I grab onto that lifeline. *Yes, think about Kady.* My unshed tears dry as I tuck the hurt into a deep corner of myself. "I quit." The words tumble between us like concrete blocks.

Final.

Resolute.

They sound a hell of a lot more confident than I feel. But I'm good at hiding when I'm hurt. I've had a lot of practice, after all.

Garrett's eyes widen. "You can't quit, Kenna." He thrusts a hand through his hair. "We're already hellishly short-staffed as it is. You know how much I rely on you. Please, you have to ___"

"I don't have to do anything. Consider this my resignation letter. Dated effective for the end of my accrued vacation time, which I'm taking as of now. And if you say one word, *one word*, about it or hinder my job search in the future, I won't hesitate to take this wherever I need to hit you where it hurts."

"What the hell has gotten into you?" Garrett sputters at my back as I spin on my heel. I may sound brave, but I'm about to lose it, and the last thing I want is for Garrett and *Fiona* to see me break apart.

I slam the engagement ring on the desk in front of them, rush through the office, and back out into the icy morning. The next thing I know, I'm in the front seat of my car, bawling into my hands, snot running down my face. I cry until all my makeup is smeared, my chest aches, and my eyes burn. Then there's a knock at my door.

Jerking upright, I try to cover the mess with my sleeve until I see Riley standing outside. She gets one look at me and scurries around to the passenger side, hopping in and passing me a makeup wipe from her giant bag of tricks.

"Who do we have to kill?" she asks.

CHAPTER FOUR

DEAN

“GOD SAVE ME FROM TOURISTS,” I mumble as I creep up the mountain road toward my house.

The little sedan in front of me is fighting through the snow, and I know there’s no way in hell their little car is a match for the icy roads. But did they pay attention to the warnings? Did they rent a four-wheel drive?

Nope. Of course not.

It’s idiots like them that wind up doing something stupid, like getting stranded in the mountains in the middle of winter and needing to be rescued. They finally pull the car to a stop at the side of the road. The father gets out and slams the door, and I can tell he’s pissed as hell, even from a distance. The mom leans out from her side and tries to reason with him. Two kids bounce around in the back, oblivious. Looking at them makes my skin crawl, and all I can think about is getting the hell away and back to the cabin.

The father catches my eye just as I’m moving to go around them. I try to blend in with the leather seat, to no avail. Sighing, I pull up to the stop sign, pausing to look both ways. The father moves to the passenger side and gestures for me to roll down the window, which I ignore.

“Hey, buddy, can you give us a hand?” he yells through the glass and hooks a thumb over his shoulder toward the sedan.

I shake my head and gesture for him to back away so I don’t run him over. His face flushes—either from the below-freezing temperatures or another flash of anger. Probably both. He waits in disbelief, probably certain I’ll change my mind, but it’s useless. His failure to plan is not my responsibility. I rev the engine, and he stumbles back at the loud purr from the Ford F-350.

“What the hell, dickhead!” I hear him shout over the engine.

When I'm sure I have enough clearance, I accelerate through the stop sign and pull onto the road that'll lead me up the mountain. They can call a tow service and a rental agency and be back to their vacation condo within the hour and won't be out anything but the inconvenience. That's why, as I drive away from the red-faced dad, I don't feel an ounce of guilt.

In the years since I left the Marines, I've lived by a hard and fast rule: don't be a hero. You'd think this would only apply to dire situations—life or death stuff—but I've found my life is a whole hell of a lot easier if I use it as a blanket rule. Chicks, kids, little old ladies, it doesn't matter. Staying my ass out of it keeps me sane, and I have no reason to change.

That's why I chose Crystal Mountain after getting out of the Marines. Sure, it's got a shit ton of tourists, especially now during the winter season when the resorts manufacture snow on the peaks for skiing, snowboarding, and whatever the hell else. But the views, man. There's nothing like it anywhere on Earth. And that's saying something, considering I've flown to some of the most beautiful places in the country, if not the world.

The cabin I share with my Grandfather Luke, or Gramps when he's being extra sassy, is one he used to share with my Nana Nadine. I used to spend summers here, which turned into all vacations and most of the school year after my mother married my stepdad, Frank. When Frank and I couldn't stomach living under the same roof anymore, I moved in with Gramps and Nana full-time until I shipped out at eighteen to join the Marines.

My grandmother Nadine passed away while I was in the Corps, and Gramps was fine by himself for the next few years. Gramps called when I was trying to figure out what the hell I should be doing with my life after the military. Said I could stay with him until I figured it out.

After I moved in with him, it didn't take long for me to realize he needed the help—and the company. When I wasn't scheduled for a flight, I stuck close to home helping him with the small farm he ran—goats, chickens, a couple ducks—or

running him to and from appointments. I hated seeing him getting more frail by the day, but I was grateful for the time we had together. Margaret helped when I was gone or when Gramps and I started to get on each other's nerves. She was about the only person I'd let come near the place without insisting they return to their vehicle and go back the way they came.

The interaction with the tourists fades into the back of my mind as I drive up the mountain road. Trees tower above me, their branches dusted with a sheet of snow carried from the resort's machines. We haven't had a real snow yet, but it's coming. I swear I can practically feel it in my bones. This will mean a break for me, and I'm surprised to find that I'm actually kind of looking forward to it. The holiday season is always our busiest, so I haven't been home much to spend time with Gramps. A fact he reminded me of whenever he saw me before his stroke.

The last of the tension leeches out of me as I pull up to the cabin and shut off the truck. Contentment stirs in my chest at the feeling of being home. This is the feeling I'll do anything to protect. It's why I hate people coming and disturbing it. Why I won't answer Ford or Callum's calls and messages. Why I turn down Felix's offer to put in a good word for me with NCHART.

I've spent most of my life eaten up with adrenaline, fear, and guilt. Now all I want is peace and to be left the hell alone.

Ice crunches under my boots, the only sound in the vast woods surrounding the cabin aside from the occasional sound of the animals behind the house. Crisp mountain air fills my lungs with each breath, along with a hint of smoke from the chimney. They must have a fire going.

Inside, it's warm and cozy, and there's some music playing in the background. My ears strain to hear more, and I recognize the song "(Sittin' On) the Dock of the Bay" by Otis Redding. I take off my coat and boots, feeling like I'm shedding a second skin.

I find Gramps sitting in an armchair near the fireplace with a blanket over his lap and a puzzle on the TV tray in front of him. Margaret is perched next to him, taking his pulse. On the side table is a carafe of water and a whole host of pills and gadgets the doctors sent home with us when he was cleared to leave the hospital.

Margaret notices me and smiles. “Hey, handsome. Thought I heard the truck pull up. How was your flight?” she asks, humming as she finishes her task. I don’t know what I would have done without her. I make good money doing what I do, and Luke has a healthy retirement, but the medical bills are going to drown us between his emergency stay, medications, and physical therapy.

We’re lucky he made it through with relatively minimal complications, but that doesn’t mean we’re out of the woods.

“Good, but I’m glad to be home. How’s he doing today?” I move to the kitchen to grab a beer and pop the top, drinking deeply.

“He’s doing much better,” Margaret says, “but I think he’s getting restless. He wants to get out and move around.”

Luke grunts in frustration, his brow furrowing as he debates between two puzzle pieces. “I wish the two of you would stop talking about me like I’m not here. And I don’t need to be stuck indoors like an invalid.”

I walk over to him and squeeze his shoulder. “I know you’re feeling better, Gramps, but you need to take it easy. At least for now. You had a stroke. You need to listen to the doctors and do what they say.”

“Bah,” he says. “I don’t need no doctors tellin’ me what to do. I’ve been taking care of myself for over eighty years. I think I know what’s best for me.”

Margaret smiles sympathetically. “I know it’s hard, Mr. Pascal, but you need to take it easy for a little while longer. You don’t want to risk having another stroke.”

He grumbles, but I can see the defeat in his eyes. He knows she’s right, but he doesn’t like it.

“Don’t worry. We’ll get you back on your feet and causing trouble in no time.”

He nods, and I can tell he’s resigned himself to his bedrest, at least for now.

I walk Margaret to the door and thank her for caring for Luke while I was away. She smiles, gives me a quick hug, and steps out onto the porch. As she descends the steps, I notice a stray cat sitting on the rocking chair to my right. I glance up, hoping I can foist it on Margaret, but she’s already pulling out of the drive.

The cat is small with black fur, a white belly, and an orange patch in the shape of the sun over one of its eyes. It looks at me quizzically, tilting its head from side to side as if trying to understand me.

We regard each other for a moment, and then I make a shooing motion, hoping it’ll go back where it came from. But it only stares and then licks its paws, completely unimpressed. I curse under my breath. I can’t leave it out in the cold. It’s going to be below freezing tonight. Sighing, I pick it up and bring it inside. Tomorrow, I’ll take it to the shelter to see if its owners have reported him missing.

Gramps tips down his glasses at the mass of fur in my arms and says, “Well, what have we here?”

I let the cat down to get a can of tuna from the pantry. When I turn back around, the cat’s jumped up onto the recliner with Gramps and settled onto his legs like this is its house or something.

“Looks like it’s decided to stay,” Gramps chuckles, petting the cat like it’s always been here.

Scoffing, I put the tuna down with a bowl of water. No way in hell are we keeping the damn cat. “Don’t you go naming it or anything. It’s not staying.”

I snatch up my phone and punch in the animal rescue number I find after a quick search. On the third ring, a robotic voice informs me that no one is available and to leave a message. I rattle off my details and the predicament,

emphasizing its urgency. With a deep sigh, I end the call and turn back to Luke and the cat.

“I’ll call the rescue back tomorrow,” I tell Luke. “But for now, he can hang out with you. Unless you’d rather I shut him in the laundry room or something.”

“I don’t mind the company,” Luke says, petting the cat with a smile.

Later that night, after I get Gramps settled down for bed, the cat snoozing next to him, I sit on the porch, staring out into the darkness as I sip my beer. The night is quiet, and for a moment, I allow myself to relax and forget about everything else. I can hear my grandfather’s light snores inside the cabin, and I know he’s asleep. I take a deep breath, feeling the cool night air fill my lungs.

Naturally, my phone goes off at that moment. It’s a call from some social media app, I think. I don’t recognize the name—and don’t want to talk to anyone—so I hit the ignore button. Honestly, who would be calling at this hour, anyway? Nobody with anything good, that’s for sure. And now I’m starting to sound like Gramps. Shit.

Seconds later, I get another notification from the same profile, but it’s several direct messages in rapid succession. Christ, I bet this is some sort of spam thing. I read an article where people get into your private clouds and shit and blackmail you with your own nudes. Not that I have nudes in my cloud. Those are private and better seen in person, anyway. I delete the messages without reading them. No, sir, no blackmailing me today. I don’t have any money to spare anyway. Thankfully, whoever it is decides to give me a break. Fuckin’ finally.

Just as I’m about to take another sip of my beer, I hear a truck coming up the mountain road. No one comes up here. I freeze, my heart racing as I quickly set the beer down and stand up. I know who it is before the truck stops and curse myself for not keeping my home security app open. Should have known I’d see him soon since he hadn’t come calling in a while.

I glance longingly at my beer and sigh, knowing I'll need something stronger to deal with this shit. You'd think he would have softened some with age, but he's only grown to be an even bigger asshole over the years. I'll never know how my mother ever thought marrying him was a good idea. He'd been attractive when he was younger and wealthy. Maybe she had been lonely and tired, and he saw her as easy prey. But there was a fly in the ointment of his perfect plans: me. Well, that and turning into a walking felony with a penchant for meth and beating women.

"What do you want?" I growl, trying to keep my voice steady, when he stumbles from the truck to my porch. At least I was outside, and he didn't come up, banging on the doors and worrying Gramps.

"I need money," he slurs, his breath reeking of alcohol. "Just a lil bit, 's all."

"I don't have any money for you," I say, trying to keep my voice level. "You need to leave."

He takes a step forward, and I can see the anger in his eyes. "I'll leave when I get my money," he says, his voice rising. "You owe me, boy."

I feel my own anger rising, and I know I need to keep my cool. I can't let him provoke me into a fight. "I don't owe you anything," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "You need to leave now."

He glares at me, and I can see the wheels turning in his head. I know he's trying to decide whether or not to push me, but in the end, he says, "You'll give me what you owe me, or I'll be back to talk to Luke about it."

I watch him go with a mix of relief and anger. I know he'll be back, and I'll have to deal with him again. But for now, I'm just glad he's gone. I close the door and lean against it, letting out a deep breath. Frank is a tomorrow problem, so for now, I just need to relax.

Hopefully, nothing else will destroy my peace and quiet.

As though the world has other plans for me, snow begins to fall.

CHAPTER FIVE

KENNA

SNOW IS COMING down in heavy sheets, and I can barely see through the haze of white as I inch the Jeep Renegade rental up face of Crystal Mountain. Thank God I didn't decide to take my car. My snazzy red convertible was a guilty indulgence but totally unsuited to blizzard-like conditions. It sure was pretty, though.

I shiver, my coat not doing much to keep out the chill. I'm almost there, I tell myself, trying to keep up my morale. I'd been driving for the better part of two hours, and without the girls to keep me awake with their constant back and forth, my mind couldn't help but wander. To Kady. To Garrett. To the girls.

I left the girls in Riley's capable hands with the excuse that I had an emergency work trip. I hadn't wanted to worry them. The only one who looked at me with a smidge of apprehension was Klaire, but she hadn't pushed. Thank goodness. I have no idea how I would have explained everything to her. My whole life is starting to feel like a complete mess. Just when I thought I was getting it together.

Isn't that how it always goes, though?

My phone ringing pulls me from my whiny thoughts, and I answer with a voice command. I expect to hear Kady's voice again in my headphones but hear my father's instead. So now he calls back. He hadn't bothered when I needed his help earlier to watch the girls. He left my texts on read and never returned my frantic voicemails.

"Hello?" he says.

"Hey, Dad. I'm glad you called. Did you get my texts about Kady?" I squint at the street signs through the heavy snowfall. There. *Finally*. The road I'm looking for. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Did you hear me?" Dad asks.

“No, I’m sorry. I’m driving. What did you say?”

He sighs. “I asked if you’re going to be in town this weekend. Melody is having a bridal shower and would like you to come.”

My hands tighten on the steering wheel as Dad’s words echo in my mind. Bridal shower? Melody and Dad have only been together a few months, and now they’re getting married? I bite back the tide of emotions that bubble up inside me.

“When did this happen?” I ask quietly, struggling to keep my voice even.

“It’s not a big deal, Kenna,” Dad replies. “Just answer the question. Are you going to be in town this weekend for Melody’s bridal shower? And make sure to bring your sisters too.”

My throat tightens, and I choke out, “No.”

There’s a moment of silence. “No? What do you mean no?”

The rage spills over. “I said no. You never see the girls, but now you want to play new happy family and parade them around for your in-laws? Not a chance.”

“Kenna—” he sputters.

“Did you know I broke up with Garrett? Have you checked my messages and voicemails? Did you even know Kady is missing, Dad?”

More silence.

“I didn’t think so,” I spit out. “The only person you’ve ever been concerned with is yourself. So you should be more than happy to be the only one who cares about your wedding. I have to go. I’m trying to find Kady. Congratulations on your engagement,” I spit out, my voice full of spite.

“You listen here—” But I’m already hanging up.

No, Dad. I’m done listening.

Pushing him and his news from my mind, I follow the map through the winding mountain roads. Finally, the snow begins

to slow, and I can make out the outline of the house ahead. I breathe a sigh of relief, thankful to be almost there. I'm so mentally and emotionally exhausted that the thought of the coming confrontation makes me want to run the Jeep off a cliff. Pulling up to the cabin, I give myself a little shake and a good pep talk.

Dean Tyler—I learned from social media—may not have emailed, called, or messaged me back when I tried to reach him, but he'll just have to listen to me in person. I'm sure once he listens to my offer, he'll help me. And if he doesn't... well, I'll just have to convince him otherwise. Kady's life may depend on it, and I'm not taking no for an answer. I can be pretty tenacious when I put my mind to something.

Besides, he and Jamie were friends once upon a time. Surely he'll want to help if they're in trouble.

I notice the firelight that flickers in the open living room window as I brave the gusts of wintry air. My boots sink into the deep powder with my first step, and I consider myself lucky I went skiing once last year and still had a bunch of fancy winter gear to bring. I cross the short distance and knock on the door, my heart pounding as I wait for an answer.

Inside, I hear a curse over the roaring wind and relax a little. Someone is home. The curse is followed by the heavy tread of boots, solid and steady. I know with absolute certainty that that stride belongs to the man I'm looking for. I plaster on a winning smile and muster up all the charm I can manage.

The door opens, revealing a hulking frame that fills my entire view. My charm evaporates. I don't think I've ever seen a man with a scowl so fierce it makes me want to turn around and run in the other direction. And I'm supposed to convince him to help me?

He's even more striking than his pictures made him out to be. His short dark hair is recklessly tousled, and the thick beard and rugged mountain-man look are emphasized by his brutal masculinity and the hard set of his mouth. He wears ancient jeans and a chunky sweater that shows off his muscular frame. As he steps onto the porch, the snow beneath

his heavy-duty boots makes a soft crunching sound. Those definitely aren't designer anything. His gaze locks with mine, and his expression is tight with annoyance. My over-emphasized smile falls... and then I notice the gun.

I'm not sure if my knees are weak because I've never had a gun pointed at me... or because his brooding stare has me pinned to the spot.

I shrink back a little, my feet scraping against the wood planks. Then I give myself a mental shake, smile, and do a stupid little wave. If my cheeks aren't already red from the cold, they sure are now. "Hey, Dean! You may not know me, but I'm Kady's sister, Kennedy. Kenna. She and your friend Jamie have been dating for a while. Anyway, I've tried getting ahold of you. Do you even have a phone? Or maybe it's out of service with all this weather and all?"

I run out of breath from talking so fast, and my huge smile dies a little more when he doesn't say a word. Then he backs up and slams the door right in my face. Gawking at the glass, I emit a choked sound of objection. Then I knock again, a little louder and more insistent this time.

What an asshole.

My lips form into a stubborn line. If he thinks he's going to get rid of me that easily, he's got another thing coming. Because if there's one thing I don't do, it's give up where my family's concerned. I know he's friends with Jamie—or used to be—and he's a pilot in this area. Ergo, he's the man I need to help find my sister.

Whether he wants to help me or not.

I pound on the door again. No answer. "Dean?! C'mon, Dean, open the door. I need to talk to you. Are you really going to let a woman freeze to death on your front porch? I'll stay out here all damn day and night if I have to. You'll wake up tomorrow with me as a human popsicle out here. But I guess that's cool if you don't mind disposing of my frozen corpse." My words come out in white puffs. "Dean?"

More knocking.

He wrenches the door open, his ruggedly handsome face tight with fury. “*What* do you want?” he asks, his voice gruff. His expression resembles a granite sculpture, his eyes chips of gray. The rifle is still thrown carelessly over his shoulder, intimidating even though it’s not aimed at me now. “You’ve got five minutes before I call the cops and have you dragged off my property.”

I swallow hard and take a step back, my hands trembling as I raise them in surrender. Of all the reactions I imagined on the way up here, having a gun pulled on me and being threatened with the cops certainly wasn’t one of them. I mean, Kady had said Jamie’s former teammates could be assholes, but I hadn’t really taken her too seriously. Aren’t all military guys assholes at heart? Scratch that. After the Garrett fiasco and now adding my dad and Jamie for good measure, I’m convinced *all* guys are assholes.

“I just wanted to talk,” I say, embarrassed to find my voice trembling. I’m not usually intimidated quite so easily. “I’m Kady’s—”

He cuts me off before I can finish. “I heard you the first time,” he says gruffly. He stares at me for a moment, his expression hard. Everything about him seems hard and unreachable. As cold as the wintery mountains surrounding us. “I don’t want to get involved. I don’t even know you.”

My mouth opens in shock as I process this. I shake my head, trying to find the words that seem to elude me. Finally, I manage to stutter out, “Can’t you just hear me out? Five minutes. Give me five minutes.” My winning smile once again has no effect on him. Geez, this guy is harder to charm than I thought. It’s as though he’s immune to any emotion, his own or otherwise.

Dean peers at me intently, his gaze burning into mine. After a few moments, he lowers the gun and leans it against the wall next to him. It says a lot about the man that having him put a gun away makes him feel a little more friendly. “I don’t know anything about your sister. I haven’t spoken to Jamie in years. When I said there’s nothing I can do for you, I meant it.” The finality in the statement would deter a lesser

person. But if I survived staring down the barrel of that rifle, I could handle his grumpy-ass attitude.

Maybe begging will help? I'm not above it. Maybe a guy like him is into a little begging. I try to school my face into something more demure than the lava-hot determination smoldering in my gut. "Please, there's no one else who will help me. The police won't take her disappearance seriously because she's an adult or some such nonsense, and Jamie may as well be a ghost. He has no social media whatsoever, and his phone isn't working anymore. All I need is help searching around the cabin. I figured since you're a pilot and all, you could fly me out there and help me look around..." My voice trails off as his scowl intensifies.

So much for the begging.

"I said there's nothing I can do for you. Are you really going to make me call the cops?"

I bite my lip, wondering if it's wise to press my luck any further. Still, I'm desperate for answers, and despite his insistence otherwise, I know he can help me. "What do I have to do to get you to help me?" I ask, dropping all pretense.

The silence between us grows, and he starts to shake his head when I hear an old man's voice from inside the house. "Dean? Who's that at the door? If it's Margaret, tell her I don't need no doctorin' today. I feel fine. And you better not have called the rescue about Sunny because you aren't getting rid of him, dammit. You may be faster than me, but I can still give you a good whuppin'."

"It's no one," Dean shouts back, his expression daring me to say otherwise. I don't say a word. Mostly because I get the impression Dean is protecting someone, which is the first hint I have that he cares about someone else. I hate myself for it, but this may be the soft spot I can prod a little to help my case. Not that the thought of doing that makes me feel particularly great, but a girl's desperate.

There's a pregnant pause before I hear footsteps approach the door. Dean scowls at an older man with white hair and soft

gray eyes who appears beside him in the doorway. At least I'm not the only one on the receiving end of *that* look.

"Why didn't you tell me we had company?" he says gruffly but not unkindly. His breathing is so labored I can hear it over the howling wind. "And why didn't you invite her in instead of letting her stand out in the freezing cold? Didn't Nadine teach you better manners?"

I didn't think it was possible, but Dean's expression sours even more. I try to hide my smile behind my hand. Okay, so I'm enjoying the fact that I'm not the only uncomfortable one.

"She was just leaving," Dean lies, and now it's my turn to glare at him.

To the old man, I say, "*Actually*, I'm looking for my sister, Kady. She disappeared a few days ago, and the police aren't doing anything about it. I think she might have gone to her boyfriend Jamie's family cabin nearby, and I was hoping Dean could help me look for her since he and Dean used to be friends. And since he can fly and all."

The old man starts coughing, and Dean steps forward, scowling. "I told you there's nothing we can do. This weather is only going to get worse. Going out there now would be a suicide mission."

"Now hold on," his grandfather says, "Don't go jumpin' to conclusions until you hear what this gal has to say." He turns back to me and gestures for me to come inside. Dean stifles a frustrated groan. I smile at him, then beam at his grandfather. If looks could kill, I'd be dead and buried.

It would almost be worth it.

The old man offers his hand, and I take it gratefully, squeezing between Dean and the door and stepping into blissful warmth. "Let's get you out of the cold before we all freeze to death."

"Thank you so much, sir. My name is Kenna Lynch. I really appreciate your time." Okay, so I say the last bit with a pointed look to Dean, who is retrieving the rifle and stowing it in a gun cabinet oddly kept in the dining room. Is that the

alpha male version of a china cabinet? The thought makes me grin even more, causing Dean's glare to intensify. He sulks over to the kitchen to make coffee as his grandfather leads me to the living room and a very comfortable sitting chair next to the fire.

"I'm Luke Pascal. Dean, why don't you pour a cup of coffee for me and our guest?" With a heavy sigh, Luke relaxes into a matching chair on the opposite side of the fire and places a blanket over his lap. He's oblivious to the dark glare Dean shoots his way. A scraggly cat appears from God knows where and jumps onto his lap, settling down on its back and baring his stomach for indulgent pets. Ah, this must be the Sunny he mentioned before. Dean with a cat. Who would have thought? "You say your sister is missing? I'm sorry to hear that. Dean will be happy to help in any way he can. Isn't that right, son?"

Dean sets my cup of coffee down on the side table with more force than necessary and passes Luke his gently, along with a container of medication. Luke takes a handful of pills without complaint, washing it down with the coffee. Then he sets the mug aside and begins to pet Sunny from head to fluffy tail. The cat is content, although he and Dean seem to be having an intense stare-down.

The cat wins, and Dean crosses his massive arms over his chest and shoots me another panty-freezing glare. "Like I told her outside, I don't know anything about Jamie or her sister. We've got bad weather coming in that makes flying risky. And I've got my grandfather to take care of. There's nothing you can say that'll convince me to take you out there."

I take a deep breath before meeting Dean's eyes. "What I was going to say before you pulled a gun on me, then shut the door in my face, was that I'm willing to pay whatever you want if you'll help me."

Luke nods thoughtfully before turning to his grandson. "Guess you missed that part?"

Dean looks from me to his grandfather before sighing as he runs a hand through his hair. He then looks back up at us

both and finally nods in agreement. “I’m not the man for the job, but I can ask around for someone who can help,” he offers gruffly, like he’s not used to speaking polite words out loud.

The old man claps his hands together triumphantly and gives me a warm smile before drinking deeply from his mug.

Sure, it took a little coercion, and it isn’t exactly the knight in shining armor routine, but I take it.

“Thank you,” I say, relieved. “Any help would be appreciated.” Baby steps. Getting him to back down at all is a win, as far as I’m concerned.

Dean’s grandfather and I make small talk as he goes down his list. Dean ends one call and moves on to the next, speaking to his contacts about my missing sister. I take a deep breath, trying to ease the strain of this entire ordeal.

After a while, he hangs up the phone and comes over to me, his brows drawn together in consternation. “Look...” He looks away, hesitating.

I can’t help the feeling of despair that wells up inside me. My shoulders sag as I realize that his contacts must not be able to help.

Fuck.

“With the weather coming in, there isn’t anyone willing to take you out. If you can wait until the end of the week, you may have more luck,” Dean says softly. His eyes flicker up to mine and hold my gaze.

Is that regret in his eyes?

Hope flickers in my stomach. This may be my only chance to convince him to help me.

“I don’t have that kind of time,” I say firmly. “I can’t wait until the end of the week. I need to find my sister now. I’m willing to pay *whatever* it takes. Please.” I say the last word so softly it’s almost a whisper.

CHAPTER SIX

DEAN

LATER, when I figure out why the hell I agreed to help her despite my better judgment, I'll come back to this moment. I'll remember all the "FINAL NOTICE" hospital bills piling up on the kitchen table. The months of therapy still in our future, home health nurses, and God only knows what else. But the promise of money was nothing compared with her big eyes staring up at me and the word "Please" coming from her full pink lips. Gramps' old clock ticks away in the corner of the room, counting down the seconds until I can't put off what I'd known since the second I found her on my doorstep.

Finally, I sigh.

"Alright," I say gruffly. "I'll do it. It won't be cheap, though. It's going to cost you an outrageous amount of money to get me in the air. Are you sure you're up for that, princess?"

Kenna doesn't even blink at my words. If anything, she looks more determined than ever. Meeting my gaze and nodding, she says, "Whatever it takes," with cheerful conviction.

I immediately regret my decision. The last thing I should want is to be crammed into the tiny cockpit with her for hours on end. Nothing I respond with will be pleasant or kind, so I don't say a word. Maybe now that she got what she wants, we can get this over quickly so I can get her the hell out of my life.

Gramps fills the silence with mindless chatter for a little while, and I concentrate on cleaning up the remnants of coffee. My mind goes over a list of things I'll need to do to prepare. The first is calling Margaret to take care of Gramps for however long it'll take. I'd estimate twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Gear, flight plans, checking the weather.

If it holds off...

While Kenna and Gramps chitter like hens, I put in a call to Lawrence. While it rings, I ask Kenna, “You sure about paying whatever it takes? Chartering a flight last minute isn’t going to be cheap.”

She meets my gaze head-on, and the flinty determination in her eyes does something to me that I’d rather not examine. “I said whatever it takes, and I meant it.” She tucks her hair behind her ear impatiently, the glittery gold rings on her fingers flashing.

I hold back a snort. Barely. Girl has another thing coming. Getting to the cabin will be easy. It’s searching around it that’ll be her reckoning. Knee-deep snow, dropping temps, and increasingly terrible visibility will make the experience interesting, and that’s not to mention the likelihood that this will all be for nothing. Because if Jamie doesn’t want to be found, he won’t be. Hell, now that I’m committed to this, at least watching her fail will be somewhat entertaining.

She’ll probably give up after a couple hours, and we’ll head back. Easy money.

Right?

I give Kenna a shrug. “It’s your dime.”

Finally, Lawrence’s harried voice fills my ear. “Darcy here. How can I help you?”

“Hey, Darce, it’s Dean.”

“Hey, Dean. How can I help you?”

“Dean? Everything okay with Luke?” I hear Margaret’s voice in the background.

“Yeah, he’s just fine. This is about a personal favor. There’s a... woman who needs to charter a last-minute flight for tomorrow. She’ll need a single engine, probably the Robison R44, if it’s available, for the full day. Do you think we could swing that?”

I assume—okay, maybe I hope—that he’ll give me a resounding no, considering the weather. But of course, I’m not that lucky.

“Sure, I think we can make that work,” he says after a moment’s contemplation. “When do you need to leave?”

“As soon as possible. Tomorrow morning?” May as well get this over with before the storm really hits.

Lawrence hums. I can practically hear the *ca-ching* that must be sounding in his head over the phone. “Alrighty, we’ll have it ready to go. Can I email you the paperwork for the client to fill out? What’s the destination?”

“Yeah, that’ll work.” I give him Kenna’s email as she recites it to me. “A cabin on the north side of Thunderhead Mountain. Weather going to hold off?” I ask hopefully.

There’s a long pause, and I glance at my phone to see if it’s disconnected. Then Lawrence says, “North side?”

I check with Kenna and give him a more accurate location. “Something wrong?” I ask hopefully.

Lawrence clears his throat. “No, no. Of course not. Did—um, did the paperwork go through?”

When she confirms she’s received it, I tell Lawrence I’ll see him in the morning.

Kenna chats with Gramps as she fills out the paperwork on her phone, then pushes to her feet. “Well, I appreciate your... hospitality.” Is that a smile I hear in her voice? Damn woman doesn’t seem to be intimidated. I nearly snort. If she wants to put up with me, that’s her own damn problem. Maybe I’ll enjoy being in that cramped cockpit with her. But only a little. At least enough to see just how far I can ruffle those pretty feathers of hers. She continues, “But I’d better get some sleep. What time and where can I meet you tomorrow?”

“You staying at the resort?” Gramps interrupts before I can shoo her ass away.

The space between Kenna’s brow furrows, and she twists that pretty little mouth to the side. “I’m not real sure yet. I haven’t had time to get a room anywhere. I drove here straight from my place near Charlotte and was hoping they’d have rooms available.”

“During tourist season? I doubt it.” Gramps gives me the side eye when I speak, but I ignore him. The fact that she’s still here at all is all his fault. I should have put him in an old folk’s home. I try to communicate that with a pointed look, but he only smiles.

Asshole.

Kenna gives me a patient smile that only makes my frown intensify. What would it take to actually get under her skin? Most women turn tail and run the second I give them a scathing response, like the woman at the bar the other night, but not this one. No, Kenna treats me like a wounded puppy she can rehabilitate with kindness and some gentle pets, like that damn cat purring on Gramps’ chest. Well, screw that. A long day with me will convince her otherwise because the alternative is that I’ll have to come to the realization that there’s someone who can put up with my shit, and that’s out of the question.

As though she can read my mind, Kenna says, “Then I’ll go the next town over. I’m sure I’ll find something. Really, I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself.”

I roll my eyes. Not only is she not going to listen to reason, but she also thinks the next twenty-four hours will be a walk in the park. I can’t wait until she gets out into this storm and realizes how truly delusional she is. I open my mouth to say something—probably to get the hell out—but Gramps beats me to it.

“She can stay here,” Gramps tells me in that authoritative voice of his.

“No. Absolutely not,” I interject. The sooner she leaves, the better.

“Are you sure?” Kenna asks, looking back and forth between Gramps and me.

“Of course. The guest room’s empty. Don’t mind Dean. He’s more bark than bite.” He gives me a pointed look. “Help her with her bags.”

I have to remind myself that she is the key to the most lucrative payday of my life, and I'm not about to let it slip away. Gritting my teeth, I nod in agreement. There's no going back now. "Fine. Let's get your stuff, princess."

I turn and march out the door, expecting Kenna to follow. I can feel her eyes burning holes in my back as I walk away. I wait for her at the bottom of the front stairs, arms folded across my chest, staring off into nothingness, wondering what the hell I've gotten myself into until she finally joins me.

"I can't thank you enough for agreeing to do this," she says in a voice raised over the howling wind.

Leveling her with a hard stare, I say, "Don't thank me. I'm only doing it to get you out of here. If your sister really is with Jamie, then you won't be able to find them. If there's anything he's good at, it's disappearing. Didn't Kady tell you? He was Marine Recon. But I'll fly you up there, look around. I'm just looking at this as easy money. I'm not here to be anyone's hero. Especially yours. Got it?"

Kenna steps back as if shocked by my words and then nods slowly. Good. I don't want any misunderstandings. She may be sunshine and rainbows, but I'm a goddamn nuclear fallout in comparison.

After she gets her stuff from the back of her rental, we walk silently back into the house. I show her to the small spare bedroom at the end of the hall on the main floor. It isn't much, just a full bed with a nightstand and an empty dresser, but she won't have to wander around town looking for somewhere to stay.

Kenna hesitates when I move to leave like she's going to say something, then jerks her head. I'm not the type of guy to extend her any further hospitality, so I shut the door between us, feeling the tension inside me unfurling now that there's some distance.

I help Gramps to bed, then retreat to my room. I lay there as the snow falls like a heavy blanket outside the window, smothering light and hope beneath its weighty embrace.



I knock on her door the following dawn, but there's no response. Worried, I slowly push it open to find her dozing peacefully, the abandoned cat snuggled in a pile of scraggly fur on her stomach. I move to her and disturb the cat, who hisses as it leaps from the bed and slinks out of the room. I make a mental note to call the rescue when I get back from this gig. That beast isn't staying here a moment longer than necessary. Just like this woman. With the blanket freed up, I move it to cover her a little more fully. Why? I don't attempt to define my reasoning.

I shake Kenna's shoulder gently, rousing her from a deep sleep. "Kenna, it's time to get up." My voice comes out sharp and gravely, my gaze locked on her face.

She opens her eyes. A flush of embarrassment spreads across the apples of her cheeks when she notices me standing next to her, and recognition dawns. "I'm sorry," she mumbles, her voice hoarse with sleep. "I thought I set an alarm. Though it's not unheard of for me to snooze it a few times. I'll be ready in twenty minutes."

I nod curtly, needing distance. Everywhere she is, there seems to be too little oxygen available. "It's fine. You can use the shower and get cleaned up if you want. Then we'll head out. Helicopter will be ready in about an hour so that'll be plenty of time."

Leaving her to shower and do... whatever it is women do, I head out back to tend to the animals and do a quick prep to insulate their structures against the coming storm. It's already snowing lightly, and it doesn't seem like it'll be stopping anytime soon. Gramps used to love to tend to them, but as much as he likes to say otherwise, he doesn't get around as well as he used to. Last summer, I set up an automatic water dispenser in the pens so there's always fresh water, even if it froze. I double up the food in their feeders just in case and

make a mental note to ask Margaret to top them off if she sees they're running low. She normally gets the eggs when I'm gone and gives the animals a once-over to make sure there's no emergency.

A quick call to Lawrence on the way back inside confirms the R44 is ready and waiting for us with the supplies all set—emergency medical kit, radio with GPS, fuel, flairs, and survival gear. Not that I've ever had the use for any of it, but it doesn't hurt to be prepared. The scent of pine permeates the frigid mountain air, and I take deep breaths as I climb up the porch steps and enjoy the way the chill fills me up, clearing my mind.

It's going to be a long day, but hopefully, I'll be back here in time for a beer with Gramps and my own bed—alone.

Pushing through the front door, the scent of fresh coffee greets me, and I find Margaret with Gramps in the living room. I give her a nod, and she waves as she lays a blanket over Gramps' legs just in time for that damn cat to jump up and make himself at home. I send it a narrowed look over the rim of my coffee cup. I won't have time to call the shelter today, but it's the first thing on my list when I get back. Farm animals, yes. Strays, no. I don't get attached to the livestock, as they serve a purpose, but pets require a kind of emotional commitment that's far outside my capabilities.

I bring my coffee over to the living room and lean a shoulder against the picture frame entryway that separates the two spaces. "You up for dealing with him for a little while?" I ask Margaret, who smiles up at me warmly.

She glances up at me through thin-framed glasses perched on her thin nose. "I'll manage. You sure ya'll will be okay going out in this storm? Weather report says it's going to be hairy up there. Those cabins are mostly deserted; too remote for tourists, and you get all sorts of crazies with it being so isolated."

"Don't fuss, Marge. The boy can handle himself. Besides, that girl's worried plum sick about her sister. She seemed

determined enough that she'd wander off by herself if Dean here doesn't go with her."

Margaret harrumphs and settles back in the chair opposite Gramps. She gives me a tight smile. "Still think you should wait for the weather to pass, but I know there's no talking you out of it. Just be careful."

Kenna walks in then, her cheeks flushed from the shower or whatever the hell she's put on them, and her brown eyes glow with warmth when she spots Gramps beaming at her. I scowl into my cup. Isn't he supposed to be on my side? Traitor.

"Is that coffee I smell?" she says after greeting everyone.

Margaret gestures to the kitchen when I keep a stony silence. "Help yourself. It's not fancy, but it's fresh. Thermoses are in the cabinet if you want to take it with you."

"You're an angel. Thank you so much," Kenna says with a huge smile at Margaret. If I could frown while drinking, I would have. How is she this chipper so early in the morning? It's not normal. I swear if she's like this all day, I may lose my mind. Give me the rambunctious, drunken billionaires any day.

Margaret starts doling out Gramps' medication, and I give him a squeeze and murmur goodbye before heading back to my room to retrieve an overnight bag. It doesn't hold much, just a change of clothes, basic toiletries, and an extra phone charger. I also carry concealed, so my gun goes in the bag as well. Throwing the bag over my shoulder, I leave the room and find Kenna with her own bag over her shoulder and a steaming thermos of coffee clasped between her hands.

"Thanks again, Dean. I really app—"

"Save it," I interrupt. "I don't need your appreciation, princess. All that matters to me is that your check doesn't bounce."

Her gaze cools a little, and her mouth twitches. "I've already sent the deposit over. Half up front, right? You can check now so you know I'm good for it." She juts out a curvy

hip and rests a hand on it. My eyes linger a little longer than normal, and I snort. Not sure if it's at myself or at her.

Because I know it'll make her irritable, I take my phone out and check my email and bank account. Sure enough, there's a message from Lawrence confirming payment, and the corresponding bank draft is scheduled for deposit pending the two-day waiting period. The fear I'd been holding onto that I wouldn't be able to pay for Gramps' physical therapy dissipates, and I release a pent-up breath.

I may not like it, but this payday is going to save my ass.

I guess now it's my turn to save hers.

"Guess you can put your money where your mouth is. Let's get goin'."

Without waiting for her to answer, I turn with a final wave at Margaret and Gramps and head out to my truck. Kenna's rental will stay here until she gets back.

The drive to the airport is a silent one. The flurries make it difficult to see the road, and Kenna's focused on her phone, presumably checking to see if there are any updates from her sister. In between watching the road and navigating through the weather, I'm focused on watching her, even though I don't want to be. The way her brow furrows in concentration, the way she bites her bottom lip, the way her hair falls across her face and sticks to her cheeks from melting snow on her skin. My fists tighten around the steering wheel, and I force myself to focus on the road ahead.

She's nothing to me. A paycheck. A means to an end. There's no room in my life for a stubborn-ass woman who lights up the world around her like she's a gift from God. Maybe if I were another man, I'd be at her feet, begging her to share a bit of that sunshine with me, but I'm not. No amount of sunshine could melt the jagged shards of ice where my heart used to be.

We finally arrive at the airport, and I cut the engine. Despite the cold, Kenna is out of the truck in a shot, shouldering her backpack and looking to me for direction. I

nod to the nearest hangar, where the R44 is already waiting outside, thanks to Lawrence. I spot him standing outside the main office with a couple other guys I don't recognize. He lifts a hand in greeting, and I do the same.

Kenna hesitates as we approach the R44, her gaze sweeping over its powerful frame. My hand brushes against the helicopter's side. "This is it," I say with a hint of challenge as I open the door. "You ready? You can always turn around and go home until it's safe enough to drive up there."

She flashes me a determined grin that I feel like a punch to the gut. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You aren't going to get rid of me that easily. Stop trying to get me to change my mind because I won't. You're stuck with me for the day, Dean Tyler, so you may as well start getting used to it."

I grumble under my breath as I follow her up into the aircraft. I go through my pre-flight procedure, ignoring her until my heart rate goes back to normal. Her smile does strange things to me. Things I'd rather not examine. Must be annoyance. I decide as I give her a headset for ear protection. Annoyance is absolutely the emotion I feel. No one should smile as much as this woman does. It's unnatural. And she doesn't look cute with the oversized headset on. She looks ridiculous.

Scowling once again, I help her get buckled into her seat, make sure her belt is snug, and double-check all of our gear to verify all are accounted for and secure for flight. Finally, I take my own seat and get ready for takeoff.

The engine roars to life beneath us, and Kenna smiles as we lift into the air. Her squeal of delight fills my ears as we gain altitude. The land beneath us shrinks steadily, and she gasps, fairly pressing her nose against the window beside her to see the landscape of snow-blanketed fields, trees, and roads below.

"It looks like a painting," she says, still studying the view below. "Wow. This is incredible."

I catch myself watching her again, grateful she's too distracted by the view to pay any attention to me. Catching

myself, I focus on navigating to our destination, keeping a watchful eye on the weather. It's worse than I anticipated, though I don't relay that information to Kenna. As long as we get there, don't waste a shit ton of time, and leave relatively quickly, we should be fine. She won't like me rushing her, but I can guarantee she won't like being stuck in a snowstorm even more.

"How long have you been flying?" she asks when we've been in the air for about a half hour. Her voice is smooth and sweet through the forced intimacy of the headsets like she's speaking directly into my ear. Gooseflesh peppers my skin, and my fists clench.

"Let's not," I say without looking at her.

"I'm sorry?"

"We're not friends. You don't have to make small talk." I can feel her eyes on me, but I keep my gaze on the skyline. There's a lengthy pause while she grapples with how to respond to my bluntness. But it's better this way, keeping a distance. Better for me and for her. Opening yourself up to someone only opens you up to pain.

Isn't that what love is? Sure, the beginning is great. Hell, the middle is arguably better. But every story has an ending... and they aren't always happy.

"Right," she says, and I can practically hear the hurt feelings in her voice. A woman like her, who's nice to everyone, takes care of her family like she does, and fuck, tracks down her missing sister, couldn't fathom being intentionally rude to another person. Even now, with me being a dick, she says, "Sorry, you're right. You should focus."

My thoughts rival the swirling, gray scenery around us as we continue on in silence, the loud drumbeat of the engine and rotor blades the only sound. Being forced to relive thoughts of Jamie and the others brings emotions better off long forgotten to the forefront. It hadn't occurred to me until we were up in the air that I could find him dead, wherever he is. He wouldn't be the first brother to take his own life. But the thought of

losing someone else... my mood sours further, and I hope to God this is over quickly so I can stop feeling so fucking much.

As we approach the mountains, the storm grows more intense. The wind howls and buffets us around, making it difficult to maintain a steady course. Apprehension grows inside me the closer we get to Thunderhead Mountain, a location a hundred or so miles north of Crystal Mountain. My palms sweat on the controls, and I wipe them on my jeans, dismissing the nerves as nothing more than a desire to get home and away from this woman.

Suddenly, Kenna's voice crackles through my headset, distracting me from my thoughts. "Dean, I think I see something. Over there, beyond those trees."

I follow her gaze and strain my eyes against the blowing snow, searching for any sign of life. And then I see it, too. Jamie's cabin. It's hard to tell from this distance, but smoke might be coming from the chimney through the bare branches of the American beech, yellow birch, and maple trees. We found it sooner than I thought, despite the terrible visibility from the snowstorm.

I should be relieved and looking forward to wrapping this up so quickly, but an unease slides up my spine that has me scanning the visible surroundings, but I don't see anything to explain the feeling. Kenna doesn't notice because she squeals in relief, and I don't bring it up. It's probably nothing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KENNA

THE BITING winter wind howls through the snowstorm, whipping stinging shards against our faces as we make our way toward the cabin. Each step is a struggle, the snow nearly reaching our knees, but I'm not deterred, even if the sheer amount of snow is awe-inspiring. My heart races with anticipation and anxiety, the urgency to find Kady propelling me forward. She has to be here. I just know I'm going to run up to the door, fling it open, and she'll be there with a ready giggle and a damn good explanation. Then I'll strangle Jamie, and we'll all have a good laugh about what a great misunderstanding this all was.

Silly Kenna, always overreacting, she'd say. You worry too much.

Dean and I trudge through the snow, our breath forming small clouds in front of us. The surrounding mountains are cloaked in a blanket of white, their majestic peaks obscured by swirling flurries. The landscape is both serene and treacherous, its beauty masking the dangers hidden beneath the surface. If we stay lucky, this storm won't intensify too much more before we leave.

Finally, we arrive at the cabin, its wooden walls barely visible under the thick layer of snow. Dean pushes open the creaking door, and we step into a chilling silence. The air inside is stale and frigid, tinged by an affronting scent underneath the lingering scent of smoke I can't easily decipher but that makes me wrinkle my nose. The only light filtering through the dirty windows cast long, ghostly shadows on the frost-covered floor.

My gaze sweeps the room, searching for any trace of Kady. Any sign of life or hint that she may have been here. But instead, my eyes are met with a charred and ransacked cabin. It's as if a storm of destruction has swept through, leaving only ruins in its wake.

I take a few more steps, my heart sinking at the full extent of the damage. Every wall is scorched and blackened, and the furniture is overturned and broken. Everywhere I look, there's evidence of upheaval and chaos. Some spots still smolder, with curls of smoke disappearing into the breeze coming in from outside.

I fear the worst as I search the room and call out her name, but there's no response. It's as if the room itself is holding its breath, waiting to see what will happen next.

I wander around the cabin in a daze, my mind awl with questions and possibilities. Where is Kady? What happened here? Is she safe?

"Isn't this charming?" I murmur under my breath. "Is this what men consider romantic? What's basically a shack in the middle of nowhere? Why the hell would Jamie bring my sister to a place like this?"

Dean palms the pistol at his hip. Is this man *ever* without a gun? I mean, for real. When did he even get that thing? "This is Jamie's bug-out place. He'd only come here if he were running from something. It's not meant to be a five-star resort, princess."

Speaking of bugging out, my eyes nearly pop out of my head. "You didn't think to mention that earlier?" If the frustration could literally drip from my lips, it would have frozen.

He peers into a room at the back that turns out to be a bathroom. I can already tell it's empty because the door's been split in two like a linebacker took offense to privacy. Good Lord, what did Kady get herself into? What did *Jamie* get her into?

"You didn't ask," is Dean's insufferable reply.

You'd think I'd be well-versed in all the ways a person can be irritated, considering how many sisters I have, but you'd be wrong. *No one* is as irritating as Dean "Pain in the Ass" Tyler.

"*Why* does Jamie have a bug-out place? Why would he bring Kady here? What the hell happened? You better answer

me now, Dean, or I swear to God, I'll shoot you with your own gun." It's not an empty threat. Riley likes to drag me to her taekwondo classes sometimes, and I've picked up some moves. I'm pretty certain with the edge of surprise and a little luck, I could wrestle that gun away from him.

Dean lifts his left brow, and I'm not pissed enough to ignore the slashing scar through it I didn't notice before. "Jamie's always been a little paranoid. He keeps this place in case he ever needs to disappear. I don't know why he'd bring her here. Like I told you before, I haven't talked to him in a while."

"*Disappear?*" I repeat incredulously. "What does that even mean?"

He nonchalantly lifts a shoulder as he rifles through dusty cabinets. "He's been paranoid since our last deployment. He'd come out here when he needed to get away, decompress. Disappear for a few days. We used to joke he was one can of sardines away from being a doomsday prepper."

"So you're saying he was a psycho. Great. That makes me feel *tons* better." Damn Kady and her penchant for always believing the best in people. Damn Kady for being another person I have to rescue. Damn her even more for making me worry. But most of all, damn me for always dropping everything when anyone needs me. I wish I were the kind of person who could just not care. But that's not me. I will do anything for the people I care about, often to my own detriment.

My mind races, trying to put all the pieces of the puzzle together, but it's like several of them are missing. "I'm going to kill her," I mutter.

Then I realize Dean has gone quiet. Fear spears into me, and I swirl around to find him picking through a table he's uncovered that's strewn with empty plastic bags, glass vials, and torn packaging. And that's only what I recognize. None of it bodes well, though. The signs of some sort of drug operation are unmistakable, and the realization sends a shiver down my

spine. This isn't just about Kady and Jamie's troubled relationship.

It's something far more dangerous.

"You've got to be kidding me," I say between gritted teeth. "That's not Jamie's, is it? It can't be."

Dean's brow furrows as he scans the room with heightened awareness. "Of course not," he says quietly. "He may have been a little paranoid, but he was as straight edge as they come. He never even drank, for fuck's sake. This is something else."

The weight of his words settles upon me, mingling with the cold despair creeping into my bones. "I don't understand."

Dean's eyes flash. "What part don't you understand, princess? Your sister isn't here. They probably saw this shit hole and went somewhere else. Now let's get the fuck out of here before whoever stashed this shit comes back for it and finds us instead."

I narrow my eyes at him, feeling my normal good humor crystalize into anger. "I'm not leaving without my sister."

He steps toward me, his jaw set and his eyes like flint. "You'll leave when I say you leave, do you understand me?"

Frustrated tears fill my eyes, and I hate myself for it. I wipe them away furiously, shame flooding my cheeks for showing one iota of vulnerability. Heaving steadying breaths, I meet his hard gaze and swallow back my pride. "Please. We can't just leave without answers."

A big hand waves at our surroundings. "You've got your answers. You wanted to see the cabin. We're here. They're not. You've got five minutes, and then we're gone whether or not your ass is in that seat."

I give him a pained stare, but I know it's hopeless. He hasn't given a damn about me or my sister since I met him. I don't know why his emotionless response fills me with despair, but it does. "You're a real jerk, you know that, right?"

He grunts in answer. I've never wanted to punch someone so much in my life. Spinning, I push my hands through my hair, pulling at the roots and hoping it'll give me some clarity. Dean's given up investigating the interior, and I don't really blame him. There's little to nothing inside, and what isn't rotting or covered in dust and smoke is charred from the fire that's still in embers along the back wall. I'm drawn back to the bathroom, remembering the phone call where I thought I heard something breaking. Had Kenna been in the bathroom when she called me?

I pick my way over the splintered wood and step into the cramped space. The scent of mildew fights its way into my nose over the concoction of smoke and decay. There's no curtain on the shower, and there are yellow stains in the empty toilet. I begin to tremble as the reality of my situation begins to sink in. We're in the middle of nowhere, Kady is nowhere to be seen, and I have no idea where they could have gone. My whole body begins to shake, and my teeth gnaw on the inside of my cheek so hard I worry I may draw blood.

I give myself a second and quell the panic that threatens to overtake me and wipe my wet eyes. I wish I could splash some water on my face, but nothing comes out of the faucet except a deep groan and a rattle from the pipes. *Naturally*. I bark out a laugh and squeeze my eyes closed to keep from completely losing it. When I open them, my gaze catches on the dust-covered mirror, and I frown. Something's scrawled at the bottom in the thick coating.

Project Sentinel

What the hell does that mean? My heart beats faster. I know with more certainty than anything else that Kady left this for me. Whatever Project Sentinel is has something to do with what the hell's happening.

It's a clue.

I turn at the sound of footsteps and find Dean. "Time to go."

"But—"

“Do I need to drag your ass out of here?” he growls.

I bite my lower lip. “No, but I—”

Dean grabs my bicep and tugs me out of the bathroom. I don’t fight him because I don’t need the bruises and know there’s nothing else left for me to find. But when we reach the door, I yank my arm free. “I can walk,” I say.

“Congratulations,” he deadpans.

“You’re an asshole, you know that, right?”

“And you’re stalling.” He looks out the bare front window. I don’t know how much he can see, considering how grimy it is.

“I’m trying to tell you what I found.”

“I don’t care,” he says without turning around.

“But it—”

He turns, leveling me with a stare full of resentment and... hate? No, I don’t know. Whatever the emotion is, it’s gone before I can decipher it. “Look, lady, I don’t give a damn what you found. I’m not your hero here. I’m not going to help you track down your sister. I don’t really give a shit where she went. You paid me to bring you here and get you back. You’re here. She’s not. It’s time to get the fuck out. If you think I’m going to prance around the United States following clues, you got the wrong impression of me... unless, of course, you’re willing to open up those purse strings again and pay a pretty penny.”

My pleas die on my tongue. Like *hell* am I going to beg him for help again. Like *hell* am I going to shed another tear in his presence. And like *hell* will I give him another cent. I clamp down on the words that threaten to spill out. I have begged too many men to be worthy of their time, and look where it’s gotten me. A father who couldn’t care less about his kids and a fiancé who stuck his tongue down the throat of the first woman who paid him any extra attention.

I’ll go home and hire a private detective or something. Anyone would be better than Dean. Even the devil himself.

He must read something in my expression because his lips twitch into a barely there sneer. “Finally, the first sensible thing you’ve done all day. Keep your mouth shut, and we’ll be out of each other’s hair in no time.”

Before he can say anything else, the distant sound of engines pierces through the tension between us, growing louder with each passing second. Panic tightens around my heart as I realize we’re not alone.

He turns to me with an intense look that says it all. We have to get out of here. Now. “I don’t see them yet, but they’re close. Stay behind me, Kenna. I mean it. You stay right on my ass and don’t stop for anything. We’re going straight for the helicopter as fast as you can. So move your ass, princess, because you don’t want to be here when they get back.”

But I’m already running out of the door and sprinting toward the helicopter with Dean tight on my heels. “Shit,” I hear him bark out at my back.

Thankfully, there’s nothing in sight between us and the clearing where Dean landed the helicopter except for snow and trees. The roar of engines grows louder with each step, causing my heart rate to increase as adrenaline pumps through my veins like wildfire. We reach the helicopter just as two dark figures appear from behind a nearby tree, their faces are concealed by shadows, but their intentions are clear from even this distance. They’re here for us. Gunshots ring out, the bullets whizzing dangerously close. Panic fuels our desperate flight as Dean hops into the pilot’s seat. I scramble into the passenger side, praying we’ll get out before it’s too late.

The rotors spin furiously, struggling against the snow-laden gusts. Just as we begin to lift off, gunfire riddles the helicopter, shattering glass and pinging against the metal frame. The helicopter jerks violently, and Dean fights to maintain control, his face etched with determination.

“Hold on!” he shouts over the din, his voice barely audible above the roar of the engine. I wince and scrabble for my headset, clamping it down over my ears.

Finally, the helicopter lurches free from the ground, ascending into the storm. The wind howls around us, threatening to rip us from the sky, but Dean's skilled hands guide us through the turbulence. We soar above the snow-covered peaks, leaving behind the chaos and danger that lurked below—for now.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DEAN

“ARE YOU OKAY?” I ask as I peer down at the landscape, my eyes scanning for the two people who were shooting at us. Something about them had been familiar, but I couldn’t place it, which pisses me off.

When Kenna doesn’t answer, I shoot her an assessing glance, my eyes scoring over her body for wounds or blood. Not finding any, I release a breath and realize my heart is galloping in my chest. Not from being shot at—sad to say, but even though it’s been years, some things are like riding a bike. No, it’s because Kenna was there beside me and came close, so close, to being shot. Too close.

If she’d been hurt...

Fuck me, I’m never doing this shit again. Felix was all fired up about search and rescue, but I think he’s fucking crazy. Saving people is kick ass. The adrenaline shit? Dope as fuck, and I’d do that in a heartbeat. I like adrenaline. Risking someone else’s life... losing people I care... I mean, that I’m responsible for? Fuck that shit all the way.

Her head is twisted away from me, arms wrapped around her waist protectively. The question dies in my throat, and I force my gaze away from her. It’s better this way. Keeping our distance. That’s what I wanted, right? We’re less than an hour away from the airport, and as soon as I get her back to her Jeep, this will no longer be my problem. I did my part; I brought her out here, and it sucks that she didn’t find her sister, but I’m not getting any more involved. As soon as she’s gone, my life can go back to normal, and I can get back to doing what I do best—being alone.

We’re silent for a long time until the controls jerk in my hands.

“What was that?” she asks.

I frown, checking the instrumentation but not seeing anything wrong. Turbulence? A quick check doesn't show any anomalies.

“Dean?”

Before I can do something stupid, like reach out a comforting hand to her, the engine shudders again, this time so bad that Kenna sits up straight.

“Dean?” she asks warily. “Is it the storm?”

I start to reassure her when the engine sputters again. An alarm begins to blare, and there's no use shouting over it.

My heart races as I scan the instrument panel, my mind racing faster than the helicopter's faltering rotor blades. The engine failure light blinks on, and the RPM gauge begins to drop rapidly. There's no denying it; we're losing power. Her life is in my hands, and the last thing I want is to fail her.

For a moment, reality slips away from me, and I'm thrown end over ass into the past.



“Hey, Tyler. Need to talk to you. You awake?” Jamie’s frantic voice breaks through my half-sleep, and I blink up at his shadowed face.

“What is it?” I ask, trying to rub blood flow back into my brain. We’ve been back at base for a few hours, but not nearly long enough to process what the fuck happened with Tate. Was he really gone? It doesn’t seem real.

Jamie’s pacing around my tent, tearing his hands through his hair. “Need to talk to someone before I go fucking crazy, man.”

“We’re all a little crazy right now, man. Did you get any sleep?”

“Couldn’t,” comes his clipped reply. There are dark shadows under his unnaturally bright eyes.

“Jesus, man. Why don’t you take a shower and pass out for a couple hours? You’ll feel a helluva lot better.”

Jamie stops pacing long enough to send me a sardonic glance. “Really? You feeling better after your little nap, my guy?”

Snorting, I press my fingers into my sandpaper-like eyes. “So, what do you need to talk about? Your hopes and dreams?” He’s quiet for a long time. So long that I squint through the darkness in his direction. “Jamie?” A tendril of disquiet threads through me.

“I don’t—I mean, I’m not sure what I saw, but if I don’t tell someone, I may lose it, man.”

Sitting up, I flick on my bedside light. Jamie is still covered in Tate’s blood. His cheeks are hollow beneath the overgrowth of beard, and dark bruises are visible under his eyes. “What? What are you talking about?”

“But if I tell you, I might be putting you in danger, too, man. If it really was... Fuck.”

I swing my legs over my cot and stretch my neck. Of all of us, Jamie has always been the nut-job. But we’ve always meant that affectionately. He’s into astrology and gets a kick out of tarot shit, but we never took it seriously. His mom was supposedly a psychic and into yoga and meditation. So I say, “Are you talking about some vengeful spirit out to get me?”

Jamie lunges at me, his hands balled into fists. “This isn’t a fucking joke, man.”

I hold up my hands. “Okay, okay. Tell me what’s wrong then.”

He collapses onto the cot next to me and buries his head in his hands. “I dunno. Maybe you’re right, and I’m losing it. I just... there was something off about last night, yeah? That place should have been kosher. They came out of nowhere.”

I lift a shoulder. “Sometimes it’s like that.”

“Maybe,” he says. “I just thought I saw...”

“Saw what?”

Another lengthy silence follows before Jamie pushes to his feet. “Never mind, dude. You’re right. I probably just need some sleep. You go back to bed. Everything’s fine.”

Before I can stop him and get him to explain what the hell is going on in that brain of his, he’s out of my tent, his footsteps fading into the distance.

I try to write it off as Jamie being Jamie, but I’m not able to sleep until the sun starts to rise. When I wake from a troubled sleep, I find Jamie’s handprints on my shirt with what must be stains of Tate’s blood.



“Dean? What—?” comes Kenna’s frantic voice. When I come back to the present, I glance over, and her face is devoid of its usual pink blush. The urge to touch her, to reassure her, is so strong it makes my gut twist. But I can’t lose focus, not if I want to ensure our survival. I silence the alarm so she can hear me.

“I need you to stay as calm as possible for me. Can you do that?” I ask over the din, my voice filled with urgency. I grip the controls with renewed strength, my fingers trembling but determined. The helicopter lurches, its once smooth flight giving way to erratic movements. I fight to maintain control, to keep us in the air just a little longer. She doesn’t answer for a minute, and I bark, “*Kenna.*”

“Yes, I can do that,” she finally answers. Her voice is shaky, but I don’t blame her.

The scent of smoke fills my nose, but the relief at her words is blinding. “That’s my girl. Everything is going to be okay.” I attempt to call out a mayday and radio our location—

the north face of Thunderhead Mountain—and I can only hope it gets through to someone.

“What—” She pauses to take a deep, hiccupping breath. “What’s wrong?”

“We’re losing power.”

“Because they shot the helicopter?” she whispers.

“No, bullets couldn’t do that. This is something else. I’m going to try to land at the next available clearing. Make sure your seatbelt is fastened securely. Securely, Kenna. God himself shouldn’t be able to get you out of that seat. You hear me?”

“I hear you.” Movement out of the corner of my eyes confirms she’s doing as she’s told. “Done. Now what?”

The storm is intensifying, wind is lashing against the windshield, and the dark, forbidding silhouette of the trees below is growing closer. With the engine failing, we’re losing altitude fast.

“Just hold on.”

I pull up on the collective, attempting to slow our descent, and simultaneously adjust the cyclic to aim for a small clearing between the trees. Autorotating down to a landing is our only chance.

Kenna grips her seat, her knuckles turning white as she stares at me, eyes wide with fear. I shoot her a reassuring glance, though my own adrenaline is pumping and every fiber of my being is focused on executing the autorotation perfectly.

As the ground rushes up to meet us, I time the flare just right, pulling the collective hard while pushing the cyclic forward. The helicopter responds, and for a moment, it feels like we might make it.

But then, the impossible happens.

A massive gust of wind from the storm buffets us, sending the helicopter veering off course. I fight back, desperately trying to regain control, but it’s too late. The tail rotor clips a tree branch and sends us into a violent spin.

The world outside blurs into a chaotic whirlwind of green and white as we crash through the treetops. The sound of splintering branches and twisting metal is deafening. Kenna's screams mix with the cacophony of destruction.

And then, with a bone-jarring impact, the helicopter crashes to the ground. I feel something in my leg snap. My vision goes white with pain, my head collides with something, and everything goes black.

CHAPTER NINE

KENNA

WHEN I COME TO, it's difficult to tell how much time has passed. There's a cold blanket of white all around me, and snowflakes are still descending from the sky, dusting my skin and clothes. For a moment, I'm disoriented and unsure of where I am or what has happened. Why is it snowing in my room? I ponder this for a moment as snow melts on my skin.

But then it all comes back to me in a rush.

The cabin.

The gunfire.

The storm.

And now... this.

I look over to where Dean is slumped against the shattered remains of the pilot's chair. Panic rises in my chest as I see the way his head is twisted at an odd angle, his limbs akimbo. But even worse, he's not conscious. I don't think I've ever experienced fear so sharp it takes my breath away. Not even when I knew the helicopter was going to crash. Braving this alone? I can't even fathom it.

Despite the fact that he's been an asshole to me, I can't leave him here to die. I need him.

Sweat beads on my forehead as I struggle to free myself from the mangled harness. "Dean?" I choke out, my voice sounding strange and hoarse to my ears. Smoke still billows from somewhere in the engine, meaning this thing could go up at any moment. I have to hurry.

I finally manage to break free and balance myself precariously over the instruments beneath me, barely daring to breathe. He's curled forward, his body shaking and shuddering with each labored breath. I reach out, my hand trembling, and gently touch his shoulder. The only response is a low groan, and only then do I notice the trickle of blood staining his dark

sweatshirt an even darker color. I suck in a shuddering breath, tears clouding my vision.

I don't know how long I stay like that, lost in a blur of terror and despair. But eventually, I crawl out of the remains of the helicopter and survey our location. The snow isn't letting up, and Dean may not make it if we don't find shelter soon. Hell, if we don't have shelter, *I* won't make it either. The girls' faces flash before my eyes. I can't give up. I have to get back to them and survive long enough to find out what happened to Kady. To figure out what Project Sentinel means and what it has to do with Jamie and Kady's disappearance.

With newfound determination, I search the surrounding area for any signs of shelter. My eyes scan the endless expanse of white and eventually spy a small overhang of craggy rocks nestled into the side of the mountain and sheltered by some trees. It's not much, but it's better than nothing. I can use some of the debris from the wreckage to enclose it. At least, it will block most of the wind and snow. Keeping us warm is my first priority.

I glance back at Dean's unconscious form. His bulk was intimidating when he loomed over me on his porch with the gun slung over his shoulder, but now, it's even more so. There's no way I'll be able to carry his weight. He's almost two hundred and fifty pounds, easy, and it's probably all muscle. Being unconscious means it's dead weight, too. I'll have to jerry-rig some sort of sled to pull him to the shelter. And I have to do it fast. I don't know how much time has passed, and I don't want to be stuck out here after dark.

My fingers fumble with the torn pieces of metal and fabric from the wreckage, my mind racing as I attempt to fashion a makeshift sled. My hands are shaking, and my teeth are chattering from the cold, but I press on, determined to get us somewhere safe as quickly as possible. There's a large piece from one of the doors that, I think, is big enough to carry him.

Perfect.

Now I need to find a rope or something to pull with. My head starts to throb as I search the small space inside the

helicopter. Then, I see the seat belt! A wave of elation rolls through me before I realize I have no way to cut it. Choking back a sob, I slump into the seat next to Dean, who still isn't moving.

I press my fingers into my eyes until I see stars. *Get it together, Kenna.*

After several deep breaths, I force myself to take my time and inventory everything I can see around me. My pain and panic are slowly leeching away, replaced by a bone-deep weariness, but I can't afford to be sloppy. Dean can't afford for me to be sloppy.

I know they keep emergency supplies on most aircrafts, and Dean was a Marine, so they're anal about everything, according to Kady. I have no doubt if there's one helicopter that will have a shit ton of supplies, it'll be this one. I just have to be patient and thorough and find them.

I force myself back to my feet and search through all the debris where the cockpit should be. Even if it was stored near the pilot, it may have become dislodged during the crash. I gather a flashlight, a lighter, and a bottle of water I come across and set them aside to take. Then, I let out a scream of triumph when my hand closes on my purse strap. It isn't a cell phone or radio, but there's no telling what treasures I'll find in there. I put the other supplies I've found in my purse.

Finally, I strike gold. The first aid kit was wedged between the left side of the pilot seat and the wall. I almost gave up hope of finding it. Inside is exactly what I was hoping for—a small pair of scissors, a trove of other medical supplies, a map of the area, and an emergency blanket. I put the kit in my purse and use the scissors to cut through the restraints on the passenger side. It's a tedious process because the scissors are small, and the seat belt material is thick. I do the same for both seats in the back and save Dean's for last. When I cut his restraints, he'll fall a short distance to the snow. The harness is the only thing keeping him in his seat.

I move to the makeshift sled and begin tying the scraps of the harness into a rope. I loop it around the busted window and

tie it securely. I don't have a cushion, but I don't think Dean will mind at the moment. Once I'm finished, there's no putting it off. I have to get Dean out of his seat and onto the sled.

With a deep breath, I reach up and undo the harness holding Dean in place. He slumps forward, and I realize his left leg must be broken because of the way it's twisted at such an odd angle. I wince but force myself to remain calm. I carefully maneuver him onto the sled, trying my best not to jostle his leg more than necessary. Once he's situated, I loop the makeshift rope around my shoulders and pull the sled toward the overhang I spotted earlier.

Breaths heave from my chest, which stings with the effort and the freezing air. "If you make it through this, you so owe me, buddy," I say to his unconscious form. "You owe me big, and you also owe me an apology for being such a dick."

His weight is almost too much to bear, but I grit my teeth and trek toward the cave. The snow is coming down harder than ever, and I can feel the cold seeping deep into my bones as we trudge through the snow. The going is slow, and my thigh and glute muscles ache with the effort, but we make progress. I'm careful to navigate around large boulders or wreckage, so it takes me for-fucking-ever to trek the distance from the helicopter to the cave.

When we finally reach the cave, I pull him as far inside as I can so he's protected from the snowfall and the worst of the wind. It's not much, but it's miles better than where we were a short while ago. My breaths now come in short gasps, and I can feel the icy air biting into my lungs. But I'm not giving up yet. Not when we've come this far and are finally out of the snow.

If I had to guess, it's been about two hours since the crash. Which would make it, what? Three o'clock or something? Not bad, but not good either. I'm already exhausted, and my energy stores are depleted. My head throbs with each heartbeat. The only thing I can do for now is construct the shelter to protect us from the brunt of the wind before darkness falls and we're completely screwed. All I can think about is

getting us as safe as possible. I'll worry about myself when I'm sure we're not going to freeze to death.

With shaking hands, I gather up some of the scattered debris, fallen branches, and boughs from around the wreckage and construct a crude lean-to against the side of the mountain. It's not much, but it will at least block out some of the wind and snow. Satisfied with my work, I turn my attention back to Dean. His leg is still twisted in an unnatural position, and his skin has taken on a deathly pale pallor. I don't know what to do or how long we could be stuck out here without medical attention.

I sit next to him for what feels like an eternity, watching helplessly as his breathing becomes more labored with each passing minute. Finally, I work up enough nerve and catch my breath so I can step outside our makeshift shelter and scan the horizon for any sign of rescue.

My eyes roam across the snowy landscape. We're deep in the mountains, far from civilization, and I have no idea how long it'll be before anyone comes looking for us.

But they have to be looking... right? Dean sent out a mayday call on his radio. Someone had to have heard it.

I take a deep breath and force myself to focus. We need to survive, and that's all that matters right now. I turn back to Dean, who's still sleeping soundly despite the freezing temperatures and all my worries. I know I need to start a fire to keep us warm, but the snow is piled high, and all the wood around us is wet. I cover Dean with the emergency blanket after tucking his jacket firmly around him and head back to the smoldering remains of his helicopter. It really had been beautiful before it played chicken with the mountains.

Later, I'll worry about what exactly caused the crash—everything happened so fast—but for now, I have to focus on making sure there will be a later for both of us. I search through the meager supplies scavenged and locate the lighter I found. Thank heaven for small mercies. I don't want to think about what would have happened to us without a fire. Nothing good, that's for certain.

I gather what I can that will burn or any paper that doesn't seem important. A book from my purse. Trash. I also find some wood, though there isn't much that's not soaked. Despite my frozen fingers, I bring it back to the shelter.

I pile it all in the back of the cave and kneel by Dean's too-still body. Even if he is a stubborn jerk, I don't want anything to happen to him. Especially if I can do something to stop it.

Glancing at the pile, I realize that I need to move him closer. He'll need all the warmth he can get if—no, when—I manage to get it started. Tugging his body along on the sled, I get him as close to where the fire will be as possible. Sweat streams down my face, and now my hands are trembling with exhaustion and the cold, which will no doubt make it difficult to strike the lighter. But I refuse to give up. I know we need this fire. It could define the line between life and death for both of us.

I set aside the worst of the pile—wet paper and damp wood—to dry for future use and place the best pieces in front of me. Carefully, I shred bark from wood and tear bits of paper into fine strips. I build all of this into a nest in the center of a circle of large rocks to block most of the wind. The perfect home for my first fire. Hysterical laughter threatens to burst free from my throat, but I wrestle it back. I've never even been fucking camping. I don't even like Airbnbs. I prefer my own bed, cozy and safe, in my own home. I swear to God, if we make it out of here, I'm never leaving the safety of the city again.

The day is cold and gray, the chill continuing to work its way through my body. After what feels like hours, and just when I lose hope, a small flame finally flickers and takes root in the nest of paper.

“Yes!” I shout, my voice echoing off the rock walls. “I did it!” The flame flickers and dies in a puff of smoke, and my smile fades. “Shit.”

The next time I get a flame, I don't celebrate until I've fed it more paper and shavings, tending it to a small but steady blaze. Now I know how Tom Hanks felt in *Castaway*. I'll

never make fun of him again. The glow of the fire illuminates the small interior of the shelter, and the warmth slowly spreads through my body, easing the ache in my bones. I bundle us both underneath our coats and the emergency blanket, sitting as close to the fire as I can manage without getting burned.

The fire crackles and shifts as I stare into the flickering light, my thoughts becoming lost in the dance of the flames. Drowsiness comes over me, and I give in to the exhaustion, slumping against the cold stone wall behind me as I keep watch over Dean, hoping we'll both still be here in the morning.

CHAPTER TEN

DEAN

EVERYTHING FUCKING HURTS.

The only thing that provides any relief is the sound of her voice telling me everything will be okay.

Georgia?

No, that isn't right.

Before I can figure out why, I'm swallowed by the blackness once again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KENNA

THE MORNING SUN has barely made it above the horizon, but with it comes at least the possibility of a rescue. Overnight, the cold reached a level I didn't think was possible, even with the small fire to fight off some of it. I pull my coat tighter around me and glance around our makeshift shelter. It was a miracle we didn't freeze, though I'm not certain I haven't.

Sleep was an impossibility. Every time I started to close my eyes, an overriding panic would surge through me, and I'd fly awake to make sure Dean was still breathing. I want to hate him, to be angry and resentful, but I was too relieved to find him alive each time I checked. I huddled with him underneath our coats and an emergency blanket that looked and felt like tinfoil but managed to reflect our heat back on us. Or what little heat there was from the fire.

When the darkness around us turned from black to gray, I almost wept.

We'd made it through the night.

I press my fingers to Dean's throat, a practice I've gotten used to after panicking all night, terrified he'd be dead or that the fire would go out while I was sleeping. Relief fills me at the steady throb of his pulse against my fingers. He's still alive. I'm too exhausted and frozen to feel anything, really, but I'm sure if I could, the prevailing emotion would be relief.

Guilt soon replaces the relief. If I hadn't forced him to come out here, we wouldn't be in this mess. If he doesn't make it...

I push the thought away. I can't think that way. The moment I start, I know I'll let it consume me, and I'll be frozen with fear. And then I'll never know what happened to Kady.

I pull away from Dean and rise to my feet, wincing at the stiffness that courses through every muscle in my body. It's not just the cold that's making me ache. The crash was brutal, and my ribs feel like they've been rearranged by an overenthusiastic MMA fighter.

As though sensing my absence, Dean shifts restlessly. His breaths are ragged and shallow, and I know he's struggling. I'd give anything for an insult... a glare... anything.

"Dean? Are you okay?" I ask, concern in my voice as I move back to his side. He doesn't answer, his face twisted in pain.

I shift the emergency blanket closer around him, trying to block out as much of the cold as possible. But I know it's not enough. Not in this weather.

We need help... and it should have been here by now.

Right?

Despite every bone in my body protesting, I move to the opening of the shelter. There has to be an emergency radio in the wreckage of the helicopter, right? I just have to find it. I have to try, at least. What the hell else am I going to do in the meantime besides freeze to death anyway? Maybe if I find it, Dean will know what to do to ensure the rescue teams find our location—wherever that is.

I step out into the biting wind, my teeth chattering and my body shuddering with the cold. I scan the sky, but there's still no sign of anyone. No sound of a search party. Nothing. The storm has at least passed, but the amount of snow it dumped overnight is awe-inspiring. I didn't even know it could snow this much in North Carolina.

My heart sinks as I trudge towards the wreckage, the snow crunching beneath my feet. It's hard to breathe in this frigid air, and my lungs protest with each inhalation. As I reach the downed helicopter, I shield my face from the icy wind with my hand and peer inside.

What had once been a helicopter no longer resembles its former self. The seats are torn apart, the instruments are

shattered, and the control panel is a twisted mess of wires. I know the emergency radio or whatever it's called must be somewhere in this wreckage. I search every nook and cranny, and my fingers go numb as I dig through the debris. Finally, I see something glinting out of the corner of my eye.

I pull what looks like a little radio from a mangled compartment and pray it still works. I flick the switch and listen intently, hoping for a signal. Finally, I hear a droning beep, and relief floods through me. It's working. Help will be on its way.

I feel a sudden surge of panic as I dart back to the shelter. What if Dean is in worse shape than when I left him? What if he succumbs to the cold and his injuries, and I get there too late? The thought of losing the dumb jerk fills me with hollow dread.

The shelter is darker and colder than before, the fire having burned down to embers in the short time I was gone. I scan the darkness frantically before finally catching sight of his bulky frame, still wrapped in the blanket near what's left of the fire. He's lying on his side, breathing shallowly, and his lips are blue. He's shivering, too, his face tight with pain.

I rush over and kneel at his side. "Dean, can you hear me? Help is coming. Everything will be okay. Just hold on."

His eyes flutter open, but they're glazed with pain and exhaustion. He tries to speak, but no words come out. He nods weakly instead, letting me know that he heard me.

I lay close to him, wrapping the coats and emergency blanket tighter around us. I try to share my body heat and keep him warm, but he still shivers against me. I need to treat his break. Hell if I know how to do that, though, or even if I should have done that before I let him sleep. I know he's supposed to stay awake with a concussion, but he's at least responding to me somewhat. Maybe he's not as hurt as I think.

To distract myself, I take out the map I found with the medical kit and begin to study it to try and figure out our location. When Dean made the mayday call, I remember him mentioning the north face of Thunderhead Mountain. There

are all sorts of state parks and touristy places in these mountains, so there must be some kind of building close. A cabin or a station for the state rangers. We need better shelter because we might very well freeze to death before Search and Rescue ever finds us.

As I analyze the map, I notice a small icon that looks like a ranger's station. It's about two miles from what I think is our current location, but we'll have to move quickly. Time is not on our side, especially with Dean's injuries. And that's *if* I'm reading the map correctly and my guess about our location is accurate.

I turn to Dean, who is still unconscious, and worry creases my forehead as I take in his condition. His head is bleeding, and I see a lump forming near his temple. The bruises are going to be wicked, and his skin is already a dark shade of purple. He doesn't budge when I give him another sip of water and check his leg.

I try calling his name, but he doesn't respond. I'm on the verge of panic, but I take a deep breath and calm myself. Panicking won't help either of us.

I make several more trips back and forth between the shelter and the helicopter, collecting whatever supplies I can scavenge. The cold is still piercing, and the snow seems to swallow my every move, but I keep going. There is no other option. I pause briefly to melt some snow over the fire in a piece of pliable metal I scavenged into a crude bowl shape, but otherwise, I keep myself busy.

As dark begins to fall, I wrap myself up tightly in one of the blankets, one hand on Dean's chest to ensure he's still breathing. As I doze off into an uneasy sleep, my mind drifts back to everything we found in the cabin. Kady's face is at the forefront of my thoughts.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DEAN

IT FEELS *like I've been through this exact scenario a thousand times, but it's never been like this before. Pushing the thought from my mind, I move with the other passengers to locate my bag in the storage bin, grateful that I'll soon be out of the crush of people.*

All I want is the privacy of the mountains and to be with my family.

That's all I've been able to think about since everything went down. The only light at the end of this hellacious tunnel.

Disembarking the plane moves at a glacial pace, and my patience at being surrounded by so many people is already paper thin. As I wait, I shove headphones in my ears and crank up one of those camping ASMR videos that soothe my nerves. The sound of the woods and the crackle of campfire keep me from snapping at the closest available victim.

Finally, I get into the terminal, clear security, and find my bags. Normally, they're waiting for me by baggage claim. I peer through the throng for her customary yellow cardigan but don't see one. She always wears the yellow one, so she's easy to spot.

I stay where I am, assuming she'll be there shortly. Traffic can be a bitch near the airport, so I don't worry... at first.

Then, fifteen minutes go by.

Then thirty.

After an hour, I'm calling her number—no answer.

At an hour and a half, I'm striding through the crowd with no care for anyone else. I muscle through them and ignore the fierce looks and muttered complaints when I'm not kind about it. Something raw and savage grows inside me with each unanswered phone call.

I order an Uber outside the arrivals exit and wait impatiently for the driver to arrive. There is no conversation as they navigate through the traffic, and I don't give a damn that the cost from the airport to Crystal Mountain will be extraordinary. With each passing moment, my stomach clenches a little tighter.

But when the car pulls up to the cabin, and there's a sheriff's cruiser in the driveway, all that tension drops out of my ass, leaving a greasy nausea in its wake.

In a daze, I thank the driver and retrieve my bags with numb hands. The sheriff's deputy exits the cruiser and meets me with a somber expression.

"I'm sorry," is all I hear.



"Dean? Can you hear me?"

I fight my way out of unconsciousness, the memory of that day clawing at me along the way. But I'd rather be consumed by the physical pain of reality than the pain guaranteed in my memories.

My eyes snap open, and Kenna's worried expression fills my vision. It goes slack when she realizes I'm awake, and she throws herself over my chest. I grunt in pain. *Christ, what happened to me?*

And then she's pulling away with a rushed, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Shit, I didn't mean to hurt you even more. I'm just so fucking glad you're awake."

I close my eyes again, hoping it'll keep my vision from swimming. My voice croaks when I speak, my throat is bone dry, and my mouth tastes like rancid ass. "How—how long was I out?"

The sounds of rustling meet my ears, and I can sense Kenna moving around wherever we are. I hear the dry *thunk* of

wood hitting wood, and the scent of something burning reaches my nose. This suddenly reminds me of the fire in the engine, and my eyes shoot back open. Kenna is adding a couple logs to a small fire. My vision is blurry, so I can't make out where we are, but it sure ain't a five-star resort—or a hospital. Dread creeps into my consciousness, tensing my wounded muscles and making my heart pound rapidly in my chest.

“Um, two days, I think? I was starting to worry you'd never wake up.” Kenna laughs slightly, but when I meet her eyes, they're bright with unshed tears. From relief? Fear? I don't fucking know. My head hurts too much to put clear thoughts together.

“Where are we?” My eyes close again as I try to assess my injuries, but it's hard to focus. My throat is so dry that speaking induces a coughing fit.

“Before we went down, you'd radioed in that we were on the north side of the mountain. I have a map, but I'm not sure I have the location right. We're about a hundred yards from the wreckage. I found a little cave thing to build a shelter.”

My eyes pop open again, and I find Kenna lifting a water bottle to my lips. I drink thirstily until I remember we should be conserving water. Kenna shakes her head. “No, you need to drink. We have plenty of snow, so I can melt more.” When I hesitate, she gives me a stern look. “Don't make me force it down your throat, Dean Tyler.”

It's a surprisingly intimate act, letting her help me drink water. She helps me sit up with one hand behind my head while another holds the bottle to my lips. The sense of being completely vulnerable to her fights against my every instinct to shield myself from relying on anyone else. But in this instance, I don't have a choice.

I try not to notice how close she is, hunched over me. How gentle her hands are, cradling my head. It's been so long since I let anyone care for me I'd forgotten what it felt like. It's unnerving, and what makes it even more so is that there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

I push her hands away, but she glares at me. “Don’t be an idiot. You need to drink something,” Kenna says and rights the bottle. “How are you feeling?”

“Like shit,” I answer hoarsely after drinking deeply. “How bad is it?”

She glances away, and that’s all I need to know to confirm it’s as bad as it feels. “You’ve got a gash on your ribs. Maybe a concussion... and I think your leg is broken.”

My eyes slip closed again for a moment. “Sit me up,” I tell her.

“I don’t think—”

I cut her off with a shake of my head. “Just do it.”

“You’ll have to tell me how so I don’t hurt you.”

“Wrap your arms around me under my shoulders, and I’ll push with my good leg. Just give me some leverage. Don’t worry about hurting me. I’ve had worse.”

“Are you sure?” At my look, she says, “Right, okay. Here we go. I’m sorry in advance. I know this is going to hurt like a bitch.”

She leans her body over me to circle her arms under my shoulders. She can’t quite reach all the way around, but I wrap my arms around her, too, which allows me to push with my uninjured foot. I laboriously scoot my way to sitting until I’m up against a cold rock wall. My head and ribs ache something awful, but that doesn’t even touch the pain radiating from my leg. Sweat beads on my forehead, and my head swims with nausea.

I list to the side, and Kenna exclaims, “Whoa there. Don’t pass out on me again, okay? I don’t want to do this alone anymore.”

Waving a hand, I keep my eyes closed until the room stops spinning. “I’m good. Just give me a minute and stop fussing.”

Ignoring my sharp tone, she says, “Do you think you could eat something?”

The thought sends my stomach heaving in protest, but I know not eating will be infinitely worse in the long run, so I say, “Probably.”

She hands me something, and I don’t even look to see what it is because it doesn’t matter. Nothing sounds appetizing, but I know I need the energy. After I choke it down, I say, “You said I’ve been out for two days? Have you heard any ’copters around? There should have been a rescue team.”

Kenna shakes her head and spins around in the small shelter to dig through a pile of things on the ground. “No, not a damn sign of anything besides a ton of snow. I did get this from the wreckage. I think it’s an emergency radio? Shouldn’t it lead them to us?”

My stomach plummets. If she has the ELT and we haven’t had any sign of rescue, there must be something wrong with the transmitter. “It should.”

Kenna’s hopeful expression falls. “You say that like it’s not going to. I didn’t mess it up, did I?”

I do a quick inspection of the device, but I don’t detect any damages. They’re built to survive a crash. We’re not so far into the mountains that we’d be inaccessible, even with the snow we received. The only explanation is that the device malfunctioned somehow. Or the weather has made accessing our location near impossible.

“No, you didn’t, but they should have been here by now.”

She slumps on her butt, silently feeding the fire with pages from a beat-up paperback. “Well, there has to be something else we can do. I found a map. And I think there’s a ranger’s station a couple miles from here if I’m reading it right. I could see if I can find some help and bring them back here to get you.”

“I’d be dead before you got back,” I say bluntly. With my injuries, the cold, no food, and little water, I’m not lying.

Kenna bites her lip, frowning. “I could make it. I know I said I couldn’t do this alone, but I was kidding. Mostly. I’m

not completely helpless. I've kept you alive this long, haven't I?"

"Not a knock against you. Hell, maybe you should go without me. It'd be easier."

Her eyes harden. "Like hell. I'll drag you there if I have to. I did it before."

"The only way we're going anywhere is if we set my leg."

She rocks back on her haunches, shaking her head. "What? No, I don't think so. Your leg is *broken*, Dean. You need a doctor. A professional. You can't be serious. I have no idea what I'm doing. It's pure luck I managed to keep both of us alive."

All I want to do is sleep, but I push my fingers into my eyes, trying to clear my thoughts. "You did great, princess. Now I need you to do this for me. Then we'll figure out where that station is so we can get the hell out of here."

She's still shaking her head. "Are you sure there isn't anything else we can do? I found a flare, too. Couldn't we shoot that for help?"

"Not unless they're looking for us already. They may not even know where we crashed. This is the only way. You can do it. I'll walk you through it."

"And you have so much experience setting bones, right?"

"I've done it a time or two." Not an exaggeration, and they were nothing like this, but she didn't need to know that.

"You're kidding."

"Wish I wasn't. Let's get it over with. First, we need to figure out how bad the break is. Roll up my pant leg and stoke up the fire to get a good look at it." Cold sweat rolls between my shoulders at the thought, but if we want any hope of getting out of here, this has to be done.

She adds a couple more logs to the fire and kneels with my leg positioned in the V of her thighs. With gentle movements, she carefully rolls up the pant leg to my knee, exposing the grotesquely discolored limb. A wave of dizziness assaults me

at the sight, but I breathe through it as I instruct her on the next steps.

“It’s not an open fracture, thank fucking god. Take off my boot as carefully as you can so we can check for blood flow.” She does as I say with minimal movement, but it still hurts like a bitch. I instruct her to pinch the skin on the top of my foot and one of my toes. “This checks for capillary refill. We want to see the skin go from white back to pink to make sure there’s still blood flow.” When there is, we both sag with relief. “I need you to feel around the break.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You can do it.”

“Not without throwing up, I can’t,” she objects.

“As long as you don’t throw up on me, I don’t care. I need you to find where the break is so we know how to best stabilize it.”

“Fine. You asked for it.”

Her tentative fingers feel up my foot, over my heel and ankle, and then skate over a place that makes my vision go white. “There,” I choke out. She probes the area at my insistence. “We’re going to have to stabilize it. Do you have something we can use as a splint? A long piece of metal and something to wrap it with?”

Kenna searches around the shelter, finds a sturdy branch about the right size, and strips herself of a thin sweater layer. In any other circumstance, I wouldn’t have been able to help myself from drooling at the sight of her bare skin, but I’m quickly distracted when she redresses and poses over my injured leg.

“Now what?”

“Gonna need you to wrap the shirt as tightly as you can around the branch. We don’t want that bone to move at all.” She does as I ask, and I try to keep from passing out again. “You don’t have any painkillers, do you?”

She scoots around the shelter and digs through a bag when she finishes. “I have some ibuprofen. Would that help?”

“That’s practically candy to a military man. But it’s better than nothing. Thanks.”

She gives me the bottle of water, and I wash down four tablets. I feel like I’ve run a marathon, and I’ve barely done anything. Needless to say, hiking to this supposed ranger station is going to be a bitch.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Kenna asks, pressing a hand to my shoulder. “We can wait another day. Maybe the rescue team will show up by then.”

“We can’t risk it.”

“Well, how in the hell are we supposed to trek two or more miles through the snow with your leg like that?”

“Very carefully,” I answer vaguely. “Now, let’s take a look at that map and see what we’re working with.”



“Let’s get going,” I tell Kenna, “before we lose the light.”

It’s mid-morning on the next day, and considering my condition, it may take us hours to go a short distance. My injury, the snow, and guessing our location will make this the hike from hell. And here I thought being stranded with a city girl was the worst thing that could happen.

“I’m comin’, I’m comin’ . Jeez, you’d think being injured would make you less bossy,” she huffs, shouldering her pack and meeting me at the entrance to the ramshackle shelter.

“You’d be wrong,” I say, taking a tentative step forward. The light reflecting off the snow blinds me momentarily, but I sigh when I get a good look at the landscape around us. More than a foot of snow must have fallen during the storm. “Make

sure your snowshoes are secure. We can't afford for you to twist an ankle or something."

Kenna bends at the waist to do as I recommend, with some muttered protests under her breath, which I ignore as I do the same, although far less gracefully because it's hard to keep one leg straight. She easily fashioned the snowshoes from branches near the wreckage and an old fishing net we kept for fishing charters, reinforcing the net with pliable limbs. The overall result was impressive, though I couldn't tell her that.

I was too busy psyching myself up. While she checked her shoes and gear, I tested my leg and the makeshift crutches. They seemed sturdy enough, but I couldn't say the same for my leg. A mass of throbbing pain rockets through me like lightning with each step, but there's nothing I can do about it. I can't let her go alone with the guys who shot at us still possibly in the area.

The first few steps make me question my resolve, but after a while, I manage to tune out the pain or at least become numb enough to keep putting one foot in front of another. A day of rest had allowed me to regain some energy, but not nearly enough for what lay ahead.

"So, tell me about yourself," Kenna says after we've put some distance between us and the wreckage. The station is about two miles down the mountain like she thought. If we're lucky, it'll only take a couple hours to get there. But more than likely, we'll get there around nightfall. I'll have to take frequent breaks and go slowly to avoid further injuring my leg.

"No," I answer.

"You have something better to do?" She lets out a grunt as she climbs over a rock.

"Yes."

I can't see her, but I can hear her scoff. "Oh, yeah? I'm all ears." When I don't speak, she says, "Fine, I'll tell you all about me instead."

"Oh, great," I mutter but doubt she can hear me over the sound of her crashing over snow and fallen limbs. It was easier

to be a dick to her when I was close to being rid of her. Now that we're stuck out here together, I can tell she's trying to cover up how scared she is. And I hate that I fucking care that she's scared. That I want to make her feel better. That a part of me is eager to hear all about her.

It's hard to hide how much I want her when we're stranded together.

"You already know about my twin Kady. She's a librarian at the school my sisters go to. Her favorite thing is to curl up with a good book. It wasn't until she met Jamie that she started to break out of her shell a little. He loved to push her, make her try new things. Hiking, traveling, and all that."

"That was Jamie, alright," I say and curb the smile that tries to appear at the thought of Jamie and Kenna's sister happily hiking through the woods. The Jamie I knew would have loved it.

"Anyway, she's madly in love with him. That's why I don't get why he'd take her and disappear. At least not without telling me. He'd have to know how terrified we'd be."

Her voice starts to grow on me. At least it distracts me from how fucking tired and in pain I am. "Probably has to do with our last deployment."

I can practically feel her gaze on me. "Your last deployment? Why? What happened? Kady never really told me much."

"A good friend of ours was killed. Ryan. Ryan Tate. Died in our arms." I don't know where the words come from. It's the first time I've talked about Tate with anyone.

Her stumbling quiets as she pauses a few feet ahead of me to turn a sympathetic look toward me. "I'm so sorry, Dean. I didn't know. Jamie never said anything to Kady that I know of."

I lift a shoulder in response, mentally brushing away her concern. "Anyway, Jamie had it in his brain that it was a conspiracy. He was real spooked that Tate's death was intentional for whatever reason. He would never say why

because I think he was afraid if he told us, we'd become targets, too."

Her mouth drops open. "You're kidding," she says.

"Like I said, Jamie's a little paranoid."

Or at least that's what I'm saying to convince myself. I was able to ignore the messages from Ford and Cal at first. It's not the first time one of them has tried to reach out and reconnect. I got so successful at pushing them away after everything went down that they pretty much gave up.

"Do you know anything about something called Project Sentinel?" she asks.

"Never heard of it. Is it like a movie?"

Kenna is silent for a long time. "No, it's not a movie. We'll talk about it later. Anyway, I've told you about Kady, but I also have a bunch of younger sisters." She tells me about her three younger sisters, and I lose myself in the sound of her voice. It takes until our first rest break, a good hour's trek, for me to realize why she's doing it.

Little brat. I don't need her distractions. I'll do just fine on my own, like I always have.

But that doesn't stop me from letting her tell me all about her family. For a second, with her voice filling my ears and my body weary from exertion, the sucking black hole in my chest recedes.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KENNA

THE WIND CUTS into my jacket and jeans as we trudge through the endless snow-covered terrain. I can't remember what it was like to exist without being cold. Hell isn't fire. It's snow and ice. Isn't there a poem like that? I swear when we get out of here, I'm going to spend a couple weeks—no months—in a tropical climate. All I want is endless beaches and all the sunshine I can absorb. Maybe I'll even convince the girls to move somewhere where there is no snow ever. Like Miami. If I'm never in the snow again for the rest of my days, it'll be too soon.

A glance at Dean shows me he's moving slower than ever, his steps achingly precise, presumably so he doesn't trip. Even from a distance, I can see he's trembling from exhaustion. I thought the stoic hero who endures despite all obstacles was a thing of romance-trope mythology. Just something you saw in the movies or read about in books. But Dean embodies that character, the kind of man who stays strong through the worst conditions.

It makes it damn hard to stay pissed at him for being such a dick to me before the crash. I'm trying to hold on to the spite, but it's difficult when I fought so hard to save him. When I'm so grateful he's alive, and I'm not alone.

Seeing him hike for hours on end with a broken leg makes me look at him in a new light. There's a tenderness inside me that warms every time I see his continued displays of resilience. Even though he's injured and exhausted, I haven't heard him complain once since we left. He hasn't even blamed me for being the reason we're both stuck out here, even though he'd be completely justified to do so. I wouldn't fault him if he yelled at me now for it. But he hasn't. He even let me blab on about my family, though I assumed he couldn't care less.

I also know that I can't give up now when he's fighting so hard to make it out of here. I'd kill for a hot coffee and a warm bed, and that tropical vacation is also calling my name, but I have to keep pushing for Dean's sake. He wouldn't be in this mess if it weren't for me.

I glance back at him and am relieved that he's still there, trudging through the snow. He doesn't look happy about it, that's for sure. As I turn away, I find my lips lifting in an ironic smile. Who would have thought I'd be reassured to find Dean Tyler's grumpy face still behind me?

"You doing alright?" I shout over my shoulder. The wind isn't as bad as it was... the day before? Two days? I think I've lost count. It feels as though it's been an eternity.

"The same as I was when you asked twenty minutes ago," Dean answers, and I can hear the not-so-thinly veiled sarcasm even above the wind. Well, at least that hasn't changed. I may have softened toward him, but he hasn't thawed a bit where I'm concerned.

"I think we're almost there." Of course, I don't know that for certain, but we've been at this for hours. We have to be getting close. If not... well. We'll worry about that if we come to it.

Dean doesn't answer, but then again, he's probably saving all his energy to glare at my back. Why does that feel more affectionate than intimidating now? Maybe it's because he's a lot less scary with a limp and no gun in his hand.

As soon as we get off this mountain, I'm sure I'll go back to thinking that he's a jerk. A grumpy, cuddly jerk.

We march on for what feels like years. At some point, I'm stumbling to place one foot in front of another. My pants are damp, clinging to my numb thighs, and poor Dean can barely stay upright. When he falls to his knees with a sharp cry, I struggle to his side despite my vision going hazy with exhaustion.

"Let me help you," I say. I wrap his arm around my shoulder and take some of his weight. It's awkward, and the

man must be pure muscle because he's heavy as all hell, but he gets to his feet.

He grunts but doesn't say anything in protest, which is how I know he truly is exhausted. We have to find this ranger's station.

Soon.

I'm not certain how much longer we'll last out here without shelter and warmth. At this point, I'm not even hungry anymore, and I could sleep for about a thousand years.

I spot a fallen tree and guide Dean over to it. It doesn't take any convincing to get him to sit and take a break.

My heart stutters slightly at how gray his formerly tan complexion has gotten. Pushing to my feet, I say, "I'm going to scout ahead and see if I can find the station. You wait here, and I'll come back for you. Which direction is it?"

Dean merely points somewhere behind me, and I nod firmly, more to myself than anything, and head out before he can argue that it's a bad idea. Trust me, I know it's a bad idea. The sum total of my experience with the wilderness involves a weekend of glamping. The fact that I'm now in charge of keeping the both of us alive is ironic, to say the least. But I'm nothing if not determined.

Our lives depend on it.

I keep Dean in sight as I trudge through the snow and into the dense forest. I almost give up when I spot a shape out of the corner of my eye. Spinning around, I see a building in the distance. Maybe half a mile away down the mountain.

The relief that washes over me is so immense it takes me to my knees. We did it. Maybe we'll make it off this mountain after all.

Using the scissors I grabbed from the first aid kit, I score an X into several trees along the way back, marking my path so we don't get lost. After everything that's happened so far, that would be my luck.

After a short but arduous trip back up the mountain, I find Dean where I left him. His jacket is pulled tight around his shoulders, and his large frame shivers against the battering force of the wind. His eyes are tight with strain, but his voice is steady when he sees me and nods in the direction I came from.

“Tell me you found the damn place.” A wicked shiver wracks his giant body, looking hard enough to break bones.

I nod, my words coming out with thick puffs of air. “Not a minute too soon. We need to get you off your feet and somewhere warm. It’s ahead, maybe half a mile. Can you make it that far, or do you need to rest some more?”

“Stop babying me. I’m fine.” And then, with one large inhale and a bearish grunt, he pushes back to his feet and begins lumbering into the woods, using my footsteps as a guide.

I gaze after him for a minute, frozen. But not because of his biting remark. Because he’s still standing. Seriously, what the hell is he made of? How is he still on his feet, let alone hiking? And thank God for that because I don’t know if I could drag him the rest of the way, despite saying otherwise.

I don’t know how long it takes to get to the ranger’s station, but every second feels like an hour. Dean’s progress is slow but steady. Me, however? I feel like I’m about to faint any second. Oh, how the turns have tabled.

Finally, we make it to the dilapidated ranger’s station. At this point, I’m completely exhausted, and my whole body feels numb. I don’t even care that it doesn’t look much better than Jamie’s cabin. Even our cave shelter would look like the Ritz-Carlton at this point.

I trip over my feet and land hard against the rickety door. It’s taking all of Dean’s strength to remain upright. It’s up to me to get us inside. Thankfully the door is unlocked, so I push it open. I don’t know what I hoped to find, but it certainly isn’t an empty, abandoned, musty-smelling cabin. How many of these could there possibly be on one mountain?

I take one step inside and blink rapidly, trying to make sure the scene before my eyes isn't my imagination or exhaustion playing tricks on me. But it's not. Pressing a hand to my face, I hold the other out to cut through the cobwebs. If I weren't already shivering from the cold, the thought of being covered in spiders would have sent fresh chills down my spine. As it is, I'm too tired to pay it more than a passing thought.

There's no salvation to be found inside. The small structure is empty and desolate. There's a naked fireplace, a battered table and desk, and a single cot. Dust and debris cover pretty much every surface, and a cursory look through the two doors reveals a closet and a small bathroom. I guess there's that?

But it's better than nothing.

It's better than being dead.

That's good enough for now.

It's better than we were this morning.

We have shelter and a bed. That damn cot may as well have Egyptian cotton sheets and a down mattress.

Dean follows me inside and shuts the door behind us. It isn't much, but the small barrier between us and the wind provides a welcome warmth.

"I haven't been this warm in days," I breathe.

Dean collapses on the cot, which lets out a groan. "We need to get a fire going. See what you can find in here that'll burn. Anything will work."

I send him a frustrated glare, which he ignores because, of course, he's thinking about all the things we should do instead of crumpling in an exhausted pile on the floor and sleeping for a few days like I want to. But, damn him, I know he's right. I stumble over to the desk, find a pile of unidentifiable papers in a drawer, and throw them in the empty fireplace.

While I do that, I hear a loud crash and find Dean shattering the chair on the floor to use for wood. I gather it up and add it to the paper. Using my new skills as an expert fire

starter, I have a small flame in the fireplace within a few minutes. Soon, the dry wood catches, and warmth fills the cabin.

“Pretty good at that for a city girl,” Dean grunts from where he’s collapsed on the cot.

“Shocking, right?” I say with an impish grin in his direction. Is it my imagination or the lack of sleep and food—really, so many reasons—but is Dean actually... smiling? I blink a few times. When my vision clears, either he’s stopped, or he never was in the first place.

I choke back a hysterical giggle. Seriously. Dean smiling at a joke. Clearly, I’m losing it. God, I need some fucking sleep. I’d kill for a nap. But I know things need to be done first.

The next steps are food and water, so I head outside, fill our lone water bottle with fresh snow, and set it by the fire. There’s no food in the cabin, but we have some left from the wreckage. We split it between us, too tired to say much more. At the end of all this, I’m exhausted and can barely keep my eyes open. Dean doesn’t look much better.

“Scoot over,” I tell him as I stumble to the cot. It’s barely big enough to fit him, let alone the two of us, but there’s no way in hell I’m sleeping on the floor. I’m also not going to make him do that either.

Ah, the age-old, one-bed dilemma. If I weren’t so damn tired, I’d find it humorous. And maybe in another lifetime, I would have been giddy at the thought of sharing a bed with Dean. Hell, I’m only human, and he’s the definition of a tall drink of water. But right now, all I want is to sleep... and maybe to steal a little bit of warmth from his big, powerful frame.

He raises his eyebrows at me, and for the first time, I think he’s stunned. Or confused. I can’t quite tell in my weariness. Seriously, I’m about to collapse and don’t care where.

“Don’t argue,” I say, gesturing for him to lie down. He must be shocked or tired like me because he doesn’t protest. He stretches out over the cot, and I climb over him to wedge

myself between his body and the wall, careful to not bump any of his injuries. The feeling of being held, even if only superficially, is a comfort, and my eyelids grow steadily heavier without any prompting.

Another time, maybe, I'd be intimately aware of every inch of my body that comes in contact with his. Another time, I'd analyze how his hands find their way around my waist. How his nose turns toward my hair. How tense he is at first with me beside him, until he finally relaxes a little at a time, until he's relaxed against me.

"Does this hurt you? Let me know if I need to move." My jaw cracks with the force of a yawn that seems to come from my bones.

It's a long time before he answers. So long that I almost slip into unconsciousness. "Close your eyes, princess. I'll hold you until you wake up."

"Don't call me princess," I mumble and fall into a deep, dreamless sleep, his deep, rumbling voice in my ear.



After being so cold for so long, the warmth surrounding me keeps lulling me back into a deep sleep each time I surface. I snuggle closer to it, wrapping my arms around the weight next to me and burying my cold nose into warm skin. The scent of lavender and rosemary, I think, fills my lungs in deep gulps, and somehow the scent is reassuring.

Part of me knows the outside world isn't normal or right, but the warmth, scent, and comforting weight of an arm on my hip dispels any tendrils of disquiet.

Finally, when I've slept enough for my brain to interject a note of alarm, I gradually come back to consciousness. First, it's the heartbeat pounding in my ear. Slow, steady. One of the girls probably snuck into my room after a nightmare. It wouldn't be the first time. But no, a quick evaluation of the

person next to me shows they're way too large to be one of my little sisters.

Well, and then there's the hand on my ass.

The *large* hand.

The large *male* hand.

Despite myself and everything I've been through recently with Garrett, my heart speeds up in response. The hand is decidedly possessive, even in sleep. And that sends me bolting straight into the fully awake category. Only a man like Dean would hold a woman like that in his sleep.

I freeze, unsure of what to do. I settle with trying to slip out of his grasp, hoping he's still so exhausted he won't notice my movement.

But of course, he notices everything.

As soon as I move to sit up, he twitches. I glance down, my forehead furrowed in apprehension, but his eyes aren't open. In fact, they're squeezed tightly shut. Behind the lids, his eyes flutter, and he begins to move in his sleep, his hand falling away from my ass.

At first, I thought the warmth spreading through me was coming from the remnants of the fire in the fireplace, but no. I place a hand on Dean's sweaty forehead. I'm burning up because Dean's skin is on fire.

I jolt upward, and his hand falls away, but otherwise, he doesn't move anymore aside from his chest rising and falling rapidly with each breath. "Dean?"

I curse. He's boiling with fever. "Shit."

Carefully, I maneuver over him so I can stand by the side of the cot. I shake his shoulder, to no avail. Christ, he cannot do this to me again. I don't think I can keep it together for us this time.

"Dean?" My voice is frantic, frayed around the edges, ready to snap.

His eyes open just the slightest bit, and his cracked lips pull down into a frown. “Jesus, woman. Can you not let me sleep?”

I melt into a puddle of relief at his side, my knees cracking against the wooden floor. I must have grabbed his hand at some point because I’m kneeling over it, chanting prayers in my head. When I’ve gathered myself enough to keep from totally losing it, I glance up at him to give him a once-over.

“You scared me.”

“All I was doing was sleeping.”

My free hand goes to his forehead. “You have a fever. Maybe an infection or a cold? Hell if I know. How do you feel?”

His scowl deepens. “I’d feel better if you’d stop asking me that.” He must not feel too bad if he can still muster up the energy to channel his inner jerk.

This man, I swear. Pushing to my feet, I roll my eyes hard enough that I hope they don’t get stuck. My thighs still tremble with exhaustion from our hike as I cross the distance to where we dropped our supplies. I rifle through the medical kit and find more ibuprofen. Hopefully, it’s enough for now. I give him two tablets along with what remains of our water.

“Take these and don’t complain.”

Surprisingly, he does, and after I take the water, his eyes slip closed again. Another yawn comes over me, and I wage a short mental war with myself before refilling the water bottle and setting it by the fire. I add another piece of wood from the chair Dean destroyed and stoke the embers until flames lick at the wood. The cabin fills with warmth again, and I reclaim my spot on the cot by Dean. Even that small amount of activity has sapped my energy.

But I don’t let myself rest until my hand comes away cool from Dean’s head. Thankfully, his fever has broken for now.

Snuggling up to him, I let sleep claim me, Dean’s heartbeat steady in my ear. It’s not until I’m hovering on the precipice of unconsciousness that I feel his arm wrap tightly around my

waist again, pulling me close to his side. It's the comfort and security I find in his arms that has me finally drifting into a restorative sleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DEAN

I DON'T RELAX worth a damn after Kenna passes out.

Not after feeling her relax against me. God knows all I want is a couple more hours of sleep, but for the life of me, I can't seem to convince my body to follow through. The meds worked on the fever, but the heat I'm feeling now has nothing to do with that or the dwindling fire in the fireplace.

Common sense tells me I should get up and move around, search for more supplies, and get something to eat, but a voice in my head tells me to keep still so she can rest for a little while longer. At least this way, she's not yammering nonstop. The only way I can get some peace and quiet now that we're stuck together on this fucking mountain is if the damn woman is asleep.

Of course, the longer I feel her against me, the longer I imagine more inventive ways of keeping her quiet. I haven't fantasized about a woman in so long that at first the fantasies only come to me in vague flashes. Kenna awake next to me, her hand diving into my pants and fisting my massive cock with her little hand. Her luscious thighs spread wide as I pumped into her. Her plump ass in the air, red with the imprint of my hand.

I groan out loud, the sound rusty and broken. Do I still have a concussion? Am I hallucinating or having delusions? Something must have been knocked loose because I haven't had a dirty thought in the years since I left the Marines. But the longer I stay cozied up to her, the more vivid those thoughts become. I can picture her feisty mouth devouring my dick. Her bright laughter breaking off into a moan. I never thought much about a woman laughing during sex, but I can see it with Kenna. For a man who hasn't laughed in who knows how long, there's an ache in my chest that craves that carefree moment almost as much as I crave the taste of her.

I lie there, staring blankly at the ceiling, trying hard to ignore how her breath brushes against my neck. From the corner of my eye, I watch as the first light of dawn seeps in through the battered windows and throws a halo of gold over Kenna's sleeping face. It's a beautiful sight—the way the light dances and flickers over her creamy skin, making her full lips a delicious pink. I can't help but wonder how long it's been since I've even looked at a woman for longer than it takes to blow them off.

Years.

A lifetime.

Longer.

At least that's what it feels like.

The sound of her soft snoring draws my attention back to her, and I let myself drink in the peace that comes with it. It's funny how something so simple can bring such a sense of contentment in a world that has been reduced to chaos. But lying here watching her sleep so peacefully, my mind wanders to a place it probably shouldn't.

No, a place it *definitely* shouldn't.

I shift slightly, feeling the stirrings of something I thought was long dead. It's been a while since I felt any kind of human connection, and I started to forget what it can feel like. But somehow, this woman has wormed her way under my skin. And as much as I try to deny it, I know deep down that the feeling is mutual.

And it pisses me off now as much as it did the moment I saw her standing on my front porch.

With a sigh, I push myself up, careful not to disturb her as I untangle myself. I limp across the room, grabbing my coat and boots as I go. I need to clear my head and get away from this suffocating feeling of, what? Longing? Desire? God, I don't know. All I know is that I need to get out of here before it consumes me.

Stepping out into the crisp morning air, I take a deep breath, letting the chill seep into my lungs. The sun is just

starting to rise over the mountains, casting a pink glow over everything it touches. The snow that fell for the past few days has finally stopped, leaving behind a blanket of white that stretches as far as I can see. It's beautiful and calming in a way that makes me forget about everything else until the cold settles back in my bones and reminds me that I shouldn't go too far.

Reluctantly, I turn back to the cabin, limping along, my leg screaming in protest the entire way. There's nothing like a broken bone to cure you of any thoughts of arousal. It may hurt like a bitch, but at least it's absolved me of the urge to do something stupid.

Like flop down on the floor and beg her to sit on my face until my beard is soaked with her cum.



“No. No, no, no, no. This cannot be fucking happening.”

The next morning, I glance up from the fire I'm stoking to melt more water. Kenna darts up from the chair where she was repairing one of the snowshoes and heads for the door. Pushing to my feet, I say, “Where are you going?”

Her cheeks are bright pink, and I absolutely do *not* think about my fantasy of her turning just as pink. “I have to use the bathroom if that's okay with you.”

“I'll go with you.”

She holds up a hand and slaps it against my chest. “No. No, you are not.”

My brows knit. “Of course I am. It's dangerous out there.”

She sucks on her bottom lip, which almost deters me. Almost. “Then I'll take the flare gun or something, but you're not coming to babysit me, Dean. I mean it.” She tries to leave again, but I snatch up the hand she pressed against my chest.

“You’re not going anywhere without me, princess.” I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me, but the thought of her being out there alone in the woods makes me want to chain her to my wrist to be certain she’s unharmed at all times.

She shoves my hand away. “Don’t get all caveman on me now. I’ve been going to the bathroom alone for almost thirty years. I don’t need an escort. We’re in the middle of nowhere. *Nothing* is going to get me. Now, will you *please* drop it and let me go?”

Her blush deepens at my stern expression and lack of a response. “Can you, *for once*, please not be a jerk?”

I think for a minute because if she means not letting her go out alone makes me a jerk, then I’m fine with that. “No.”

She actually growls and pokes a finger into my chest. “Listen, buddy, I am *not* in the mood to deal with this today, so pack up the testosterone for five minutes and use your brain. I don’t need you to follow me.”

I don’t answer because I’m not arguing.

She’s not going alone.

End of story.

Blowing out a breath as she studies my expression, hers hardens. “Fine. Have it your way. We’re going to find the stream nearby. And you’re going to keep your eyes averted at all times. *At all times*. Do you understand?” She says the last bit through clenched teeth. She whirls around, then turns back just as quickly. “Not a word about it.” Then, she turns again and goes out the door.

All these years later and women are still an absolute mystery to me. At least that much hasn’t changed.

The stream we heard on the way to the cabin is far enough away that I pretty fucking quickly begin to regret my stubbornness about going with her. But that same stubbornness keeps my mouth shut. She may have been fine while I was unconscious, but there’s no way in hell I’m going to let pure luck take the reins. Experience has taught me that shit catches

up with you when you let your guard down. And I refuse to let my guard down with Kenna.

So we walk for fucking ever, following the sound of rushing water to the stream. Then Kenna stops, crosses her arms, and glares at me with a no-nonsense expression. “If you insist on being here, turn your back. And if I catch you peeking, I will skin you alive. Are we clear?”

She must take the grunt I give as an affirmative, but I mean anything but. There’s no fucking way I’m not looking if she’s getting the slightest bit naked. Maybe the Dean from a week ago could have resisted... but the Dean today? He’s fucking looking his fill.

I turn my back like she asked and use the time to scan around us. The sounds of her getting undressed fill my ears, but it’s not the strip tease I expect. No, it’s her cursing under her breath because it’s cold as fuck. My beard twitches with the stirring of a smile.

If nothing else, the woman is *not* boring.

I would have thought I’d be ready to jump off the mountain at the thought of being stranded with her. Instead, it’s the opposite. Ever since I woke up with her next to me, all I can think about is carting her off to my place like a caveman and keeping her all to myself.

Boredom sets in quickly—and the pain. Standing up for this long is excruciating, and, in this instance, I have no self-control. So when I think she won’t be as suspicious, I glance in her direction. It’s not surreptitious because I’m not a teenager, but I do it with the full understanding that she may tear my skin straight off of my bones. Those fantasies from this morning have me crawling out of my skin at the thought of seeing her bare. I have no doubt reality will trump daydreams every time.

I see the blood first.

It cuts through the haze of lust quicker than you’d think.

Straightening and uncaring of the pain in my leg, my gaze scans the area for the threat. I almost call out for her until I put

the clues together. The blood is on her jeans, just the barest stain at the apex of her thighs. I wouldn't have noticed it another time if I wasn't on such high alert. My gaze cuts to her, and I find her wrapped in a blanket, cleaning her panties at the edge of the stream.

A riot of emotions tumbles through me, and I have to put a hand on the rough bark of the tree next to me to stay upright. The thought of her being naked so close to me with the vivid visions of her taking my cock deep in her throat still in my head should cut me at the knees, but they don't. It's the intimate knowledge of her vulnerability, like the kind I'd felt when she'd held the water to my lips to drink. The kind I haven't had with a woman in so long that I'm hit straight to the gut like I've crashed a second time. I can't catch my breath. My stomach is twisting to the point that it blocks out the pain from my leg for the first time since I woke up in that damn cave.

This is why I haven't been with a woman since I got out. Because I want that side of the relationship, but at the same time, I can't imagine having it again. It's something I've always wanted. The thing Nana and Gramps had. The forever kind of love. The forever marriage. The good, the bad, and the bloody. Being with a woman, knowing *everything* about her and being trusted enough with all her insecurities and perceived faults.

You don't get that from a one-night stand.

And losing a forever kind of love? Makes you afraid of ever having it again.

Quickly, almost without thinking, I move into a concealed spot of bushes and strip from the waist down. Needless to say, not fun or easy in this weather and with an injured leg. My briefs aren't much, but she needs them more than I do now. Maybe I feel a little bad about being such a jerk to her, but she can't go without something to wear. At least I know that much, and there's no way in hell I'm going to let her wear damp underwear in this weather.

I don't say anything so as not to embarrass her, but I manage to limp to her pile of clothes and place the briefs on top without her noticing. She'll see them when she gets out and can wear them while hers dry, which won't take long with the fire back at the cabin.

Besides, a part of me likes the thought of my briefs pressed close to her pussy. Having her scent soaking them for me to wear again later. I won't analyze how much that pleases me or how fucking psychotic it sounds. I dress quickly, already freezing my literal ass off, and move back to where I can listen for her. As much as I want to take another look, I keep my eyes squarely on our surroundings.

When she gets done washing her panties a little while later, I hear a strangled sound of surprise. I expect her to stomp over and give me a cutting remark, but she doesn't. I don't examine how good it feels on a primal level to know she's naked so close to me. I don't examine how I keep glancing at her out of the corner of my eye as she dresses. And I especially don't examine how I suddenly don't want to get off this mountain as much as I did the day before.

After a while, I worry something is wrong, but she finally shuffles in my direction. She comes to my left side, her head tilted to the ground. "You didn't have to do that," she murmurs.

I take the opportunity to get a good look at her face. Her cheeks are still stained bright pink, and, God help me, I want to cup them in my hands and drink from her mouth until I'm full. Coughing roughly, I push off the tree and say, "It's fine. I assumed you needed them."

Her head bobs in a jerky nod. "Right. This isn't embarrassing at all. I can die now."

"No need to be embarrassed. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." Please, don't want to. Because the more she does, the more I think about how sensitive she must be. How I could make her come so quick and so hard it'd bring tears to her eyes. Orgasms are a great cure for cramps, after all.

She gives herself a shake and finally meets my gaze. “I’ll give them back.”

I lift a shoulder. “Doesn’t matter. Let’s get back to the cabin before I freeze my balls off.”

Her giggle makes me clench my jaw, and I turn before I lose my damn mind.

We start the long walk back, her usual chatter gone, and I think it’s probably the exhaustion from everything. But... I also think I’m starting to miss it. Suddenly, I want to fill the silence with questions to get her talking again.

We’ve got to get out of here before I do something really insane, like beg her to let me worship at her feet.

The whole situation has me irritable by the time we’re back inside, and I’m stoking the fire. I can feel my frown pulling at my lips and creasing my forehead. This never would have happened if I hadn’t agreed to help her in the first place. I knew it was a bad idea and should have listened to my instincts. Something told me she was bad news when she first showed up on my doorstep, and like a fucking idiot, I let her talk me into it with her big smiles and promise of a fat payday. I thought I was better than other men, but apparently, the years I’ve secluded myself haven’t changed a damn thing. Give me a woman with generous curves and one night alone with her, and everything I’ve been telling myself about staying celibate has flown out the window.

Kenna flops down on the cot with a groan. “I would kill for a mocha right now.”

“I’d kill for a burger.”

She wrinkles her nose. “I’m a vegetarian. I want a mountain of eggplant Parmesan. Seriously, I think I could eat an Olympic pool filled with it. Then I want to refill it with Rocky Road ice cream.”

I snort but file these details away out of habit. I certainly don’t give a damn what her favorite foods are. Really. “I should have pegged you for a bunny food lover,” I say, the words coming out more biting than intended.

But she doesn't seem offended. If anything, she smiles a little. Seriously. What the hell is wrong with her that my normal defense mechanisms don't work? "If I weren't cramping like a mother right now, I'd hit you with something," she murmurs.

Studying how her smile turns into a frown and her brows pinch, I say, "You should take some of the medicine. I'll get it." She starts to protest, and I give her a look as I retrieve it from her pack. "You need it too."

Lifting a shoulder, she says, "I've had worse."

"I'm sure, but you'll take it and not argue for once in your life." I give her some water and the pills.

She takes them with a pained smile. "Thanks. I guess you're right. I just didn't want you to get another fever or something and need them."

"I'll be fine." I watch to make sure she takes them and nod a little when she swallows deeply. Then she opens her mouth to show me they're gone. Her pink tongue darts out to lick her lips, and I nearly groan. I force myself to spit out my next sentence. "But we won't be if we don't get out of here soon."

I notice how pale she is and how dark the smudges under her eyes have gotten. "I know. We're still so far from anything, though. Got any ideas? 'Cause I'm all out of them, to be honest."

Clearing my throat, I say, "I studied the map some while you were sleeping. There's an old Jeep trail not far from here that should lead into town, but it's a long way. If we walk for a bit and get closer to town, I'm hoping we'll run into a search party or someone with a truck where the roads are probably clearer."

She bites that fucking lip again. "What about your leg? Should you really be walking on it again?"

"I'll manage. We should rest up tonight and then head out at first light tomorrow." The sooner we get back, the better. I don't know how many more nights I can spend next to her before seriously considering making my fantasies a reality.

“If you’re sure, then let’s do it. That mocha is calling my name, and I don’t know about you, but I could really use a shower.”

“Why don’t you get some rest?” I suggest. “You look like hell.”

“Any other day, I’d kick your ass, but I’m still exhausted.” She plops down on the cot and is out like a light the second her head hits the pillow.

Instead of sleeping, I stay my ass awake, keeping an eye on the view outside the window, both to ensure no one followed us... and so I don’t spend the night staring at her.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KENNA

WE'VE GOT to get out of these mountains before I further embarrass myself. As a grown woman, you'd think I wouldn't be self-conscious about getting my period. But I've also never gotten it while stranded with a man who looks like Thor's dark-haired, bearded, grumpy older brother. My cheeks flame with embarrassment, but luckily we're hiking through the snow again, so the cold camouflages it.

And if we die on this trek trying to find our way out of here, at least I won't have to face giving him back his underwear.

Fuck my life. Seriously. Fuck it all.

"What?" Dean asks from beside me, and I glance over. Is he... laughing? Surely, I must be hallucinating. Dean "The Grump" Tyler doesn't laugh. Doesn't smile.

"Nothing," I mutter. Seriously, can my cheeks get any redder? If this mountain doesn't kill me, I may be seriously tempted to throw myself off the nearest cliff.

"Are you sure you're okay? We can go back to the cabin and figure out another plan."

"I'm fine, I promise. Let's keep going. How far away did you say the road was?"

He studies my face intensely, and I glance away and back several times under his scrutiny. Once he seems satisfied by what he sees, he says, "Not farther than it was to get to the cabin. Let me know if you need to take a break, yeah?"

I stop in the middle of the... woods. Because there's no trail, it's just trees and snow and more trees and snow. "Who are you, and what have you done with Dean?" I demand.

He stops, too, scanning our surroundings. "What?"

“You’re being... considerate. You’ve been like this since yesterday. Did that hit on the head alter your personality? ’Cause it’s freaking me out.”

This time, there’s no mistaking it. Dean laughs. Not a bellowing one or anything, but a deep, manly chuckle that warms my chest. I’m not gonna lie, my jaw drops. He rolls his eyes at my expression.

“Let’s keep movin’, princess. We can’t waste the daylight.” With that, he continues through the woods like laughing is something he does all the time when it is *not*.

I scurry to keep up with him. Despite the awkwardness of the makeshift snowshoes and his injured leg, his long strides still eat up so much ground I have to move double time just to keep up with him.

“Oh, no, no, no. That was definitely a laugh. Don’t tell me I’m finally growing on you,” I say when I reach his side.

He grunts. “Keep dreamin’.”

But I smile to myself because a few days ago, he would have scowled and stomped off at my question or bitten my head off. Does the invulnerable Dean Tyler actually have a sense of humor? Who would have thunk it?

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do when we get back?” I ask to fill the silence. I don’t know about him, but this long without social media or at least a book is starting to take its toll. If we wouldn’t have died without it, I wouldn’t have burned that book. I never would have thought I’d miss the nonstop chatter from my little sisters, but I’d give anything to be in the middle of one of their knock-down, drag-out, screaming matches right now.

I hadn’t realized how much they filled the silence until I didn’t have them anymore. I make a mental promise to never complain about them ever again. At least not for a few weeks.

For a minute, I don’t think he’s going to answer. He doesn’t usually, so I fill in the gaps of conversation where his responses are supposed to be with imagined answers to my

questions. But then he shocks me by saying, “Take Gramps out for a steak and a beer.”

What little ice that had remained in my heart for Dean Tyler melts. In fact, the warmth I feel at his response could melt the mountain around us with its intensity. Family is the most important thing in the world to me. I’ll admit, when I first met Dean, I didn’t think much would penetrate the stone in his chest where his heart was supposed to be. But the frown on his lips at the mention of his grandfather clearly means he’s deeply worried about him.

“Steak, no, but a beer sounds fantastic.” I sigh wistfully at the thought of a nice, cold beer. The desire to drain one right now comes a very close second to a nice tall mocha.

“What about you?”

I don’t have to think nearly as long. “Shoot my sister,” I say deadpan.

This time, there’s no mistaking Dean’s laugh. I bite my lip to keep from smiling back. God, but he’s beautiful when he laughs. His teeth flash white beneath his beard, and his eyes crinkle at the corners. It brightens up his face and makes him look... almost human. Normal. Sexy.

Jesus, I can’t believe I just thought Dean was sexy.

I swallow hard at the last thought and push it far, far from my mind. Along with the reminder that I’m wearing his briefs right now. “Seriously, maybe it’s a good thing I don’t know where she is because I could throttle her.”

“I’ll hold her arms behind her back,” Dean offers with a half-smile. I could really, really become addicted to making him smile.

For a moment, I forget what he said. Then my brain jump starts, and I say, “Don’t tempt me. But after that, I want to take an hour-long shower with a couple bottles of expensive soaps and body washes. Then I want to eat my weight in pretty much anything until I’m so full I can’t move. After that, I want the biggest, fluffiest bed I can find.” Then I stop, realizing he said something sweet about his family and all I can think about is

being clean. “That sounded terrible. Of course, I want to hug my sisters and never leave their side again. That’s a given.”

“I had no doubt. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out how much you care about them. You wouldn’t be in this situation to begin with if you didn’t. They’re lucky to have you as a sister.”

I shouldn’t want or need his approval, but hearing the words come from his lips means more than I thought it would. I find my gaze glued to my feet. “Thank you,” I murmur.

We fall into a surprisingly comfortable silence as we trudge through the snow. Now that he’s talking so freely, I don’t know what to do with myself. It was fun needling him when he was so obviously annoyed by it. But now that he’s relaxed some, I fixate on how goddamned attractive he is. Seriously, it’s unfair. And if I were any sort of decent person at all, noticing him wouldn’t even be on my radar, considering I still have a wedding dress on hold as we speak.

Garrett.

My stomach sinks when I realize I haven’t thought of him since... before we left Dean’s house. What does that say about me? About our relationship? I fall into a wicked spiral, going over our entire relationship with a fine-tooth comb. How had I not even realized he was cheating on me? Was I as distracted and focused on my sisters as he always said I was?

There were times in our relationship when he accused me of being emotionally closed off, if you can believe it. Had I been closed off to him? Is that why he turned to another woman?

“What’s wrong?” Dean asks, interrupting my self-flagellation.

“What?”

“You look like you want to punch something.” He says this like that something might be him. “Still thinking about Kady?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing.”

“I’ve been around enough women to know when they say *it’s nothing*, they’re lying. So, what is it?”

I laugh uncomfortably. “You don’t want to hear about all my problems.” Please, please, don’t want to hear about all my problems.

“Might as well spill. Your incessant chatter keeps me distracted from the pain.”

Sending him a glare, I blow out a breath and hitch my purse a little higher on my shoulders. “Well, when you put it like that, how can a girl refuse? It’s nothing, really. You mentioning family made me think about my fiancé. *Ex-fiancé*.” I correct at his startled look. “I found out he was cheating the morning I got the call from Kady. So, emphasis on the *ex*.” When he doesn’t speak and just watches me with those all-seeing eyes, I continue. “He was apparently sleeping with a coworker. I did the thing you aren’t supposed to do and fell for my boss. He used to complain all the time about me giving too much time and attention to my sisters. Used to make me feel like shit about it.”

“He sounds like a fuckin’ asshole,” Dean says bluntly.

My first instinct is to defend Garrett, but I swallow it back. “I can’t say you’re wrong.”

“If he were any kind of man, he’d realize your devotion to your family is something he should admire.”

“Really?” I look up at him, but his gaze is straight ahead, and it looks like his mind is elsewhere. It makes me wonder... “What about you?” I ask.

At this, he glances at me. “What about me?”

“Do you have any family other than Gramps? Ever been engaged?” I can tell the instant I ask the question, it hits a little too close to home. His shoulders stiffen, he nearly stumbles, and the light in his eyes gutters out. “I’m sorry. That was too personal. You don’t have to answer,” I sputter out.

He looks away, and even underneath the beard and thick jacket, I can see his throat bob with a swallow. I’m kicking myself for ruining what had been a good conversation with my

stupid mouth when he says, “I was married. For four years. Her name was Georgia. We had a little girl.”

Now it’s my turn to nearly stumble. Dean was married? He was a father? I don’t interrupt because I’m afraid he’ll clam up again, and I’m dying to know what happened. But at the same time, I’m a little terrified it’s going to break my heart.

Because now I realize the reason he’s been such a jerk. He lost them in a way he never quite recovered from. My heart squeezes for him, but I keep my mouth shut to let him talk.

“Our daughter’s name was Penelope. We called her Penny. I used to call her my Lucky Penny.” His voice grows more hoarse with each word, and I can already feel the tears prickling at the back of my eyes and throat. I bite my lip so hard I can almost taste blood. “Georgie didn’t want me to go on my last deployment. I could have turned it down. But I couldn’t say no to my team. They needed me. So, I went. After all that shit went down with Tate, all I could think about was coming home to my girls. They were the only things keeping me sane.” My breath catches, but thankfully, he doesn’t hear me. “I was at the airport waiting for Georgia to pick me up. She normally met me wearing the same sweater and carrying a big cheesy sign. I couldn’t wait to see them. But she wasn’t there. I thought maybe she got caught up in traffic. After a while, I took an Uber home. There were cops there waiting for me.”

“No,” I whisper under my breath.

“They’d been killed in a car accident. Semi driver fell asleep at the wheel and hit them head-on. Both died on impact.”

“Dean.”

“I regret every second I spent away from them. I’ve spent the years since hoping this has all been a dream and that they’ll come home to me. It took me a long time to accept that they wouldn’t be.”

I remember his anguished eyes when I first saw him on his doorstep. I thought he’d been a jerk. It never occurred to me

that maybe he had reason to be. My experience with my parents leaving when I was young gave me a taste of what it was like to lose someone in a way that changes you forever. To lose a wife... But to lose a child... It's no wonder he is the way he is. It's a miracle he's still upright, to be honest. I'm not sure I could be that strong.

"Can we take a break for a minute?" Dean asks, and I realize his limp is more pronounced.

I nod because if I start talking, I know it'll involve tears, so I follow him to a tree stump, where he sits and takes out his water for a long drink. I do the same because my throat is dry from trying not to let my tears fall.

When I'm sure I can control myself, I say, "Tell me about them."

His eyes meet mine and flit away. For a while, I don't think he'll answer, then he starts. "Georgie was a stylist. Lots of dark brown curly hair out to here." He gestures around his head, and I bark out a laugh because he's clearly still befuddled by it. "Penny got her hair and her personality, thank god. They were twins." His voice cuts out a little, and he says, "I miss them so much it's like I lost a part of me."

I don't know why I'm not surprised to hear him speak so passionately about someone. Maybe I always knew there was a reason he pushed everyone away. Hell, maybe that's why I tried so hard to have him fly me out. I could relate to him. My parents didn't die, but they did abandon me when I needed them the most. For a child... I don't think I could imagine something worse.

"I'm sorry, Dean." I touch his arm until he looks at me. "Truly."

"Thanks. It's been a long time since I talked about them to anyone. I guess I thought if I mentioned them, it would make it hurt worse."

"Does it?"

"It never stopped hurting. Not a day since they died. But now it's a little easier to remember the good things."

I lean against a tree nearby. “Like what?”

“Penny used to watch this YouTube lady. She’d do nursery rhymes and stuff. Apparently, Georgie spent a week straight playing this Daddy song so that the next time they called me, she could say her first word. Daddy. I’ve been through some shit, but hearing that little girl say Daddy? There wasn’t anything like it.”

I’m not going to cry. I’m *not*. “I bet you were one of those dads who seemed all intimidating but were really a marshmallow inside.”

His responding smile is soft and sad and does crazy things to my insides that I don’t examine. “Oh, for sure. There wasn’t anything they wanted that they didn’t get. I was gone for them. That’s why I haven’t been with anyone since.”

That makes me straighten. I don’t know how long it’s been, but it has to have been a long time.

“No one?” I clarify.

“No one,” he confirms.

“Wow.” I’m dumbfounded. “That’s, I mean. I don’t know what to say.”

He lifts a shoulder, not meeting my gaze. “Once you’ve been in a relationship like that, everything else seems like a waste of time. And even if I were interested in being with someone, it just meant setting myself up for the possibility of being hurt.”

I think back to Garrett and how much it hurt. “Yeah, I can see that. I don’t blame you at all. There’s no timeline for grief.”

He nods and then pushes back to his feet after a while. We walk in silence, his admissions weighing heavily on my heart. I keep stealing glances at him, feeling like I’ve had the wool removed from my eyes, and now I’m seeing him clearly for the first time.

This is a man who was so devoted to his family that he became isolated to deal with the grief of losing them. He must

have loved them truly, deeply. It feels a little petty to think this, but Georgia was a very lucky woman to experience that, if only for a short time. No one deserves to lose the person they love or have their life cut tragically short. It makes me realize if I hadn't survived the crash, I would have died without experiencing a connection like that.

If I'm being honest with myself, I know the reason I didn't want to go dress shopping wasn't because of my size. Sure, I can be insecure about being a little overweight, but I'm beautiful, and I know that in my heart. I was reluctant to do any planning for the wedding to the point where we hadn't even set a date. Maybe part of me knew Garrett hadn't been the one. Because when it comes down to it, I don't think we would have had a relationship like Dean had with Georgia. If we had, I would have been more upset when I caught him cheating. It hasn't even been long since I caught him, and I'm already over losing him. Sure, I mourn what could have been and the man I thought he was, but I'm not torn up over it like I should be if our relationship was meant to be.

Lost in thought, I don't realize the terrain has changed under my feet until Dean grabs me by the arm.

"What?" I say with a frown until my surroundings penetrate my thoughts. We're standing in the middle of a gravel service road.

We made it.

I turn to Dean, and I don't know who takes the first step, but before I know it, I'm launching myself into his arms, and he pulls me tight to his warm, hard body.

We made it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DEAN

HER BODY FITS against mine like she was made for me. It would be easy to write off how I react because it's been so long since I've wanted a woman or because I'm feeling vulnerable after talking about Georgia for the first time, but it's about damn time I started being honest with myself.

I pull her closer instead of pushing her away like I would any other woman because I want her.

I want her body under my hands. Her taste in my mouth. Her sweet, wet heat wrapped around me. I want her chatter to fill the emptiness and the sunshine in her eyes to brighten all the shadows that have clung to me for so long. If she thinks she's going to walk away as soon as she gets out of here, she'll quickly learn I'm a man used to getting what I want.

My arms go around her waist, and I use her forward momentum to crush her to me. Her generous breasts press against my chest, and her thighs brush mine. My hand goes to the back of her head and cups beneath her ponytail, cradling her head against me. Suddenly, my throat is tight, and it takes effort to draw air into my lungs.

I never thought I'd want to hold another woman like this, let her get so close to me... but maybe I was waiting for the right one. Maybe I was waiting for Kenna.

She pulls back a little to look up at me, and the light in her eyes shines like the sunrise after a long, dark night. "I can't believe we're finally going to get out of here," she says.

If I were another, more insecure man, that statement would have had me feeling rejected. But no. I know we'll get out of here, and she'll think she can go back to her life the way it was, but she's wrong. She just hasn't realized things have changed, but that's okay. I'm pretty patient and persuasive when it comes to reaching an objective.

Finally, I let go and say, “Still got a ways to go, princess. Let’s keep up the pace while we’ve got the light.”

She rolls her eyes, and my hands ball into fists at my sides to keep from slapping her on the ass in a gentle rebuke. “Yeah, yeah. That mocha is calling my name, so I’m not going to argue. In fact, if your leg wasn’t hurt, I’d race you the rest of the way.”

“Sure you would.” I have no doubt she would, too. That dipshit she’d been with had dulled her shine a little, but the Kenna I’d come to know? She could handle anything that came at her or anything she put her mind to. Even a giant asshole like me.

My energy is rapidly waning, and my leg is still screaming at me, but we have no choice but to keep going. I haven’t forgotten the assholes at Jamie’s place, so I keep an ear out for danger. But I’m hoping they wrote us off for dead and won’t come looking.

An hour later, we’ve made it a good distance. We’ve just finished polishing off the last of our granola bars and drinking from the water bottles when that listening pays off. I hear the soft crunch of snow underfoot, followed by the *crack* of a twig snapping.

Kenna either doesn’t notice or hear, but she’s so distracted by the last bite of her granola bar she probably wouldn’t notice a car driving straight at her. Careful to not freak her out unnecessarily, I slowly get to my feet and move closer to the tree line where the sound came from.

“I’m so sick of granola, I swear to God. If I never have trail mix or granola bars again, it’ll be too soon.”

“Mm-hmm,” I say, my ears straining to hear over the sound of the wind.

“It’s not even the good granola either. It’s the dry kind that tastes like dust and doesn’t even have crappy chocolate chips to improve the taste.”

I take another step to the woods, my heart beating so hard I can feel it in the aching of my broken leg. “Right,” I murmur.

When I've convinced myself I'm starting to imagine things, I hear another sound. Another snapped twig. Fuck, but the one time I don't have a gun on me is when I need it the most. All I can think about is being cornered by those guys, defenseless and with no way to protect Kenna.

"Dean?" Her voice sounds worried.

"Stay there," I tell her.

"What's wrong?" she asks, her voice notably lower. "Why are you looking at the woods like that?"

"Probably nothing. Heard something."

Of course, the damn woman doesn't stay put like I asked. She moves close to my back and grips my jacket in her hand. "What did you hear?"

Before I can answer, there's a loud grunting sound, and Kenna's hand tightens in my jacket.

"What the hell is that?" she whispers.

"More than likely, it's a deer." But I still reach down for a fallen limb.

Shadows shift in the depths of the woods. Kenna's body inches impossibly closer until she's pressed almost completely against my back. I can feel her trembling against me.

For a few long, tense moments we wait, barely breathing. Then, the figure gets close enough to the edge of the woods that we can see the protruding antlers and lithe body of a deer.

We both let out a collective breath. I let the stick lower to the ground, and my shoulders relax. Kenna lets out a burst of laughter.

"Man, we really need to get off this mountain. I think I'm starting to go crazy."

"You're not kidding."

The deer stares at us with watchful eyes for a few more minutes and then ambles on, retreating into the shadows of the forest. Kenna's hand stays twined in my jacket until the deer is completely gone from view.

“Come on, let’s keep going. It can’t be too much longer.”

“You know,” she says as she starts back down the road, “I’m starting to think you have no idea how long it’s going to take. Because I’m pretty sure it’s not the first time you’ve said that.”

“Well, I don’t have my GPS on me, so I can’t tell you for sure, princess.”

I can practically hear her roll her eyes. “I wish you’d stop calling me that,” she grumbles.

“Not in this lifetime.”

“I’m going to come up with an equally annoying nickname for you,” she warns.

I feel that smile tugging at my lips again. It makes the muscles in my cheeks ache because they’ve gone unused for so long. “You can try.”

“Did they have a nickname for you when you were in the military?”

“Nah, that was never really my style.”

“Lame. I feel like that would have been a motivating factor. Some badass name, like Ghost or Demon.”

I send her a disbelieving look. “It’s not a motorcycle club where your nickname is like Diablo or something.”

“So none of your friends had one?” She pauses for a second. “I guess I can’t see Jamie with a name like that, now that I think about it.”

“I guess the only one with a nickname really is Killian. But his was only a shortened version of his name—Kill. Also, because he was damn good at it.”

“I feel like your pet name should be something disarmingly sweet. Something that would piss you off.” She trails off, deep in thought, and I’m almost scared. “I’ve got it. I think you’re going to love it. If you insist on calling me princess, I have no choice but to call you pookie.”

I frown. “No.”

Her smile is bright and unbothered. I almost miss when she was intimidated by me. Not that it lasted long. “Yes, you’re definitely a pookie. Don’t you think? I think it fits you so well.”

“I think if you call me pookie, we’re going to have a problem.”

“Then stop calling me princess.”

“No.”

“Okay then, pookie.”

Sure, I could have shut her up by throwing snow in her face or threatening to lead her in circles around the mountain, but why beat around the bush—so to speak. I grab her hand, spinning her around. The laughter dies in her throat when she sees my expression.

“You know I’m only kidding, right?” Her hands press against my chest, and she has to push up on her tiptoes to reach the bottom of my chin. “You don’t have to get all emotional about it.”

“Say it again,” I tell her.

She narrows her eyes. “Why?”

“So I can shut you up.” Her lips clamp together, and her eyes shoot wide. “That’s what I thought.”

But now that I have her so close, I’m loath to let her go. As seconds go by, her body becomes more pliant to mine. I blame the hug from earlier. Spending the night with her. Now, all I can think about is how soft her lips will be against mine.

“You’re not letting me go,” she says, her voice soft and lacking a playful tone.

“Thinking about it,” I say.

Am I imagining it, or is she leaning close to me, too? “Why do you have to think about it?” she asks.

“Cause I really want to kiss you right now.”

Her fingers grip my jacket. “W-what?”

I brush the hair away from her face. Her lips are parted and soft with surprise. “I’ve been thinkin’ about it for a while now. Can’t seem to stop. Would you let me?” I know she’s got a fresh ex-fiancé and that she may have hated me for a while there. But I’m starting to think if I don’t kiss her soon, I may never get the chance. Despite what she said, I know we’re getting close to civilization, and if I don’t man up now, there won’t be any more time.

For a second, I think she’s going to turn me down. But then she lifts a hand to my cheek and raises higher on her toes. “Yes. I would.”

Our lips crash together, and she makes the softest sound against my mouth that I feel in my dick. My hands cup her cheeks, tilting her head so I can greedily lap at her. She nips at my lip, and I gasp, my hands switching to skim down her body to her thighs. I hitch her up, and she automatically wraps one around my uninjured leg.

What I wouldn’t give to have her somewhere with a decent bed and a lock on the door right now. Based on the sounds she’s making in the back of her throat, she feels the same.

Her fingers snake their way under my clothes, cold shards of ice against my blistering skin, and I almost expect to see wisps of steam curling up from the contact. I keep my knees locked so we don’t crumple into the snow. But it’s a close call. The feel of her hands on me does incredible things to me, making me almost boneless. If we had that bed and lock, I could spend days with her touching me. It’s been so fucking long, and she’s the first person who’s felt *right* in longer than I can remember.

We break the kiss, our lungs fighting for breath, and my mouth finds the hollow where her shoulder meets her neck. I kiss there, soaking up the way she whispers my name and digs her nails into the skin at my lower back. Her hips move against me, searching for friction, and as much as I want to give it to her, now is the worst possible time and place.

My lips move back to hers, rubbing a teasing pattern over them. She growls in frustration. Her free hand goes to the back

of my head, her mouth parts under mine, and our tongues tangle. My careful control nearly snaps, and my fingers bite into her hips.

The cool logic I just had evaporates, and I'm about to drag her to the ground when I hear tires on the road and the rumble of a truck engine.

We come apart with gasps of breath. "Did you hear that?" she asks.

The sound is already closer. With my hands on her hips, I steady her as she puts both feet on the ground. "Get behind me," I say.

She does as I ask, her hands still on me as though she needs the contact to steady herself. "You don't think that's them, right?"

I don't answer because I don't know, and I hate that. All we can do is wait. If it is them, we'll do what we can and hopefully make it out of here with their truck.

The truck grows closer until it finally rounds the bend in the road in front of us. It's a white F350 I'd recognize anywhere. Relief and disappointment war in my chest. I'm thankful to get off my fuckin' feet, but I'm reluctant to leave, knowing it means my time with Kenna—which has been all too short—is coming to an end.

I turn, and she stays close to me, hovering in the circle of my arms. "It's okay. You don't need to worry. It's not them." My hand lifts of its own accord and travels over her short, dark hair.

"Who is it?" she asks, peering around me.

The truck comes to a stop next to us, the engine left on idle as the driver's side door opens. Felix hops out, and the door slams shut behind him. Steps crunch through the snow and ice, and he rounds the front.

The smile he flashes when he sees us is a mile-wide swath of pearl-white teeth. "You probably used up a couple of your nine lives, friend. I think I ought to take back that offer to join

NCHART,” Felix says. “You see, it’s important to keep the bird in the air if you want to survive.”

“No shit,” I say and limp toward him, clapping a hand on his back.

Felix doesn’t miss a thing. “You hurt?”

“He broke his leg when we crashed,” Kenna pipes in.

“Jesus,” Felix whispers. “I’ve got a kit here that may have a splint. Let’s get you guys in the truck with the heater. I’ve got food, too, if you’re hungry.”

“Starving,” Kenna says. “Thank you so much. I’m Kenna.”

“Shit, sorry. Kenna Lynch, this is Felix Bane. Used to roll with him overseas. He was in the Army, though,” I say before she can ask. “He does Search & Rescue now for North Carolina Helicopter Aquatic Rescue Team.”

“So would this asshole if he weren’t such a pussy. But Marines,” he says as though that’s an explanation.

“Don’t listen to him,” I tell Kenna as I help boost her into the front seat of his truck. The warm air hits me like the flames of hell, and Kenna groans in pleasure as she settles in. I launch myself in after her and close the door behind me with a sense of finality.

We’re going home.

I should feel more relieved than I do, but the edge of disappointment sharpens. We’ll get off the mountain, and then it’s likely that she’ll go home. She has an entire family to look after, and I have Gramps to tend to. There’s no way the old man will ever leave the mountains. Shock washes over me as I realize... maybe I’m not as against the idea of moving as I was before we were stranded.

“So, do you have any embarrassing stories about Dean?” Kenna asks as she bites into a chocolate bar Felix passes to her. I decline but take a giant bite out of a sub sandwich, nearly groaning as the flavors explode over my tongue. Eating my first real meal in days is almost as good as kissing Kenna.

Almost.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KENNA

“HOW LONG UNTIL WE REACH TOWN?” I ask Felix as I down my second chocolate bar and sip from a thermos of hot coffee. It’s not a mocha by any means—it would be a stretch to even call it coffee because it’s watery and bitter—but it’s hot and coffee adjacent, so I’m ecstatic.

“Probably another half hour. They just managed to clear out most of the roads.” He shoots Dean a look. “That’s why it took so damn long to find you two. We were only just able to do a more intensive search. We thought you were dead. Speaking of, I’d better radio in and let everyone know I found your sorry ass.”

“Takes more than that to kill this one,” Dean says around a mouthful of roast beef and pepper jack, jerking a thumb in my direction. I scowl at him and roll my eyes. He waits until Felix relays the news over a radio, then asks, “Is Gramps okay?”

“I checked on him this morning. That old fucker—pardon my language—was sipping whiskey with a big cat on his lap while he watched golf on T.V. He wasn’t even worried. He told me you’d be back in a few days, a little worse for the wear. And damn if he wasn’t right.”

“Yeah.” Dean snorts through his nose and takes another bite of his food. “He’s always right.”

“Apparently. I’m going to get you guys straight to the hospital for a once-over. Make sure nothing is worse off than your leg. Don’t worry,” Felix says with a pointed look at Dean. “I’ll drop by and let Lucas know I hauled your sorry ass out of the mountains.”

“Preciate it,” Dean says shortly. But I can tell by the way his eyes are averted that it means a lot to him.

I fight the urge to take his hand in mine. Now that we’re off the mountain, I’m not sure how to act around him. Sure,

we grew closer, and yeah, we kissed, but I'm still not sure if he'd allow me that sort of intimacy.

Forcing myself to focus, I swallow the last bite of chocolate with a gulp of coffee. "Have you heard anything from my family? My sisters must be worried to death. I kind of left in a hurry, and then everything else happened." I'm surprised they haven't devised their own bat signal or something.

"I haven't heard anything, but here, use my cell phone to get in touch with them." Felix retrieves his phone from the cup holder in the center console and passes it to me.

"Thank you *so* much."

"No sweat," he answers.

I abandon the rest of the coffee. With my free hand, I dial Riley's number from memory, but it goes to voicemail. I try again with the same results. What the hell? Riley is never *not* attached to her phone. The thing is damn near glued to her hands. I try Klaire, but she doesn't answer either. I leave them messages to contact me through Felix and also the hospital information where they can reach me. Then I ask Dean what his grandfather's number is at the cabin and leave that, too, just in case.

"No luck?" Dean asks, and his arm comes around me, settling comfortably over my shoulders. I guess he has no problem showing me affection.

"No, but I'll try again when we get to the hospital." I try not to worry, but it takes root in my stomach and the chocolate and coffee churns, making me feel sick.

Dean doesn't try to comfort me with empty words. Instead, he tugs me closer until I'm wrapped in a circle of his warmth, which comforts me more than words ever could. I lean into his arms, and we spend the rest of the ride in silence. Felix seems to sense we're exhausted, so he just turns the radio on low to a country music station. The music and the rumble from the truck lull me into a half-sleep for the rest of the drive. I didn't

think it'd be possible to sleep, but my body is more tired than I thought.

“Thanks for the food and the ride, man. I appreciate you for everything,” I hear Dean say to Felix through the haze of half-sleep. I yawn and sit up, pushing my disheveled hair from my eyes.

“Nah, don't worry about it. I know you'd do the same if it was me out there. Besides, now you owe me one.” There's a pause as they share a grin, and then Felix says, “So what the hell happened? You're the last guy I'd ever think would go down.”

Dean sighs. “Honestly, I'm not sure. We came across these dudes cooking drugs of some kind, probably meth, in a cabin in the mountains. They ran into us, so we had to get out of there quick-like. Then the engine caught fire not long after we took off.”

“They shoot at you?”

“Yeah, but not with anything powerful enough to damage the engine. It was something else. Probably just shit luck.”

“You don't really think that, do you?”

“I don't know what to think. Once I get the all-clear, I'll fly back out to the crash site and see if I can figure out what the hell happened. But my first instinct is sabotage.”

The truck rocks to a stop at what my groggy brain assumes is a stop sign. I crack my eyes open and realize we must be nearing town. There are signs of civilization I thought I'd never see again. A gas station. A bus stop. Signs for tourist traps. I should be relieved, excited, and more, but instead, I glance at Dean and wonder if I'll ever see him again once we get to the hospital.

Sitting up, I realize I was right. We're at a stop sign next to a gas station. I rub my eyes as we pull into the gas station. Felix hops out to refuel, and Dean brushes the hair from my face. “Why don't you run inside and get cleaned up?” he suggests.

I send him a frown. “Is that your subtle way of telling me I look like crap? Besides, I don’t have any money for anything.”

Dean presses a wad of crumpled bills into my hands. “Here, got a loan from Felix. Get whatever you need. Will you bring me some deodorant, soap, and a toothbrush and toothpaste?”

Swayed by the thought of feeling a little clean, I say, “Okay, twist my arm. What about you?”

He winces and nods to his leg. “Now that we’re not moving, this is starting to kill me, so I’ll be right here.”

“Duh, you’re right. You should rest. I’ll hurry.”

“Take your time.”

I speed through the small gas station and let out a breath of relief when no one is inside other than the attendant, who doesn’t pay any attention to me as I grab a little basket and speed straight to the personal care aisle. There, I toss a couple sticks of deodorant, some bars of soap, two toothbrushes, and a tube of toothpaste into the basket. I also grab some tampons, silently cheering that I won’t have to use my ripped-up sweater anymore. Quickly, I pay for my treasures and slip to the bathroom, where I nearly orgasm over having clean teeth and real feminine hygiene products. Now, all I can think about is kissing Dean and not worrying about my breath.

Felix pulled the truck to the parking spot right by the door, so I jump in feeling more clean than I have in nearly a week. Dean is waiting with the door open, and I practically skip to his side. His beard twitches in a grin.

“Does Felix have a bottle of water in there? Where’d he go, by the way?”

He pulls out a bottle of water. “Take a leak.”

I retrieve the toothbrush and toothpaste and pass them to him. “Brush your teeth,” I order. I see a flash of recognition, and he does as I ask quickly and efficiently.

While he does as I order, I climb up on the step bar and wait impatiently for him to finish. As soon as he’s done, and

before I can second guess myself, I cup his face with both hands and guide his mouth to mine. If this is the last time I get to kiss him, I'm going to make it count. Our lips touch, and I feel a rush of heat flood through me. The taste of his minty breath and the soft abrasion of his scruff against my skin sends shivers down my spine. His arms wrap around me tightly, pulling me closer as we deepen the kiss. Never in a million years did I think I'd want his hands on me, and now all I want is to feel them *everywhere*.

I can feel his desire growing as his needy hands move from my back to my hips, gripping them tightly and pulling them into the vee of his thighs. I moan softly into his mouth, and it only spurs him on more. One hand moves up to cup my breast, massaging it gently underneath my shirt. The flimsy shelf bra of the cami does little to insulate my sensitive skin from his roughened palms. Feeling my nipples pebble, he groans into my mouth.

When my breath catches, Dean breaks the kiss, his chest heaving as he stares at me in barely controlled need. I feel a surge of panic, thinking I've made a terrible mistake, but then he leans back in and kisses me once again with a fierce hunger I return in equal measure. The bottle of water slips from where he placed it on the seat and clatters to the ground as we cling to each other, lost in the moment. His hard body presses against mine, and it's all I can do to keep from tearing off his clothes then and there.

An ear-splitting whistle has us breaking apart like a couple of guilty teenagers. Dean quickly and discreetly pulls his hand from underneath my shirt, and I flush as I see Felix striding from the gas station. I meet Dean's eyes, but they're unreadable in the shadows. Carefully, I climb over him and sit in the center seat again. Felix joins us with a mile-wide grin but, thank God, doesn't say anything other than, "Let's ride."

We pull out of the lot. My skin is still zinging with energy from that kiss, and my mind is racing with what it could mean, so I don't pick up on any weird energy until Felix whips the truck abruptly down a side street. My gaze flashes to Dean's, and I clock his serious expression.

Headlights from behind us flash on the dashboard. Someone in a loud truck slams on the brake to turn down the side street with us. Dean glances in the side mirror and frowns. My heart starts to beat in my ears when I feel Dean tense up beside me.

“Felix?” he asks in a tone I imagine he used as a Marine. “You see that truck? Been following us since we left the gas station.”

They share some silent communication because Felix’s jovial expression is grave now. “I see it. In the glove compartment.”

Tendrils of disquiet thread through me as Dean quickly retrieves a small handgun and turns to me. “Get down.”

I don’t hesitate or ask questions. I squish myself into the floorboard as much as I can, but I still feel vulnerable. Exposed. Dean leans forward to protect me, and I can feel his body vibrating like a live wire. He’s afraid. For me.

It can’t be those guys from the cabin, can it? How did they know where we were? Of all the damn luck to go to the same gas station.

I don’t have time to think anything else because Felix abruptly slams on the brakes. He and Dean peer out the windows as the truck behind us does the same. There’s a long pause, and I realize Felix is holding a gun, too. Their eyes meet, and Dean’s are chips of silver. Hard. Determined. Murderous.

“On three.”

They don’t say the words, but I can hear the countdown as vividly as if it’s being shouted into my ear. On three, they throw open the doors, hitting the two men who were creeping up the side with identical *thunks*. There are grunts of impact, a lot of cursing, and then several gunshots go off immediately.

I don’t realize I’ve been shot until I feel something wet on my arm.

I must black out momentarily because when the world comes back into focus, Dean is crouched next to me in the

open door of the truck. “Princess. Can you hear me?”

“Hey, pookie,” I answer through gritted teeth.

Dean’s answering smile is relieved and maybe a little annoyed. But honestly, I think he likes my little pet name. “Where?” he asks.

It takes me a second to realize what he’s asking, and then the pain slams into me full force. I gasp and clamp my eyes shut. “My shoulder. Fuck. What happened?”

He yanks down my jacket and sweatshirt with surprising gentleness. “Shot must have gone wide. Goddammit. We’ve got to get you to a hospital. Here, sit up for me. I have to check on Felix.”

“What about the guys?”

“I got one. The other got away.”

I don’t ask him to elaborate on what he means by “got one.”

“Fuck.” Dean’s voice comes from the driver’s side.

When I lean over the seat to see, I find him hauling a limp Felix up and into the back seat. “Is he...?”

“I don’t know, but buckle up. I’m gonna break several laws getting you both to the emergency room.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DEAN

“PUT PRESSURE ON THE WOUND,” I say.

“It hurts,” she replies through gritted teeth.

“I know, princess, but I don’t want you to bleed out on me. We’ll be there soon.” Thank God it’s late evening, and the roads are relatively clear. Crystal Mountain is a small town, and traffic isn’t really a thing. I thought drugs and murder weren’t either, so I guess I could be wrong.

“I’m dizzy,” Kenna says, her voice so faint I can barely hear it over the pounding of my heartbeat in my ears.

I take the hand on her good side and press it to my lips. I’ve never been the type to pray, but I send up a mental plea to whatever higher power there is. I can’t lose someone else. “From blood loss. But you’re going to be okay. Just stay awake for me. We’re almost there.” *Don’t leave me.* I don’t say the words, but I breathe them into her skin.

“Don’t leave me, okay?”

“I’m not going anywhere.” And I’ve never meant anything more in my life.

The feeling of rushing to the hospital strikes a little too close to home, wondering if someone else I care about will be okay. I don’t think I can survive losing someone else. As if to punctuate the thought, Felix groans in the back seat, and I press harder on the gas.

We make it to the hospital a few minutes later. I called on the way and relayed the situation, so two stretchers are waiting for us at the emergency department. Nurses swarm as soon as the truck rocks to a stop, and in a flash, Felix and Kenna are loaded up and whisked inside. I jerk the truck into a parking spot, pocket the keys, and dart inside. The receptionist directs me to a waiting room where I park my ass in a seat to wait for news.

Waiting is almost as torturous as the drive.

Finally, a doctor comes to the waiting room. “Mr. Tyler?”

“Yes?” I answer, pushing to my feet and running a hand through my dirty hair.

“You came in with Ms. Lynch and Mr. Bane?”

“That’s right.”

“There are some officers here who want to talk to you.”

“Can it wait?”

The doctor frowns. “I’m afraid not.”

“Can you tell me how Felix and Kenna are doing?”

“Mr. Bane is in surgery, and Ms. Lynch is getting stitches. But I’m afraid that’s all the information I have now. You’ll be able to see Kenna as soon as they’re done.”

“Thanks, Doc.”

Two police officers appear behind him and lead me to a secluded corner.

“Mr. Tyler, if you have the time, we have a few questions about everything.”

I grunt in response.

“Can you give us a play-by-play of what happened over the past few days?”

I recount to them in as much detail as possible about the cabin, the men there, and surviving on the mountain. One of them takes notes while the other listens intently. My hands start to shake as I detail the shooting, so I shove them in my pockets.

“We found the deceased assailant where you described the shooting taking place. Does the name Jeffery Turner mean anything to you?” the one taking notes asks.

I shake my head. “Doesn’t ring a bell. I didn’t recognize either of them.”

“You say the cabin belonged to a friend of yours. James Murdoch. Does he have a history of drug use?”

“Jamie? No way. He’s as straight as they come. From the looks of the cabin, I don’t think he’s been there in a while. If I had to guess, I’d say he surprised whatever operation was going down, and they got spooked and left.”

More notes. “Can you describe the other gunmen?”

I try to think back, but it’s all been such a blur that I don’t have much to give them.

“Thank you for this. We appreciate your time. You’d better have that leg looked at,” the other officer says.

I glance down at my feet and realize I’ve completely forgotten about my injuries. “Thanks.”

“We’ll be in touch.”

A nurse waiting in the wings ushers me to a room where they have me strip to assess my injuries. I’m sent off for X-rays and blood work, and goddammit, if they don’t let me see Kenna soon, I’m going to start breaking down doors.

My leg is wrapped in a cast when they finally wheel me to her room. I’m scowling at the lot of them and planning how to torture everyone when I see her lying in the bed. Her shoulder is wrapped in bandages, and she’s sleeping. I abandon the wheelchair, much to the displeasure of the nurses, and hover over the bed, hesitant to touch her because I don’t want to hurt her.

I glance at the nurse, who says, “The shot went straight through. We stitched her up, and she’s on painkillers and antibiotics. She shouldn’t have any lasting issues and will be just fine.”

When I grunt, Kenna begins to stir. Her eyes crack open, and she says, “Pookie, say thank you,” like she’s talking to a child.

Damn woman. If she doesn’t stop calling me that, I’m going to hide her pain meds. “Thank you,” I say begrudgingly.

The nurses hide their smiles as they leave us, and I scoot a chair over to her side. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I’ve been shot. I don’t recommend.”

I huff out a laugh. “Yeah, no, I don’t think so.”

“Have you ever been shot?”

“Actually, I can’t say that I have.”

At this, she brightens. “So what you’re saying is that I’m tougher than you are.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Big bad tough Dean Tyler has never been shot.”

“Well, why don’t you trek through the mountains on a broken leg. Then you can argue who is tougher.”

She frowns. “Yeah, you’re probably right. That sounds way worse. Plus, I’ve got the good pain meds.” After a jaw-breaking yawn, she says, “Have you heard anything about Felix?”

I shake my head. “No, not yet. He’s still in surgery, last I heard.”

“I’m so sorry, Dean. Do they have any idea who the other guy is?”

“Not yet, but I talked to the cops earlier. They’ll figure out who’s responsible for everything. You just worry about resting right now.”

Her eyes slip closed and then shoot open. “Have you heard from Riley or my sisters yet?”

“I’m sorry, not yet. You want me to call from here?”

“Yeah, please.” Another yawn. “I can’t seem to keep my eyes open.” She rattles off the numbers and dozes off.

I try the numbers she gave me, but there’s no answer. I leave another message updating them on Kenna’s status and give them the hospital room number.

With Kenna’s hand in mine, I bow my head over her bed and sleep for what feels like the first time in days.



I wake to one of Kenna's hands brushing through my hair. My eyes open, and I see her face smiling down at me.

"You look like a little boy when you sleep."

I clear my throat and sit up. "I do not."

"Yeah, you do. All sweet and innocent. It's shocking."

"How are you feeling?"

She smiles softly. "Better, but they just gave me another dose of the good stuff and said we could get out of here today if we feel up to it."

I brighten at the thought. "Hell yes. I need to get home and check on Gramps. He must be worried sick."

"I talked to him while you were asleep."

"You did?"

"I figured you'd be worried. He says he's glad you're okay. And that Sunny misses you." She giggles, and hearing it feels like being soaked in sunshine. "I don't think you're going to be getting rid of that cat any time soon."

"Like we don't have enough animals already. Were you able to get ahold of Riley?"

Her smile dims. "No, not yet. I even tried calling my dad, but no luck. I don't know what the heck they're doing, but I'm going to kill them when I do get ahold of them."

"I'm sure they're fine. Let me check with the nurse to see when we can get out of here and maybe get us a ride back to my place."

"Dean," she starts.

I cut her a look. "Don't bother arguing. You're not staying in a hotel while that guy is still out there. We have a spare

room.” The “if you want it” is left unsaid because I don’t want to push her.

Much.

After a quick conversation with the nurse and doctor, I manage to get us released within the hour. A rental takes us back up to the cabin, and all the tension inside me evaporates the moment we step foot inside. Gramps is in his customary chair by the fire with that damn cat curled up in his lap. Margaret sits across from him with an anxious expression tightening her features.

“About damn time you got home,” Gramps says by way of greeting.

“Good to see you too, old man,” I say and bend down to give him a tight hug. The scent of tobacco and coffee fills my nose. “Good to be home.”

“Come here, missy. Let me take a look at you,” Gramps says to Kenna.

“Hello, Mr. Pascal. I’m so sorry for all the trouble.” Kenna sits on the ottoman in front of him with one of his hands in hers. “I hope we didn’t cause you too much worry.”

“Don’t fret about that, sweetheart. I’m just glad you’re both back safely.” He eyes her bandaged shoulder and my cast. “Relatively.”

“We’re going to hit the hay, Gramps. We’re both exhausted. Thanks for being here, Margaret. I appreciate your help so much.”

She stands and wraps me in a quick hug. “Of course.” I don’t know if it’s relief or lack of sleep, but her smile trembles. Then she’s out the door, and all I can think about is dragging Kenna to bed and sleeping—for now.

“I’m going to stay up with Sunny for a little while longer. I’ll see you in the morning, son.”

I kiss him on the head. “Night, old man.”

Kenna gives a little wave, but she’s damn near swaying on her feet, too.

“Good night, you two.”

I guide Kenna down the hall, and she pauses by the spare room. “I guess this is me,” she says shyly.

“The hell it is.” She makes a strangled sound of surprise as I tug her to my room.

“Dean, what are you doing?”

“Taking you to bed.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KENNA

MY JAW DROPS.

I knew the cabin had a view, but I never imagined it would be anything like this. His room is on the corner of the house, and two of the exterior walls are completely glass. The bed is opposite them, so you have damn near a panoramic view of the trees, the mountains in the distance, and the forest.

“Wow,” I whisper, drifting toward the view. “This is incredible.”

“You’d think you’ve had enough of the wilderness after the past few days.”

I turn back to shoot him a grin and notice his smile soften. What is it about a hard man showing vulnerability that’s so fucking hot? I turn away so I don’t do something stupid like jump him. I’ve got to keep myself together. We’re not stranded on the mountain anymore. We both have lives to go back to. I need to be realistic...

But that kiss.

I give myself a little shake. “I don’t care how much time I spend outside. I don’t think I could ever get tired of this view.”

The rustling of clothes is followed by Dean placing our hospital bags on a low-slung, rust-colored chair next to me. “That’s what I think every time I’m away from here for too long. After my deployments, it was like an oasis coming home. You don’t have views like this where you live? Where is it you live exactly?”

My throat goes a little dry when I realize how much we still don’t know about each other. “Champagne. A little suburb outside of Charlotte.”

“Do you like it there?” He’s moved closer, his voice right behind me. My nerves light up. A part of me wondered if the insane attraction I felt toward him would dim when we were

back in civilization, but it hasn't in the slightest. If anything, now all I can think about is how good he'll look naked.

I lift a shoulder as I struggle to remember his question. Something about his smell totally short-circuits my brain. "It's alright, but it's where we've always lived. Where the girls have their friends and school."

I don't mention it's where our whole family used to live, and moving feels like an acceptance that we'll never be back together, even though I know that's the case. There's always going to be a little girl inside of me, hoping her mommy and daddy will get back together.

"Let's get you that shower," Dean murmurs and takes my hand, tugging me toward a door to the right of his bed.

"Really, it's okay, you don't have to go through all this..." My voice trails off as he flicks the light for his bathroom. It's easily the size of my bedroom back home and looks like something from an interior design magazine. The warm hardwood floors match the wood tones on the walls. There's a giant soaking clawfoot tub to my left, a large walk-in shower with multiple shower heads just beyond, and a large double vanity on the far wall. I assume the two doors on the right lead to an actual toilet and maybe a walk-in closet?

"Is this heaven?" I ask.

Dean chuckles. "Take as much time as you need. I'll get some clothes you can wear."

I don't argue because I'm in the midst of some serious inner turmoil about whether I want to take a bubble bath or test out the shower heads. Seriously, how do you choose?

Eventually, the shower wins out because as much as I want a good, long soak, I don't think I'll really feel clean until I have a serious girl shower. Before I strip and get in, Dean returns with a stack of his clothes that are probably too big for me and some toiletries. I already can't wait for that first silky-smooth slide into clean sheets with freshly shaven skin.

I'm gonna sleep so fuckin' good.

"Thank you. I won't take too long."

His gaze meets mine. “Take all the time you need.”

I almost want to ask him to stay and climb in the shower with me, but I clamp my mouth shut. Not only am I still on my period—fucking *thanks*, Mother Nature—but I am so gross from roughing it for the past few days. If and when Dean Tyler sees me fully naked for the first time, I’m at least going to be scrubbed raw and smelling like soap instead of sweat.

So, on the off chance of that happening, I turn the water from the dual shower heads as hot as I can stand it, step under the scalding spray, and let out a moan. I don’t doubt the whole state of North Carolina can hear—it feels *that* good. For a while, I stand under the hot water, careful not to irritate my shoulder wound, and let all the dirt, sweat, and grime from the horror of the past few days slip down the drain.

With my muscles loose and warm, I lather my hair one-handed with the shampoo Dean provided. I can’t recognize the scent, but I don’t even care. It smells so good I nearly cry. Self-care was sorely missed out in the wilderness. I’m definitely a pamperer. I get my nails and hair done regularly, and facials, masks, body scrubs, and butters are a weekly occurrence. My skin routine has been perfected to an art.

I stop mid-condition and say, “Son of a bitch.”

Maybe Dean was on to something with the whole princess thing. Not that I’d *ever* tell him that.

I finish my hair and take the bar of soap, scrubbing until I’ve got a good lather, then rub it all over my body. Making sure to suds up the problem areas twice for good measure. My spirits lift as soon as I start to feel clean again. Finally, I shave the important areas and touch my silky bare skin in appreciation.

A knock comes at the door. “Just making sure you’re alright.”

“F-fine,” I answer, suddenly hyper-aware that I’m naked and only a door separates us. The urge to invite him in presses on me until I say, “Come in.”

There's a clear pause while he must be debating whether to come in, followed by a muffled curse. Then, the door pushes open, and he walks inside.

I'm hit by a flash of insecurity and shyness, and thank fucking God, the shower is glass and coated with a thick layer of steam. He stops by the shower door and strips off his dirty T-shirt and his jeans, which are missing half a leg where they had to cut them to apply the cast. It's then I notice the garbage bag in his hand and connect it to the cast on his broken leg. I adjust the sprays while he wraps his cast, angling them away from the seat at the far end of the space.

Then, he pulls the glass door open and steps inside. The urge to touch him is so intense that I don't even fight it. Was this inevitable? Had we been hurtling toward this moment ever since he stepped out on his front porch?

I nudge him toward the seat, and he takes it, knees parted and one leg extended so the cast is away from the spray. Both shower heads are removable, so I take one and kneel on a hand towel between his legs. Dean's hands grip the edge of the seat, his knuckles white. A surge of pure feminine energy bursts through me, knowing I have such a profound effect on a man like Dean.

"Stay still so I can make sure I get you clean," I say, my voice uncharacteristically throaty and sexy.

He must have lost his mind because all he can do is give me a jerky nod.

I lather up another washcloth with soap—a lavender goat's milk soap, which would explain why he smelled floral—and start a thorough scrub of his body at his broad shoulders. I've always had a thing for shoulders, and Dean's shoulders and back are magnificent. Thickly corded with muscle and tapered to his waist. I swipe the washcloth over his defined chest, enjoying how his muscles ripple and flex under my hands. I pay attention to each arm, each hand, and even clean his fingernails.

I use the detached shower head to clean off the suds, then return to washing his abdomen, which flexes under my hands

and reveals washboard abs I have to refrain from licking. His dick hardens under my attention, thick to the point where it's intimidating and flushed pink-brown. The heavy weight of it bobs in front of me, but I ignore it, paying attention to his thighs and legs instead, careful to avoid his injured one.

Dean's head drops back against the shower wall. "You're gonna fucking kill me," he says in a strangled voice.

Allowing myself a small smile of feminine satisfaction, I rinse the suds again and turn my focus to his thick, hard cock. "Can I touch it?" I ask.

"Fuck yes."

I put the shower head in a holder on the wall and move between his legs. His eyes shut as I take his thick weight between my hands and lean forward for an experimental lick. At the first touch of my tongue to the underside, he gives a whole-body shudder. Drops of precum leak from the tip, and I lick them off, swirling my tongue around the head.

He shudders and lifts a hand to my cheek in reverence. I glance up and find him watching me now. Our eyes meet as I take his length deep in my throat.

"God fucking damn, I'm not going to last long."

This encourages me to take him as deep in my throat as I can manage, which isn't much considering how girthy he is. But he shows his appreciation by a harsh exhalation and more precum bathing my tongue.

"Can I fuck your mouth?" he asks.

I nod around him, meeting his eyes, and he sifts his hands through my hair. I almost expect it to be rough and violent, but Dean lifts his hips, gently bobbing me over his cock on a slow, steady rhythm to the point where my throat relaxes, and I take him even deeper. He groans at this, watching as my eyes water, and I gag a little.

"Tell me if you want me to stop," he says.

I shake my head a little, and he groans as he comes, spurting down the back of my throat. He collapses against the

shower wall, and I follow him down, my tongue laving his dick, sucking the last remnants of the orgasm out of him, until he whispers, “Oh fuck, stop, stop, stop.” I rock back on my heels, lifting my mouth to the spray.

He takes a minute to recover, then he pushes to his feet, a steely look of determination in his eyes. He slaps the controls for the water and says, “C’mon.”

He leads me to the bed, still soaking wet. “You don’t have to—”

A thousand thoughts rush through my head. I’m still on my damn period with a tampon in. I couldn’t do much if he wanted to.

“I want to.”

“But I’m still...” I can feel my face turn scarlet red. I gesture between my legs. “You know.”

“I know. And I don’t fucking care if you don’t.”

“I don’t think I want our first time having sex to be like this. But, um, we can do other things.”

He frames my face with his hands and kisses me deeply. He’s still half hard between us, and I feel liquid heat melt my lower belly and knees. They go a little weak, and he wraps one arm around my waist to keep me upright.

“Lie on the bed with me,” he says, and I practically leap onto it.

We’re both still wet from the shower, but neither of us seems to care. We wind up on our sides, one of my legs wrapped around his waist. His now fully hard erection grinding against my needy clit.

He pauses for a second to reach into his nightstand for a bottle of lube. Seeing it sends a bolt of heat straight through me at the thought of him using it to jerk himself off. He pours some into one palm, then strokes the lube over his dick. Then he rubs some over my clit with his big, masterful fingers until my eyes flutter closed. My fingers clamp down on his skin, and I’m positive my nails leave marks.

“That feels s-so good,” I say with a shuddering breath.

There’s a thud of the bottle as he chunks it over his shoulder on the floor, then he’s hitching my leg back over his hip so he can work his dick against me. I haven’t done something like this since high school, and God, I want him inside of me, but the tease is almost as good as the real thing. The slippery feeling from the lube gives *excellent* friction, and he sets a relentless pace.

I grip him tight to me like a boa constrictor winding around its prey. He doesn’t seem to mind. If anything, his hands grip my hips and pull me impossibly closer. My head is tucked in the curve of his shoulder, and he whispers the *dirtiest* things. I swear I could come from the words alone.

“I bet that pussy would take me so good. Swallow me right up. You’d take it like such a good girl, wouldn’t you, princess?”

I mewl incoherently in return, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“I’m gonna fuck you deep and hard and slow until you come all over me. You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” He glides against me in a steady rhythm that has me seeing stars. From the moans coming from his mouth, I swear he’s going to come again, too. “I bet you fucking would.”

“Please,” I whisper against his skin. I don’t know what I’m begging for, but he does.

He nudges me until I’m on my back, opening my legs until I’m spread wide for him. He presses his dick against my clit and grinds against me, the head pressing the bundle of nerves at the perfect angle.

“Put your hands here,” he says, and I reach down. He arranges them so I’m basically jerking him off as he rubs against me, allowing me to control the angle and pressure.

“Oh, fuck,” I whisper, and he chuckles darkly.

He’s now hands-free so he can reach up to tweak my nipples. He pinches, flicks, and sucks them into perfect attention.

But more than that, his look finally pushes me over the edge. Our eyes meet, and he sucks his lower lip in like I'm the most gorgeous thing he's ever seen. He must see my expression change because he leans closer, spreading my legs wider and pumping faster as he says, "Come on, come on, come on." Like a chant. Or a prayer. "I'm gonna fucking come," he adds like he's surprised.

The thought of coming with him takes my orgasm and flings it higher, higher, higher.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DEAN

I CLEAN HER UP AGAIN, and after she uses the restroom, I tuck her back into my bed naked, where she belongs. She falls into an immediate deep sleep, but I stay awake for a while, enjoying the feel of her bare against me. Then I drift off, following her and content for the first time in longer than I can remember.

The next day, there's still no word from Riley or her family. The roads aren't completely clear, so I convince her to stay another night. We spend the day shooting the shit with Gramps. She vegges out on the couch with the cat in her lap, and I swear it feels like she's meant to be there.

We ignore the news because stories of our crash have been splashed on every possible news station and social media platform imaginable. This also brings to light Georgia's death and my time in the Marines, neither of which I really want to rehash, so I show Kenna around our little homestead.

She goes nuts over the goats and the little baby born a few weeks prior. I swear she would have brought it inside if I would have let her. She didn't push, though, and I'm grateful because I get the feeling there isn't a lot that would make me say no to her.

We collect eggs from the chickens and walk around the gardens while I explain which stubby little plant used to be what the spring before. I show her which plants we're going to use in the spring. She seems fascinated and gets a kick out of eating the food we preserved for dinner.

Then we fall back into bed, maybe a little drunk off of wine, and she strokes me to another quick orgasm and uses my cum as lube to let me stroke her to a quick orgasm of her own. If I'm counting correctly, today was the last day of her period, depending on how long hers last. And if I'm right, I plan to make *her* my breakfast.



The next morning, I wake to her wiggling out of bed. I hear the shower turn on and imagine her getting under the spray and all those lush curves glistening with water. My dick is already hard, having been resurrected after years-long celibacy.

The shower is quick, and soon, she's crawling back into bed wearing only a towel. She curls up next to me, and I slowly tug the towel away from her body. If there's any shyness left in her, I can't see it.

I could beat around the bush, but I'm nothing if not direct. "Are you still on your period?" I ask.

She bites her lip, unable to hide her grin. "Nope," she says, emphasizing the P.

Thank fucking God. I lay on my back and slap her ass. "Climb on me," I say, and she scrambles so quickly I can't help but chuckle. I wouldn't care if she was, but I know based on her reaction before that sex on her period isn't appealing to her. I want to respect that.

She settles over my dick and leans forward to kiss me. I let her, then say, "I want that, too, baby, but first, I want to taste that pussy. Come sit on my face."

At this, she hesitates a little. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm fucking sure." I put my hands under her thighs and lift her until she's straddling my face. She lets out a squeal of surprise and delight. "I've been dreaming about this for days."

"Well, if you insist," she says with mock resignation.

"Grip the headboard," I order.

"Fuck," she whispers.

I spread her wide, then fuse my mouth to her clit, flicking the engorged flesh with my tongue. She jerks her hips, and I imagine her eyes rolling into the back of her head. My mouth waters at the taste of her.

She hovers over me like she's worried about suffocating me. Tapping her on the thigh, I pull away and say, "I said I wanted you to sit on my face."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Princess, I'm not fucking worried about you hurting me. Now sit that pussy on my face so I can get a good taste."

Her legs buckle, and I groan in satisfaction. Already her thighs are shaking, and I encourage her to grind on me as I fuck her with my tongue, then suck her clit until the noises coming out of her throat are choked by sobs. My dick is as hard as a fucking rock, and it takes all of my concentration to keep from coming right along with her.

She melts to the bed as I arrange her on her back and pull a condom from my nightstand. What can I say? I may be celibate, but I'm a good little Marine—always prepared. I have it on my dick in the next breath. My hand goes between us to find her silky-wet and sensitive, if the way she jerks is any indication.

I meet her eyes to touch base. "This okay?" I ask.

Kenna nods, smiling softly. "Yes."

Her arms twine around my neck as I drive inside. She arches, baring her neck, and I bite the soft place between her shoulder and throat. Her thighs bracket my hips, and she tightens around me, enclosing me and surrounding me with her limbs, her heat. I said being around her was like stepping into the sunshine, and that couldn't be more true in this moment.

I'm so close to the fucking edge I have to sit back up and catch my breath. Grabbing her knees, I spread her wide, and she thrashes her head from side to side. I wish I had a little vibrator to bring her back to orgasm and make a mental note to invest in one. Instead, I release my hold on one leg, lick my

thumb and rub it softly over her clit. Her responding moan is deep and breathy.

I grit my teeth, so close to coming from that sound alone. “God fucking damn, you’re beautiful all spread out like this. I want you to come all over my dick.” She clenches around me at the sound of my voice. Princess likes when I talk dirty to her.

I release her other leg, and she keeps them high and wide. I bring one of her hands to feel where I’m driving into her, and I damn near think she stops breathing. Putting my hand to her throat, I don’t squeeze but just let her feel it and confirm she’s still breathing. God, she’s so fucking close.

My thumb glides over her frantically now. I drink in the sight of her all flushed and slick, taking me deep and gripping me tight, her fingers spread so they can feel where I’m grinding into her.

And that does it for me. I come first a-fucking-gain, but then she expels a long breath and whispers, “I’m coming, I’m coming,” and I don’t beat myself up too bad. Hard to when she looks so goddamn beautiful as she does.



Later, I give her my sweats and a T-shirt to wear after we’ve napped on and off and cleaned up. I tug her out of the bedroom and get her situated on a stool at the bar in the kitchen. Gramps is taking an afternoon nap, and Sunny wanders down the hall at the smell of food cooking. Spotting Kenna, he beelines for her and leaps into her lap.

She pets him idly and sips a cup of coffee I placed in front of her. “Thanks. Oh my god, this is so good.”

“It’s no mocha, but it’s hot.”

“Tastes like heaven. Thank you for all of this. The food and letting me stay here.”

I glance at her as I plate the pancakes and douse them in thick, organic maple syrup. “You don’t have to thank me. I want to.”

“Would you happen to have a tablet or something to log in and check my socials? Maybe I can get ahold of Riley there.”

“Of course.” I keep an eye on the next set of pancakes as I retrieve my iPad from the table next to the sofa. After checking the charge, I hand it to her. “Use it as long as you need. When the roads clear up, I’ll take you into town to get a new phone.”

“That would be amazing.”

We work in silence, and a blanket of peace settles over me. I missed this. I missed having another person around—probably much more than I’m willing to admit to myself. The only thing missing is the sound of a little girl’s laughter... Then, it’s like a cloud settles over me. It’s not until I smell something burning that I realize I’ve drifted back into a dark place.

Kenna appears at my side. “Dean?” Her eyes study my face, and a wave of sadness and understanding crosses her expression. “I’ll finish this.”

She moves me to her abandoned seat and pushes me into it. After scraping the burned pancakes into the trash, she pours more mixture into the pan. “What were you thinking about?”

With anyone else, I would have kept it to myself, but I find myself wanting to share. “Penelope. Just remembering breakfasts and how she’d sit at the table and laugh. She was still mostly a baby when I left, but a baby’s laugh is something you don’t forget.”

“Do you have pictures of them?” she asks.

“Are you sure you want to see them?” At her unamused glance, I chuckle and use the iPad to pull up some of my favorites. Kenna finishes the pancakes and makes us plates, bringing them over to sit next to me. I hand the iPad to her as she sits next to me and starts eating.

She sets the iPad up so we can both see and starts scrolling through the album. The first picture was taken in the hospital. Georgia is radiant in a hospital bed, holding a red, screaming, goo-covered baby. I'm leaning over with a small smile as I snap the selfie.

Kenna laughs. "Klaire was the same way when she was born. I remember asking my parents if I could give her back."

"Penny may not have had my temper, but she had plenty of attitude, even for a baby." I don't taste much of the food, but I scarf it down as Kenna eats and swipes through the pictures.

There are a few newborn portraits of Penny by herself that Georgia insisted on taking at the resort and some of us as a family. I gave her such a hard time because I'm not a picture-taker, really, but now I'm glad she pushed for them. After someone you love passes away, all you have left are the memories, and sometimes even those fade. The pictures help me remember when the pain urges me to forget.

"They're beautiful, Dean," she says, leaning on my shoulder when she's finished her breakfast.

It's not as hard to look at them now. Maybe time hasn't healed the wounds, but I've learned to accommodate the pain. The loneliness. The regret. It's not something I think I'll ever get over. There won't be a day when I won't miss them. But maybe I can start to forgive myself. A little. Georgia wouldn't have wanted me to blame myself.

"Thanks," I say, my voice hoarse with emotion. "I always thought it would be me, you know? Doing what I did, there's always a risk I wouldn't come home. I was careless with my life. Reckless. You can't be a pilot and not have a bit of a death wish. She used to get on me all the time about being safe now that we had a baby girl, and I would brush her off. I never thought I'd be the one without her, you know?"

"Oh, Dean." She throws her arms around me, enveloping me with her sunshine once again. Lighting me up from the inside out. "You're a good man, I promise you. You didn't abandon them. Trust me, I know what it's like to be abandoned. You were doing your job."

I can't speak, so I don't try. I just hold her as long as she'll let me.

Then, when we break apart, she wipes her misty eyes. "Dammit, sorry. I didn't mean to cry."

I kiss the salt from her cheeks. "You don't have to apologize. I didn't mean to ruin the morning."

She presses her lips to mine and says, "You haven't. You shouldn't ever stop yourself from talking about them. They're important, and they matter."

I clear my throat and change the subject before I break down. "So, uh, was there anything on your social media?"

She drinks deeply from her coffee mug. "Oh, there was plenty. My socials must have been leaked to the press because I have a million notifications. There are even news people in my email." She pauses, biting her lip. "Actually, there's something we should—" She glances down at the tablet as a notification for the security system pops up. "Um, I think there's someone here."

I take the iPad from her and pull up the security system's live video feed of the front porch.

Frank is standing there. Well, standing would be a generous description. From how he's swaying, I'm surprised he's still upright. "Shit," I say under my breath.

"Is it Riley?" she asks hopefully.

"No, someone a lot worse. I'm sorry ahead of time."

"Sorry for what?" she asks as her brow furrows.

"You wait here. There's something I've got to deal with."

I quickly tug on my boots and tuck a Glock into my waistband. You can never be too careful with someone like Frank.

When I open the door, the first thing I see is his bloodshot eyes, and I get a bad feeling in the pit of my gut. "What are you doing here?" I say bluntly.

"Is that any way to greet your ol' man?"

“You’re not my old man, Frank, and I don’t want you here. Do I need to call the cops?”

“You can call ’em if you want. I’m jus’ paying my respects to the son I helped raise after finding out he and his girlfriend nearly died.”

I grit my teeth. “What do you want?” Because it’s always something with a man like Frank.

“I toldja, I want what you owe me. Money. Twenty-K should cover it.”

I bark out a laugh. “You’ve got to be joking. I don’t have that kind of cash lying around. You really are insane, Frank.”

His eyes blaze. “We took care of you. Put a roof over your head. Food in your belly. You owe me.”

“I don’t owe you shit.”

“Dean?” Kenna’s voice comes from behind me. “Is everything okay?”

“That your girl?” Frank asks. The thought of him laying eyes on her makes me sick to my stomach. “I saw her on the news. Pretty little thing. Much better’n what’s her name you married. Got tits and ass on this one. The fat bank account don’t hurt either,” Frank sneers.

“Stay inside, Kenna,” I order. Fat bank account? What the hell’s he talking about? I write it off as Frank being Frank.

But Frank is pushing by me, surprisingly strong for someone so trashed. “Where she at?”

Kenna stops at the sight of Frank in his stained and too-small clothes, his graying hair unkempt. The scent of stale booze oozes from him in noxious waves. “There she is. Saw you on the news. Mighty lucky you guys are.”

I move in between them. “Time to go, Frank. Kenna, call the cops.”

“What’s going on?” she asks, her eyes darting from Frank to me and back again.

“I’m Dean’s ol’ man,” Frank says.

“This is my stepdad, and he’s just leaving.”

Frank turns his vicious gaze to me, and the boy he used to beat flinches a little inside. “I’m not leavin’ ’til I get my money.”

“I told you, I don’t have that kind of cash.” Kenna is frozen in shock, and I don’t blame her. The last thing we need after our week is this bullshit. When Kenna doesn’t call, I get Gramps’ phone beside his chair and dial myself.

“Nine-one-one, what’s the address of your emergency?”

“Dean,” comes Kenna’s voice.

I rattle off the address, and the operator puts me on hold. Gritting my teeth, I say, “Last chance, Frank.”

“I’m not leaving. I want twenty thousand dollars, or I’ll tell every lowlife I know your little girlfriend’s address where they can find as much cash as they want.”

“You’re crazy. What the hell are you talking about?”

“You heard me.” He studies me for a moment, then guffaws. “You don’t know? Wow, this is rich. Guess she ain’t as sweet and innocent as she looks. Are you going to tell him, or should I?”

I turn to Kenna to tell her to ignore him, but she’s ghost-white. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

“This is better than Jerry Springer,” Frank says.

“Shut the fuck up, man,” I bark.

“Dean—I—”

“I can’t believe you don’t know. It’s all over the news. Someone found out she won the lottery a few years ago. Headlines are raving that one of North Carolina’s richest women returns from the dead.”

“What?”

“I was going to tell you,” she sputters. “There never seemed to be a right time.”

My hands fall limply to my sides as Frank continues to guffaw. “You sure picked right this time, boy. Maybe I should have asked for more money.”

My temper flares, and I take Frank by the collar of his jacket and throw him bodily out of the front door. He lands on his ass in the snow. “Don’t come back here, Frank, or I’ll fuckin’ kill you. And if I ever hear of you coming around Kenna, I’ll take my time with it. Do you understand me?”

I don’t wait for his response and go back inside, slamming the door and locking it securely behind me. I watch the security feed as Frank limps to his truck and, thankfully, drives away. Finally, I turn to Kenna, standing stock-still, her face still bleached of all color.

Going to her side, I cup her cheek. “Are you okay, princess? I’m so fucking sorry for that piece of shit. He’s gone now.”

She shakes her head as though to clear her thoughts. “No, I’m sorry. I should have told you before.”

I scoff. “I don’t care about that shit. Do you see the way I live? Money doesn’t matter to me. Rich or poor. I don’t care. There are more important things in life than your bank account.”

Kenna peers up at me with watery eyes. “You don’t know that. Money changes people.”

“What are you saying?”

“My mom ditched us after my dad left. We didn’t hear from her for years. You know the first time she showed up? It wasn’t for the girls’ birthdays or the time Klaire got so sick she was in the hospital and we thought she might die. It was a week after she learned I won. She was asking for a loan. I was so grateful to see her again—I just wanted my mom—that I gave her the money thinking if she didn’t have to worry about bills, maybe she’d stick around.” She wipes her nose. “Now, I only see her when she runs out of cash. She disowned me when I stopped giving her a monthly allowance.”

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry. She’s a shit person.”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I really don’t care about the money. Having some doesn’t change how much I like having you in my bed. How much I can’t stop thinking about having you riding my tongue.”

Her face flames, and she sways toward me, then steps back. “I want to believe you. God, I do. And maybe I will. This is just moving so fast, and I think I need to get my head on straight.”

“What are you saying?” I ask evenly.

“Nothing bad. I just think maybe we should take a bit of a breather. Spend a night or two apart. I—I care about you, Dean, and I don’t want to screw this up. I know you don’t care about the money, but I have my sisters to think about. I have to be smart here. So, I’m going to get a room at the lodge for the night, and we can talk tomorrow. Please don’t fight me on this. I just need some time to think.”

I tuck my hands into my pockets so I don’t grab her and tie her to my bed. Now that I’ve got her, the thought of letting her leave drives me crazy. “Are you sure that’s what you want? Whoever shot you is still out there.”

She nods. “I won’t leave the hotel or see anyone I don’t know. It’s just for tonight so I can think.”

Finally, I take her into my arms and press my lips into her hair. “I don’t like this shit at all, but I understand. Take all the time you need. Call me when you want to see me, yeah?”

“I will, I promise. It’s just for a day or two to catch my breath. Actually get ahold of my sisters and let the media die back down.”

“I get it. Do you want me to drive you there?”

She shakes her head. “I saw my rental outside. Margaret brought it home from the airport. I’ll take it.”

“Let me know when you get there, okay?”

“Of course. This isn’t goodbye.”

“You’re damn right it’s not.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KENNA

I DON'T REMEMBER MUCH of the drive from Dean's to the hotel. It passes in a blur as I waste time driving around town. In fact, the entire week feels like it's been a blur. So much has happened that when Dean's stepdad barged in, it felt like reality coming crashing down around us. I mean, I knew it was bound to happen. We couldn't continue in our bubble. We both have real lives to get back to. The question was... would they fit together?

I pass a closed mountain coaster, a mining attraction, what must be a tourist district with a bunch of kitschy shops and stores, and several restaurants. Remembering that the only thing I have to wear is Dean's oversized clothing and no toiletries, I stop at one of the boutiques to stock up on clothes and necessities.

I step into the boutique, the soft chime of the door announcing my presence. The air is filled with the scent of new clothes, and the racks are a riot of colors and textures. It's a stark contrast to the rough, mountainous terrain I recently left behind. I let the atmosphere wash over me, grateful for a small step towards normalcy after such a harrowing experience. Normally, I enjoy taking my time shopping, but all I want is to get what I need, find a room for the next few days, and not draw too much attention to myself.

The shopkeepers, a pair of older women with near identical sable brown bobs, glance up as I enter, their eyes widening with recognition. My face must be recognizable from the news reports, another reminder of the helicopter crash that left me stranded, and the other detail they might remember: I was one of the lucky few who won the lottery several years ago, an unexpected twist of fate that's been both a blessing and a challenge.

I cringe inwardly, hoping they don't draw too much attention to me. Or, God forbid, start filming for social media.

I've had both happen and, on rare occasions, have had complete strangers come up to me asking for money, favors, or worse. So, I wasn't surprised by Frank's appearance and demand for money. It wasn't the first time and wouldn't be the last. It just wasn't how I wanted Dean to find out. It was something I wanted to do on my own terms.

"Ms. Kenna, isn't it?" one of the shopkeepers asks with a warm smile. "I'm Evelyn, and this is Tildy. We're so glad to see you safe and sound."

I return their smiles, the genuine concern in their voices touching my heart. That's what I love about small towns. Even strangers can feel like family. I wish we had more of that sentiment in Champagne, but there are simply too many people being so close to Charlotte. It's like you have to constantly be on guard. "Thank you. It's been quite an experience, but I'm grateful to be here."

As I browse the racks, their curiosity seems to bubble over, and they sidle up next to me. "We heard about your incredible story. Surviving that crash and winning the lottery a few years back? You're quite the inspiration."

I can feel the soft blush coloring my cheeks, and I'm grateful a rack of clothes separates us so they can't see me in Dean's sweats and shirt. I also don't have any makeup on, not to mention the bulky bandage on my shoulder that Dean re-wrapped earlier this morning. "It's been a wild ride, that's for sure."

Tildy gives me a gentle smile. "We'll let you get back to it. Just give us a holler if you need anything."

"I will, thank you."

I select a few pieces, each a small step towards reclaiming a sense of normalcy. A couple pairs of warm jeans, yoga pants in a rainbow of colors—you can never have too many—some warm sweaters, and long-sleeved shirts for layering. They even have bras and underwear. A little too fancy for everyday use, but they'll do for now. Plus, the bright patterns and little bows make me smile. I could do with some frivolous bows

right about now. I top it off with a sensible pair of boots and some sneakers.

After making my selections, I head to the counter to pay. The shopkeepers are discreet enough not to make a fuss, kindness evident in their gestures. It's a welcome respite from the media attention swirling around me since the crash.

I offer a genuine smile as I thank them.

They exchange a knowing look, a silent understanding passing between them. I've been in the spotlight for both the extraordinary and the mundane, and they're treating me like any other customer, a relief I hadn't realized I needed until now.

"Do you mind if I change into some of this in your restroom?" I gesture down at Dean's clothes.

"Of course, honey."

"You go right ahead. The restroom is in the back. Take all the time you need."

I change into a bright purple bra and panty set and slide into jeans and a butter-soft deep purple sweater. I still have Dean's socks, so I tug on the boots and stuff his clothes into the bag. The ladies wave as I head out the door, the tinkling bell following my exit.

Next door is a general store, which is busier. I can blend in more, especially now that I'm not dressed so inappropriately. There, I stock up on basic toiletries that make me feel more human: shampoo, conditioner, body and face wash, razors, and deodorant. I even splurge on a little makeup, knowing it will make me feel more in control to wear it.

When I step out, I already feel more like myself. I pretend for a moment that I'm in Crystal Mountain as a tourist. Now that I'm not stuck in the mountains and wondering if I'll make it out alive, they're actually pretty damn beautiful. The little shopping center I'm at is across the street from a good-sized grocery store, a little plaza with several restaurants, and—thank God—a coffee house.

I remember their names because, somehow, it's already early evening, and I'm starving. Noticing my tank is nearly empty from driving around, I fill up and head to find a room for the night.

Thankfully, the lodge has openings due to tourists leaving because of the storm. I manage to get a room with a big king bed and a decent shower—two of my priorities in my life going forward. I make sure to let the desk know to direct Riley to my room if she shows up, then I order out for dinner—a mocha from the local mom-and-pop place, The Crystal Mountain Coffee Shop, and a large eggplant Parm from an Italian place in that same little plaza. They're both set to arrive in about a half hour, so I use the time to take yet another shower. I swear, I'll never have enough showers.

It takes a couple trips to bring all my new stuff inside, and I'm exhausted by the time I finish. I bring everything into the bathroom and strip out of my new clothes, setting them aside to wear again tomorrow since they're not dirty. My bandage is waterproof, so I don't worry about getting it wet as I let the warm water from the shower cascade down my body. I close my eyes, the soothing sensations washing over me. It's not as good as Dean's shower, which makes me smile sadly.

Leaving him was gut-wrenching, but I needed a moment to myself. Everything happened so fast—surviving the crash, clinging to each other, and eventually being rescued. But my feelings for Dean are like a tempest, intense and overwhelming. I had to take a step back, clear my thoughts, and gain some perspective. I have the girls to consider, and I can't just jump into another relationship. Especially not so soon after Garrett. I don't want to make another mistake. If what Dean and I have is real, it can withstand a little time apart.

After the shower, I wrap myself in the plush hotel robe and sit on the edge of the bed. My emotions tumble and twist within me, and I finally let the tears flow. The release is cathartic, each tear carrying a mixture of relief, fear, and a desire I can't fully comprehend. By the time the delivery

driver knocks on my door, the storm has passed, and I hope the comfort food will ease the knots in my stomach.

But when I open the door, it's not a waiter standing there. It's Riley and my three younger sisters, their faces a mixture of concern and relief.

“Kenna!” Riley exclaims as all four of them leap forward, enveloping me in a tight, eight-limbed hug. “We were so worried. We saw the news about the crash and came as soon as we could.”

Then, their voices lift in overlapping statements about how worried they were, how they couldn't believe I survived the crash, and how they're so happy I'm alive and they're never going to let me go again as long as they live.

Tears prick my eyes again, but this time it's from the unexpected comfort of their presence. They've come all this way to check on me, to remind me of the love and support I have. I cling to all four of them, relieved to finally know they're okay. To have them back in my arms again.

I glance at the hotel room, thinking about the warm shower, the promise of comfort food, and the solitude I thought I needed. But now, surrounded by the people who know and care about me, I realize I don't have to figure everything out alone. And as my sisters excitedly chatter about their journey here, I can't help but smile through my tears.

Sometimes, the path ahead may be uncertain, but having loved ones by your side can make all the difference.

As my sisters and Riley settle in the hotel room, I wipe away the remaining tears and offer them a shaky smile.

“Hey, you guys,” I say when the clamor has calmed down, my voice still a bit hoarse from the tears and emotion. “I can't believe you're here.”

Klaire, ever the wise and oldest of the three, gives me a knowing look. “Of course, we're here. We were worried sick about you. We told Riley we'd hitchhike up here if she wouldn't take us.”

I throw a look at Riley, who rolls her eyes. “I was coming without their threats. I just like to let them think they’re in charge. They behave better that way.”

Krystal bounces on the bed. “Yeah, we couldn’t just stay at home and wait. We had to come make sure you were okay. Besides, it totally got us a couple days out of school.”

I ruffle her hair. “Well, thanks, I think...”

Kenzie chimes in with her wide, innocent eyes. “I made you a ‘Welcome Back’ card!”

She thrusts a colorful card into my hands, and I can’t help but smile at the heartfelt effort she put into it. “Thank you, Kenzie. I love it.”

Riley gives me a reassuring pat on the back. “You can’t die without me, bitch. I wouldn’t survive without you.”

I sink onto the bed beside them, the warmth of their presence easing the turmoil within me. “I was worried. I kept trying to call you, but it kept going to voicemail.”

Riley scowls. “Service was shit at first, and then I lost my damn phone, and Klaire forgot hers.”

Klaire leans in, her expression mischievous. “Maybe now you’ll get a new phone.”

Krystal grins. “So, is the cute guy from the news the one you were stranded with?”

I blush, feeling caught off guard by her directness. “Yeah, he is.”

Kenzie gasps in exaggerated surprise. “Ooooh, he’s pretty. I like him.”

I chuckle, tickling her in the ribs. “Oh, you do, huh?”

Riley leans back, looking at me seriously. “You guys looked cozy at the hospital. Is there something going on there that we should know about? Someone took pictures of ya’ll at the hospital and leaked them everywhere,” she adds when she sees my confused look.

I don't have to answer before Klaire shouts, "I knew it! I told you there were totally vibes happening there. When do we get to meet him?"

"You slut!" Riley adds to the din, her high-pitched voice of outrage cutting above the rest. "Here I was worried about you, and you're bumping uglies with a sexy-hot mountain man?"

Kenzie's expression turns pensive. "What does bumping uglies mean?"

We all dissolve into fits of laughter as I put a hand to Riley's face and shove, knocking her back onto the bed. "You need to watch your big mouth," I warn.

The food finally arrives, and thankfully, I ordered a family-sized serving, so we split the eggplant Parm, and Riley gets some soft drinks from the machine at the end of the hall. As we eat, I entertain them with a recounting of the past few days (PG, of course, although Riley wiggles her eyebrows at me, indicating that the dirty details will be for later).

"Has there been any word from Kady?" I ask Riley when the girls are distracted and giggling over photos of Dean. "There wasn't any sign in the cabin other than something written on the mirror. Project Sentinel? You haven't heard of it, have you?"

Riley frowns. "I've never heard of it. And no, I haven't heard from her either."

My high mood at their appearance sinks a little because I'm no closer to finding Kady than I was when this all started.

Eventually, the room is filled with yawns and stretching. "Looks like it's bedtime for you three," I say.

Kenzie pouts. "But we wanna stay up and talk more!"

I chuckle. "We'll have plenty of time for that tomorrow. Right now, you need your beauty sleep."

After tucking them into the foldout couch, I sit beside Riley on the bed. She gives me a knowing smile. "Feeling better?"

I nod, feeling a sense of clarity settling over me. “Yeah, I am. And having you guys here... it means the world to me.”

Riley wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Now, about this Dean guy...”

Just as I start to explain, another knock at the door echoes through the room. My heart skips a beat, and I exchange a puzzled glance with Riley.

“I wasn’t expecting anyone else,” I murmur, my brow furrowing. A part of me hopes it’s Dean on the other side of the door.

Riley gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “It’s probably just housekeeping, but be careful.”

But my heart sinks as I cautiously peer through the peephole. Instead of the welcome sight of Dean, two figures I never thought I’d see together are standing there—my estranged father and Garrett, my ex-fiancé, the man who shattered my heart after cheating on me.

“Dad? Garrett?” I stammer, shock and disbelief flooding my veins. I yank open the door. “What the hell are you two doing here?” I demand.

My father shifts uncomfortably, his expression a mix of guilt and longing. A young woman with a full, rounded belly stands behind him. This must be the fiancée he was talking about. “Kenna, we... we heard about the crash and wanted to make sure you’re okay. Klaire gave me your room number,” he says at my questioning glance.

Garrett avoids my gaze. “I know I messed up, Kenna. I just needed to see you and make sure you’re all right.”

Riley steps up beside me, a protective presence. I glance back at her, my mind racing. What are they doing here? Why now, after everything that’s happened?

“Kenna, I know I’ve made mistakes,” my father continues, his voice wavering. “But I’ve missed you. I want to make things right.”

Garrett finally looks up, his eyes filled with regret. “And I... I can’t change what I did, but I want to apologize.”

My emotions churn like a storm, memories and hurt resurfacing. But beneath the anger and pain, I feel a strange sense of detachment. The intensity of the past few days has shifted my perspective, and I look at my father and Garrett as flawed individuals rather than sources of my anguish.

Riley’s presence grounds me, her silent support a lifeline. “You mean, you two saw the news and figured she could be your cash cow. Why do you think she never told you about the money? If that’s why you’re here, you can get your asses home. ’Cause she’s got a new boy toy with lots of big guns.”

I give Riley a wide-eyed look of censure, and she grins back at me. I take a deep breath, my voice steadier than I anticipated. “I appreciate your concern, Dad, Garrett. But right now, I need some time. I’ve been through a lot, and I need to focus on myself. Dad, if you really want to be there for me, you need to start sincerely trying to be around for the girls. I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive you, but they’re still young and could use their father.”

My father’s eyes glisten with unshed tears. “I understand. Just... We’re going to get a room in town for the night. Maybe we can have breakfast or something before we head back.”

“That’ll be up to the girls to decide. Later.” I turn to Garrett, my lips pressed into a line. “I’m not exactly sure why you’re here. I was serious when I ended things. We’re not getting back together. I suppose I appreciate the gesture, but I think it’s best if we go our own way from here.”

Garrett nods, a mix of sadness and resignation in his eyes. “Yeah, I figured. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I nod at both of them. “We need to get some sleep. Ya’ll be safe now.”

As they turn to leave, Riley gently closes the door behind them. I slump against the door, my emotions swirling in a confusing mix. The unexpected encounter leaves me feeling

vulnerable and exposed, but it also reinforces the importance of the choices I've made in the wake of the crash.

Riley's hand rests on my back, her presence a steady force. "Men. What goes through their minds, I'll never know."

I meet her gaze, a mixture of determination and weariness in my eyes. "Thanks for having my back."

She smiles, pride evident in her expression. "That's what I'm here for. But from my point of view, you handled yourself just fine."

There's a third knock at the door, and the girls erupt into veritable gales of laughter from where they're trying and failing to sleep on the bed. To Riley, I say, "This better not be Mom, or I'll lose my shit."

But it's not Mom when I peer through the peephole.

In fact, it's the last person I expect.

I open the door. "What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DEAN

AFTER SHE LEAVES, I can't settle and don't sleep worth a damn without her next to me. When I do manage to pass out, I have nightmares about Georgia and Penny and then about Kenna getting shot and me not being able to save her. I can't bear being in the house without Kenna. I leave later that night after tossing and turning. Gramps is passed out, so I don't need to worry about him. He's also got a brand-new watch that he can use to call me if there's an emergency.

Because I have nothing else to do and want to keep busy, I head to the airport to clear my head. Lawrence usually doesn't mind if I tool around in the hangar or even take one of the older birds out for a flight. The dimly lit space feels different today, a sense of urgency hanging in the air that has my skin buzzing and my heart pumping with awareness. I have my Glock strapped to my shoulder holster under my jacket just in case, but I hope to fuck I won't need it.

That hope is dashed the second I step into the main office area and hear the terse whispered voices lifted in argument. I know better than to write anything off as coincidence, and my guard is already up, so I pull out the gun, just in case. Someone's tried to kill me twice in the last week. I'd rather not make it a third time. The voices quiet, and my hackles rise. What the hell is going on?

I find Lawrence shredding paperwork, his usually composed demeanor replaced by a hint of panic. His generous face is flushed pink, and sweat stains are under his pits and down his back.

It hits me then, like a freight train. Gunfire wouldn't have been able to bring down the helicopter. I mean, there's a slight chance, but the odds are so slim it's next to impossible. But tampering? There are several ways to tamper with an engine to cause a delayed fire to start. Lawrence was the only one who had complete access. He was the one who readied the

helicopter for us. He knew where we were going. My mouth goes dry. Lawrence was the one who tried to kill us. Does he have some sort of tie to the drug traffickers?

Fuck me sideways.

And I just walked right up and delivered myself on a platter. Thank fucking God Kenna is safe at the lodge. Maybe I can manage to sneak out without drawing his attention.

That's what I think until a gun presses into my temple. "What do we have here?"

Lawrence glances up and blanches when he sees me. I see the man next to me out of the corner of my eye and recognize him instantly. He's the man who shot Kenna.

I narrow my eyes at him. "You're going to regret that," I say in a low voice.

Lawrence sighs and wipes sweat from his forehead. "Bring him in, Tommy. Take that gun away, too. We don't want him getting trigger-happy."

"You got it, boss." Tommy jabs the gun into my back and says, "Drop it, bitch, unless you want to eat a bullet."

I loosen my grip on the gun, and Tommy takes it, tucking it into his waistband. "Move," he orders and shoves me forward.

"I'm sorry it's come to this, Dean. I've known your family a long time, and your grandfather has been a close, personal friend for years. Trust me, if there was another way..." His voice trails off as he wipes sweat from his flushed brow.

"So that cook spot was yours?" I ask, my gaze narrowing on the other man standing nearby.

His presence sends shivers down my spine. He shot at Kenna during the helicopter and has been haunting my thoughts since. He's got a cold meanness in his eyes that tells me he's the kind of guy who gets off on the power of killing a man. All I can think of is not letting either of them get anywhere near Kenna. Even if I have to die trying.

Lawrence's eyes flicker with guilt, but it doesn't seem sincere. "I knew when you were going up there, but I couldn't let you come back. And I couldn't stop you without raising suspicion. That damn woman would have been relentless. I know the type. I'm sorry it has to be this way, but I can't let either of you live."

My fists clench at his words, anger and disbelief warring within me. This man, whom I trusted and saw as a mentor, was involved in a criminal enterprise that put my and Kenna's lives in danger.

As Lawrence's confession hangs in the air, the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. The crash and the shooting were all his desperate bids to protect his own secrets. It had nothing to do with Jamie or his crazy conspiracies. I nearly laugh at the realization. That had just been a shitty coincidence. What fucking luck.

My chest tightens, anger and fear swirling within me as Lawrence's words sink in. Kenna is still in danger, and I can't waste another second. I step closer to Lawrence, my voice trembling with rage and desperation. Tommy jerks on my shirt, but I ignore him.

"If you think for one fucking second I'll let you get near her, you've got another thing coming."

"This fucking idiot," Tommy sneers. "He's got a gun to his head, and he's still making threats."

Ignoring him, I speak to Lawrence. "How do you expect to get away with something like this, Lawrence?" I have to think of a way to get out of here. I have to get to Kenna. Dammit, I never should have let her go in the first place. I knew it felt wrong the moment she pulled away.

Desperation makes Lawrence's face slick with sweat, but his eyes narrow with impatience. It makes my skin crawl knowing I worked with someone like this and never had a clue. "I read up on you. About your team. Your buddy Callum's brother committed suicide, didn't he? Pathetic. But if it worked for him, it'll work for you. It's twenty-two that die

every day, isn't it? You'll just become another statistic. Sad. But no one will care in the end. Not really."

My blood starts to boil. "And Gramps? He'll never believe I could commit suicide. He'll know something is wrong."

"He's an old man who just had a stroke. Finding your body will be too much for him. Give the old man a heart attack."

"You've really thought this through, haven't you?"

"I'm a desperate man, Dean. I'll do whatever I have to."

"And Kenna?"

Lawrence's expression turns impassive, the coldness in his eyes chilling me to the bone. "Margaret is on her way to get Kenna," he reveals, his voice disturbingly calm. "The trauma of the crash was too much for you. You'll kill her and then yourself. Tragic. Tragic." *Fucking psycho.*

I step even closer, our faces now inches apart. "And what happens to you, Tommy, and Margaret after all of this?" I demand.

Lawrence's lips twitch in something that might be a smile, but it's devoid of any warmth. "We're disappearing, Dean. We've arranged everything to ensure we're untraceable. By the time anyone realizes what's happened, we'll be long gone."

Then the gun crashes into my head, and I black out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KENNA

THE GIRLS HAVE MOSTLY PASSED out, so I step into the doorway instead of letting Margaret in. “Is everything okay?” I ask, worried about Dean and Luke.

“You have to come with me. It’s Luke. He’s in the hospital again. I can’t get ahold of Dean.” Her voice is frantic, and she’s near tears.

My heart leaps into my throat. “Of course, let me get some shoes. I’ll be right back.”

“Hurry,” she urges.

I close the door behind me, leaving Margaret pacing in the hallway, and move around the hotel room as quickly and silently as possible.

“Kenna? What’s wrong?”

I slip into a pair of sneakers. I don’t have time to change out of Dean’s sweats and T-shirt that I threw on after my shower. “It’s Dean’s grandpa. He’s hurt, and she can’t get ahold of Dean. I have to go. Can you watch the girls?”

Riley hands me her new phone. “Take this in case you need it. Call me here at the hotel if you need backup.”

“Thanks. I’m going to try to call Dean.”

I dial the number from memory as I tug on my jacket. But the voice that answers isn’t Dean. It’s Luke.

“Hello,” he says in a cheerful, ambling tone. Not at all the sound of a man at the center of a medical emergency.

“Luke?” I ask, dumbfounded. My mind grinds to a halt, and I feel like I’m back in the mountains, my thoughts frozen in my head.

“Kenna, sugar, is that you? I was wondering where you went. C’mere, Sunny, and eat this here tuna.”

“Luke, are you okay?” I ask, my voice breathless.

“Fit as a fiddle, no matter what that damn doctor says,” he answers.

“But Margaret said you’re sick.”

“Margaret? I haven’t seen Margaret since you two got back. Are you sure you heard right?”

There’s no doubt about what she said. She said Luke was in the hospital again. “Where are you?”

“At home feeding Sunny. Is everything okay, sugar? You sound upset.”

I take a breath. “I’m fine. Where’s Dean? This is his number, isn’t it?”

“That’s right. But he gave me one of those fancy watches connected to his phone account. He didn’t answer, so I answered in case he’s flying and it’s an emergency.”

“Flying?”

“Ye-ep,” he says, drawing out the word. “He went up to the airport. Couldn’t sleep, is what he said. I tried to sleep, but this doggone cat kept yowling until I fed him.”

“Thanks, Luke. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Later, sugar,” he says before he disconnects.

“What’s wrong?” Riley asks as soon as I hang up.

“Margaret wanted me to come with her, said Luke was at the hospital. But that was him on the phone, and he’s fine. Why would she lie?”

“That’s freaky. I have no idea.”

“She’s married to Dean’s boss, who owns the airfield. That’s where Luke says Dean is right now. I have to go to him.”

Riley’s eyes go wide. “Girl, are you sure? That could be dangerous. Something about this doesn’t feel right.”

“What the fuck do we do? Dean would have answered his phone. If he’s at the airport, he may be in trouble. We have to

help him.”

“I’ll get the girls into the bathroom, and then you tell the old bat to come in. When she closes the door, we’ll jump her. I’ll keep her here with the girls, and you go get your man. Maybe she’s having a medical event herself. It’s been a stressful few days. I’ll call the cops just in case.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hell, yes. I’m not letting anything happen to you or your sisters.”



I’m shaking on the drive to the airport. I have Riley’s phone for GPS, and she called the police, who naturally told me to stay put. But hell if that’s going to happen. If Dean really is in trouble, I can’t leave him alone. If he’s even still alive.

Please, God, let him be alive.

I’m really tired of him being in danger. After this, I’m going to keep him in a bubble where he can’t get hurt.

The airport is eerily quiet as I pull to a stop at the long driveway that leads to the hangars. I didn’t even consider that the damn gate would be locked, and it is. There’s barbed wire at the top, so there’s no way I’m climbing over. And your girl didn’t pack any wire cutters, so I’m not sneaking my way in. My only other hope is to ram the motherfucking SUV through the gate and hope a surprise attack catches them off guard.

I scan the facility and see lights on where I think the office is located. If I gun it through the gate and head straight for the office, maybe this psycho plan will work? If we’re lucky. Dean may die if I don’t.

I gun the engine from the road, launching the SUV forward with a shriek of tires. I grit my teeth as I barrel toward the gate and brace myself before impacting the steel barrier as it

crumples like paper mâché. I feel the impact through the soles of my feet, and the wheel vibrates in my hands.

Glass shards fly in all directions. I hear the ear-splitting sound of metal hitting asphalt and feel a jolt as the SUV bounces back. I keep my foot on the accelerator, driving into the parking lot until the SUV finally shudders to a halt in front of the office which is lit up like a beacon.

I take a deep breath. Heart pounding, I catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror, and my momentary relief turns to horror. Blood is streaming from a gash on my forehead, where I slammed into the window during the crash. My shirt is soaked through with sweat and blood, and my knuckles are white from gripping the wheel so tightly.

Shaking my head, I have no time to waste. I launch myself from the vehicle and sprint toward the sound of raised voices in the office, a tire iron from the trunk my only weapon.

I see Dean's face first, bloody and surprised, from where he's sprawled on the ground just inside the office. He's restrained, his arms pulled tight behind his back. Some guy I don't recognize holds a gun to Dean's head, and I reach him first. He raises his gun at me, but the shot goes wild as the tire iron connects to his skull with a sickening *crunch*. He crumples to the floor with a thud, and Dean launches unsteadily to his feet.

"Gun," he orders. I search the ground, then locate it on the floor. My hands shake, but I point it at the other guy as Dean shuffles to my side. "Are you hurt?" he demands.

"No, I'm fine. Are you okay?" I ask as I untie his hands.

"No, I think you gave me a fuckin' heart attack."

The man moves, and I jerk the gun back in his direction. "Don't even think about it, asshole." As though to punctuate my order, the sound of sirens draws closer. Relief washes over me, making me a little dizzy. I sway, and Dean pulls me into his arms.

"I am going to spank your ass," he says with deadly calm.

"What did I do?"

“First, it’ll be because you like it, you little brat. Second, because you should have stayed away from here.” Saliva flies from his furious lips, and I pull away from him.

“Hey! I saved your life. You should be thanking me right about now.” Seriously, this is the thanks I get?

“They could have killed you. What happened to Margaret?”

“Riley and the girls have her at the hotel. The cops are probably there, too, actually. So if you’re not going to thank me for being your hero, I’m going back to get some beauty sleep.”

The cops burst in, and chaos reigns for a few minutes as they sort through the mess we’ve found ourselves in. We’re checked over by paramedics, and at some point, Riley and my sisters show up. Even my dad and his fiancée. Garrett doesn’t, thank God. I give grudging introductions as the EMTs patch Dean up, and even though I’m pissed at him, I hover to make sure he’s given the all-clear.

We’re instructed to come to the station to make statements the following day, but I’m assuming they’ve found enough corroborating evidence Dean’s boss was trying to destroy and that Margaret is singing like a canary, so we’re good to leave.

“Let’s go, I’m wiped,” I tell Riley and the girls.

A hand on my arm stops me. “You can come back to my place,” Dean says in that authoritative-asshole tone that makes me want to square up at him.

“I’ve got a room at the lodge,” I say out of pure stubbornness.

“That’s him!” Kenzie says at a near shout. “The one Kenna was bumping uglies with!”

My face burns as everyone in the immediate vicinity, including reporters who have shown up on the scene and my *father*, pivots in our direction. Riley is of no help because she’s guffawing so hard tears are running down her face, and Klaire and Krystal are filming with their phones. Dean is grinning ear to ear. Of course, he is.

“You told your sisters about me,” he growls in my ear.

“Under duress,” I say between my teeth.

“I want to see his house,” says one of the girls.

“Me, too!” says the others.

“Yeah, Ken. Don’t be mean,” Riley adds.

“Traitor,” I tell them.

Dean pulls me into his arms, and his hands slide into my hair, forcing me to look into his eyes. Damn him. He cradles my head, and the nearness of his body makes me melt despite my irritation. He nips at my lips, and my eyes fall closed.

“Please come home with me, Kenna,” he says, his lips moving against my mouth. “I have to thank you properly for saving my life for the second time.”

“Kay,” I answer and twine my arms around his neck to kiss him more deeply.

I can hear the girls cheering, Riley whooping, and catcalls from the reporters. But I don’t care.

When we get to his house and finally get everyone settled, he does thank me.

Multiple times.

Enthusiastically.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DEAN

THE NEXT MORNING, the sound of my security system rouses me from a deep sleep. Kenna burrows more deeply into the covers next to me and shoves her cold nose against my shoulder. The two blocks of ice she calls feet press in between my thighs for warmth. I hiss out a breath and feel her lips shape into a smile against my skin. Instead of complaining, I pull her more tightly against me.

“Shouldn’t you get that?” she asks when she hears the doorbell start to ring.

“Nothing in heaven or hell could get me out of this bed with you,” I say, my voice gruff with sleep.

She giggles. “I wish we could stay here all day.”

“If we didn’t have your sisters to entertain, we could.”

She slaps my shoulder. “True, but I want them here. I don’t want any of you to leave my side ever again.”

Then she falls silent. The thought of her going home pierces the cocoon of intimacy we always seem to experience in this room. Like our time on the mountain, there’s a ticking clock on how long she can stay here. The girls have to go back to school soon. They have a home and a life there. And I’m not always a man who can change my ways so easily, that I’ve learned a thousand times over.

The doorbell rings again. This time back-to-back, like someone’s leaning on the damn thing. I’m halfway tempted to tear it out of the wall. The last thing we need is Frank showing up or more reporters. Our story has gone viral several times over now, and the public seems to think it’s juicy as hell. I don’t mind the invasion of my privacy as much as I once would have. Everything seems a little easier, a little more bearable, with Kenna’s sunshine to dull the darkness.

“Seriously, if you don’t answer it, I will,” she mumbles into my shoulder. “They’re going to wake up the heathens soon,” she warns when I don’t move. “Please? It could be the delivery guy with my new phone.”

That has me sighing, and I roll out of the bed and pull on a pair of sweats. She’s been fretting about not having a phone in case Kady tries to reach out. “They better be dying because if not, I may kill ’em,” I mutter under my breath as I stalk to the front door.

“No guns,” she shouts from behind me, but I hear the laughter in her voice reminding me of how I greeted her when she showed up on my doorstep. I don’t get the gun, but it rests behind the door, just in case. What? A man can apparently never be too prepared, considering the number of times we’ve nearly died recently.

I forgot to check the security app, so I’m struck speechless when I open the door to Ford and Callum standing on my front porch. Ford is bigger than I remember—dude must live in the gym—but the hardness that used to make him seem so unapproachable is gone. Callum has always been a bit of a daredevil, but he looks relaxed and even... content? I thought I’d never want to see them again. Thought it would bring up too many bad memories. Maybe a part of me always blamed them a little for what happened to Georgia and Penny, but the second I lay eyes on them, it’s like finding a part of me that I didn’t know was missing.

“Guess they didn’t manage to kill you after all,” Ford grunts.

“Must not have tried hard enough,” Callum says with a grin.

“Come in, you fuckers,” I say and open the door wide for them.

They both give me slaps on the back that may as well be massive bear hugs. Gramps hobbles down the hallway to his customary chair by the fire, Sunny following close behind. Kenna appears next, a thick blanket wrapped around her. She

rocks to a stop, and her eyes go wide when she sees the two freaks of nature taking up most of the room in the entry.

I go to her and sling an arm around her waist. “Kenna, I’d like you to meet Ford and Cal, two of my buddies from the Marines.”

She meets my eyes as her mouth makes a little O of surprise and then gives them a little wave. “Hey, guys. Good morning. Do ya’ll want some coffee?”

“Wouldn’t say no to a cup,” Ford answers. He holds up a package I didn’t realize he was holding. “I think this is for you.”

Kenna squeals and retrieves it from his hands before she bounces to the kitchen to start pouring coffee.

“Black, please. You’re a goddess,” Cal says, sharing a smile with me. “We drove up here with the baby, and let me tell you. I thought I knew what lack of sleep was before.” He shudders. “Traveling is a nightmare. Now I get all those times you talked about Penny.”

Hearing her name doesn’t hurt as viciously as it used to, and suddenly, I remember that Ford and Cal had been like godfathers to her. Maybe I wasn’t the only one who missed her. Lost her. They cared about her, too. I’d just been so mired in grief that I hadn’t realized it until now.

Kenna must notice that I’m choked up because she says, “Try having three at a time. I didn’t think I’d ever sleep again when my sisters were born.”

“You have kids?” Ford asks with a sidelong glance at me that I ignore.

“Three sisters,” Kenna replies and shudders. “If you stay here for a while, you might see them rise like the walking dead.”

“We’d like to,” Cal says, cutting a glance at me. “Our girls are back at the lodge, letting us catch up for a bit. We’d like to stay for a while if that’s okay.”

You know, I thought having this many people around would make me feel suffocated. But the thought of having Kenna and her family, plus Ford's and Cal's... feels like home again.

"Why don't you invite them over later for lunch or something? Have a couple beers. Smoke something. I've got a mean setup out back."

"Hell fucking *yes*," Ford says with a comical level of relief. Man, do I remember those sleepless nights.

I chuckle. "It's a plan then."

"And you can catch us up on how the hell you crashed another helicopter," Ford interjects.

Kenna looks up from where she's pouring coffee into mugs. "*Another* one?" she sputters.

"Seriously, dude, you have a big fucking mouth," Cal says, shaking his head and accepting a mug.

"It was only one time," I say to Kenna. "During training. And it wasn't my fault."

"Sure," Ford mutters, and I shoot him a killing look.

"You know I should be shocked to learn ours wasn't the first one you crashed. You must have nine lives, pookie," she says, bringing me my cup.

"Pookie?" Ford and Cal say simultaneously.

"Don't ask," I warn them.

Kenna is still laughing as she starts setting up her phone. Ford, Cal, and I catch up, moving to the living room where they sprawl on the couches, and Kenna takes a seat on my lap in one of the big chairs. I play idly with her hair until she sits sharply up.

Wincing, I say, "What is it?"

Her voice is breathless when she answers, "I have a voicemail. It's Kady."

She fumbles with the screen to play it out loud. *“Kenna, honey, I’m sorry for worrying you. I’ve seen the news, and I can’t believe you fucking crashed a helicopter. I’m glad you’re okay, and I hope you’re safe now. I promise I’ll make it up to you. I just wanted to let you know I’m with Jamie, and we’re okay. I think. Staying low. If you’re with Dean like the news says, I know you’ll be safe. I—”* She cuts off, and then there’s the sound of a male voice. *“Jamie says to tell the others he has proof that he was right and that we’ll meet up as soon as it’s safe.”*

Kenna’s body relaxes against me. “She’s safe. Thank God.” There’s a pause, and then, “I’m going to kill her.”

“That’s good news,” I say against the skin of her neck.

“The best,” she answers.

To Cal and Ford, I say, “I guess this means Jamie wasn’t making up that something had gone down with Tate.”

They both shake their head. Ford says, “Good luck finding him, though.”

“Project Sentinel,” Kenna shouts suddenly.

“You okay, babe?” I say.

“That was on the mirror at Jamie’s cabin. I tried to tell you, but you bit my head off, remember? Does that mean anything to you guys?”

Ford and Cal share a look. “Isn’t that what was on that stuff in the box Tate sent you?” Cal asks Ford.

“Box?” I ask.

“Yeah. Tate’s mom sent Ford a box of memorabilia and shit, memory cards.” Cal takes out his phone and pulls up an image of an old box full of papers and odds and ends. “One of them was labeled Project Sentinel.”

“Do you think that has something to do with why they went missing?” Kenna asks.

“Worth checking out,” I tell her.

She spins in my lap, throwing her legs over mine and cupping my cheeks. “Well, can we look at it? Maybe it has something to do with where they’re going.”

“Is this how we look?” Ford asks Cal, and I flip them off.

“Of course we can. It’s about time we figured what the hell happened back then and finally put Tate’s ghost to rest. Besides, we still have to find your sister.”

Cal makes gagging sounds.

“What about the girls?” she asks.

“They can stay with Riley and Gramps here for a few hours, right?”

“Where did you keep everything?” Kenna says to Ford and Cal, her eyes sparkling with determination.

I kiss her shoulder, feeling for the first time in a long time that I’ve gotten back part of what I lost before. My brothers. My girl. A future.

A future almost as bright as her sunshine.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A FEW DAYS EARLIER,
THUNDERHEAD MOUNTAIN, NC

“I CAN’T BELIEVE I trusted you!”

The scream wouldn’t be so harrowing if it hadn’t come from the mouth of the woman I love. “You can trust me, darlin’.”

“I should have shot you when I had the chance. This is going too far. You’re crazy. You’re a lunatic. This can’t be real. For goodness’ sake.”

“We just need to lay low for a couple of weeks, and then we’ll sort this out.”

“I mean it,” she shouts when I try the bathroom door again. “Stay away from me, or I’ll... I’ll beat your brains in.”

I’d kiss her if I wasn’t certain she’d bite my tongue off if I tried. “If you’ll calm down, we can talk about this all normal-like.” She’s not normally this spicy, and I have to say, I’m enjoyin’ this whole other side to her.

“I don’t want to talk about shit, you psycho. I want you to let me go so I can see my psychiatrist for a new prescription. Apparently, I also need antipsychotics in addition to my anxiety and depression medication.”

I press my forehead against the rough wood of the door separating us. *Goddamn*, I missed her. “You don’t need meds. You’re fine.”

“I don’t think so. It’s not fine when the man you love kidnaps you, and it’s even *more* not fine when *someone* is *trying to kill them*.”

“How many times do I have to tell you I kidnapped you to keep you safe?”

Her snort can be heard across the cabin. “Right. *Safe*. What is this? The Lifetime Channel? People don’t kidnap other people like this. This is real life. Stuff like that doesn’t happen.”

“You do when you think people are out to kill the people you love.”

Deafening silence. I always worry when Kady goes quiet. It’s when she’s the most dangerous. If she’s hootin’ and hollerin’, I can get a bead on her, but when she’s quiet, she’s either sad and about to start bawlin’, or she’s pissed the hell off and you better make sure you’ve got your junk in protective gear.

“Kady?” I call out.

No answer.

“Kady?”

I press my ear to the door, a risky move, but so is letting her concoct some mad and desperate escape attempt. Knocking yields more of the same results. I could break it down, but that’s what she may be expecting.

The sound of breaking glass pierces the air, a sudden sharp note in the tense silence. My heart leaps to my throat, the unexpected noise jolting me into high alert. What the hell is she doing now?

“Kady?” I call out, my voice tight with concern.

Still no response.

A rush of adrenaline surges through me as I slowly approach the door, my senses on edge. What if she’s hurt? Or worse, what if she’s trying to escape? I grip the doorknob, hesitating for a split second before turning it and pushing the door open cautiously.

And there she is, standing amidst the shattered remains of a window, a wild mixture of emotions playing across her face.

Her hands are cut and bleeding from the broken glass, but the fire in her eyes captures my attention the most.

“What the hell are you doing, Kady?” I demand, my voice tinged with exasperation. “You’re only hurting yourself.”

She meets my gaze head-on, her fierce determination undiminished. It’s as if she’s ready to take on the world, even if it means cutting herself in the process.

I take a hesitant step forward, my heart aching as I see the pain etched into her features. “I just... I need to get out of here, Jamie. I can’t take this anymore. I can’t be trapped like this.”

My anger begins to waver, replaced by a growing understanding of the turmoil she’s experiencing. This whole situation has pushed her to the brink, and I’m the cause.

“Katydid,” I say gently, approaching her more cautiously now. “I know it’s a lot to accept. But please believe me, I did this to keep you safe.”

She lets out a bitter, incredulous laugh, her voice a mix of anger and despair. “Again, safe? You call this safe? Kidnapping me and locking me up?”

My hand twitches, aching to reach out to her, but I know better than to force contact when she’s like this. “I didn’t have a choice, Kady. You were in danger, and I couldn’t bear the thought of anything happenin’ to you.”

She studies me for a long moment, her expression a jumble of doubt, hurt, and longing. “I know it’s hard to believe,” I continue, my voice softening, “but I promise I’ll explain everything once things settle down. Just give me a chance to make this right.”

The room seems to pulse with unresolved tension as her silence hangs in the air. I can almost hear the gears turning in her mind, deciding what to believe and what to do next.

“Fine,” she whispers, her shoulders slumping as her fiery resolve seems to ebb away. “But you’ve got some serious explaining to do, Jamie. And it better be damn good.”

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. It's not over yet, but at least she's willing to hear me out. As the weight of the situation begins to lift, I grab a first aid kit, my focus shifting from the psychological mess to her bleeding hands.

In this moment, there's a glimmer of hope amidst the chaos. A possibility of understanding and forgiveness. As I gently tend to her wounds, I can only hope that our journey to resolution has finally begun.

“We'll have to start at the beginning.”

BONUS EPILOGUE

To read an exclusive epilogue from Aviator, please [sign up for my newsletter](#).

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The full epilogue is also available in the [paperback](#).

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