

CAMI CHECKETTS

# ROMANCING *The* MOUNTAIN

SURVIVE THE ROMANCE #4



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# ROMANCING THE MOUNTAIN

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*Survive the Romance # 4*

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*Birch River*  
PUBLISHING

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Edited by Daniel Coleman and Ceara Nobles

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## FREE BOOK

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## PROLOGUE

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**E**merald Taylor paced her spacious office and stared unseeingly out the window at the Dallas skyline. The glass buildings reflected the sunset in brilliant reds and oranges. Her boss, Axel Dexter, had been fully supportive of the adventures she'd planned for eight ex-Navy SEALs and eight charitable, impressive women as their counterparts. They'd both had fun brainstorming and doing a little matchmaking along the way—okay, sometimes more than a little. So far, Axel had rewarded two of the three women with half a million dollars. Two of the three couples had also fallen in love, which in Emerald's mind was more important than the money. The men were paid whether the quest was successful or not; Axel was former military and his passion was honoring and rewarding veterans.

Emerald had worked hard to provide unique, challenging situations for each couple. Some of the adventures were more difficult than others and some unforeseen dangers had come up, but so far everything had gone brilliantly. Her favorite moment had been when their first military hero, Captain Britton Grady, gave up his half a million for his counterpart's charity to benefit children. He and Tess's love story was beautiful. Emerald had sobbed as she'd watched the highlights on film.

Chewing at her lip, she kept pacing. What would Axel say when she asked if she could change the upcoming week's plan? She knew he'd agree to most any suggestion she had, but would he see right through her idea, straight to her longing for one Ace Fuller?

She kept herself busy planning and overseeing the adventure reality show, and things were always fast-paced with Axel's life and managing his charities. But no matter what she did, she couldn't get Ace's blue eyes and sweet smile out of her mind. Maybe sweet was an odd way to think of a tough military hero, but Ace had seemed innocent and kind and ultra-appealing. He was a far cry from most men she interacted with; men who were either too suave and thought she'd instantly fall for them, or too demanding and thought they deserved a "trophy" like her. Just because she'd modeled to get through college did not mean all she could do was smile and look pretty.

"What are you doing here on a Saturday night?"

Emerald whirled around.

Axel leaned against the doorframe of her office. He looked impeccable and handsome as ever in a tailored suit that she'd ordered for him, his blondish-brown hair styled perfectly, and his blue eyes were ... somber. That was out of character for Axel. He was always exuberant, sometimes over the top with energy and excitement.

She swallowed hard. "I could ask the same. Aren't you supposed to be on a date?"

He shrugged, walked in, and sank onto her couch. "Took her home early."

Emerald folded her arms and cocked her head to the side. "You take them all home early lately. What's going on, Axel?"

"Just never the right fit for me." He peered up perceptively at her. "What about you? Men beg for your number or a dinner date and you always turn them down."

She shook her head and admitted in a quiet voice, "Maybe I really am the ice princess."

A few online sites had taken to calling her that, speculating why she and Axel hadn't married yet or why she couldn't keep his attention on her and not all the other women he dated. Nobody wanted to believe they were only friends. Apparently



a billionaire and his executive assistant being “friends” made for a boring story.

“Nah.” He patted the couch by him. “You’re a sweetheart. You just haven’t found the right one.”

She walked over and sat by him. He slung his arm around her and pulled her into his side. She automatically nestled into him. When she first started working for him, she wished she had romantic feelings for him. He was impressive, handsome, fun, and thoughtful, but it had never been that way for them. No matter the perception from the outside world, they were truly like brother and sister.

They sat in silence for a few beats, then both said at the same time, “I’ve been thinking.”

Laughing, Emerald pulled away, turning so she could face him. “You first.”

Axel’s grin was restored; a sparkle lit his blue eyes. “First you have to promise you won’t tease me.”

She studied him. “I’ll promise if you do the same.”

“Deal.” They shook on it. Axel pushed a hand through his hair, disheveling the perfect look, and rushed out, “I want to go on the week eight rafting adventure with Kinsley Grady, Kane Gibbons, and whatever girl is scheduled.”

Emerald’s mouth fell open. Axel wanted the same thing she did. Well, not the same, but close. “Amelia Jensen,” she supplied. “Her charity is Emotion Overload.”

He nodded. “Yeah, the call center for anybody with emotional stress needing someone to talk to. She seems great.”

Emerald hid a smile. She and Axel might be having a similar issue. “She does seem great—fabulous, beautiful, accomplished ... but yet you couldn’t even remember her name.”

His eyes widened, obviously caught. “What can I say? I’ve always wanted to go on a weeklong rafting adventure. I need a break from how hard you make me work.”

She laughed. He was more driven and energetic than any person she knew. “Uh-huh. So spending time with Kinsley Grady, Brit’s only sister, has nothing to do with it?”

Instead of looking embarrassed, his eyes lit up. “She’s the one for me, Em. I just have to get her to see it.”

Emerald grinned. “There isn’t an available woman alive who wouldn’t fall to your charms, my friend.”

He let out a sigh. “That’s what the media claims, but Kinsley has me firmly in the friend zone. I’m hoping a week together will change her mind. I can be the camera guy for the adventure.”

“Axel, nobody wants you behind a camera. Having you on the show as part of the adventure, not just at the beginning and end, will give us our highest ratings ever.”

He laughed. “It’s all about the ratings for you.”

She smiled. They both knew that these adventures and the opportunity to give back had nothing to do with ratings, but Emerald still had to think about such things as the attention brought to these women’s charities could be even more important to their causes than the money.

“Okay, okay.” He held up his hands. “I’ll try to get shots of me, but I’d rather narrate and use the GoPro while we’re on the raft. I’ll set up cameras when we’re at camp so they can see this handsome mug.” He lifted his eyebrows.

“Your devoted fans would eat that up, and it’s a perfect idea for the final week of the show. Turn on the charm, my friend. I’m sure Kinsley will fall for you.”

“Here’s hoping.” He put out his fist and she bumped it with hers. “So what was your idea?”

She got a rush of butterflies but wasn’t sure why. Axel had just admitted to being gone over Brit’s sister and begged to go on one of the trips. He’d also promised not to tease her. “I want to be a cameraman too,” she rushed out. “Or woman.”

“Oh yeah?” His eyes were lit with questions. “Which week?”

“The next one.”

They’d had to push the future adventures back a week, so this one—traipsing through the Colorado mountains—would be the first week in June. There’d still be some snow and chilly temps, but it would give the participants a better chance of not wading through thigh-high snow drifts.

Emerald couldn’t meet his eyes as she said, “Jaycee Crane and Ace Fuller. Jaycee’s the one raising awareness and money to save endangered species.”

“Oh yeah. And what is Ace doing ...?” He pumped his eyebrows.

“You promised not to tease,” she shot at him.

He tried to look humble, but it fell short. “Sorry. But I already shared my deepest secret and admitted that I’m hopelessly gone over Kinsley. Is that why you’re going? Do you *love* Ace?”

She shook her head, smiling. “I hardly know him. I don’t love him.”

“But you want to get to know him.”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“He’s not the most handsome or smooth of the group. Is it the blue eyes or the tough body that drew you in?” Axel crossed his legs, put both hands on his knee, and a silly expression on his face.

“Both, if you must know, but it’s his smile that I can’t get out of my head. He seemed so kind, so unassuming.”

Axel was right. Ace wasn’t classically handsome, but he was the best-looking one to her. He had an appeal and draw she’d never seen before.

Axel laughed but then caught himself. He spread his hands and uncrossed his legs. “We’re a pair, aren’t we?”

“What do you mean?”

“You could have any man in the world, but you’re willing to put yourself in a dangerous, uncomfortable situation

traipsing through a muddy mountain range to get to know some guy because of his kind smile. I could have any woman in the world, yet I pine for the one who keeps rejecting me.”

She tilted her head and said, “There’s one thing off about your observation.”

“What’s that?”

“I lied earlier. You can’t have any available woman in the world. You only get dates because I set them up for you.”

He chuckled and then it turned into full-blown laughter. She was teasing him, of course. Axel Dexter was one of the top eligible bachelors in the world. She couldn’t imagine why Brit’s sister could turn him down, unless Kinsley only had platonic feelings for Axel like Emerald did. She didn’t dare mention that idea to him.

As she laughed with her friend and boss, her thoughts swung to Ace. A week traipsing through the mountains with him. She prayed he was as kind and impressive as she had been daydreaming about.

She could hardly wait to see him again.

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## CHAPTER ONE

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**E**arly Memorial Day morning, McKenzie “Ace” Fuller waited impatiently at the Rocky Mountain Metropolitan Airport near Denver. He’d been told to bring nothing and to wear comfortable clothes—running pants, a t-shirt, and a sweatshirt, and shoes that were well-broken in for long periods of activity.

He should be excited for a weeklong adventure where he’d be paid half a million dollars, but there was only one thing on his mind.

He would see Emerald Taylor again, even if only for a few minutes.

Would she be part of the crew to greet him and whatever woman he was supposed to spend the week with? Hopefully he didn’t act like a simpering fool like the first time he had met her. She was so perfect to him his tongue had probably lolled out like a puppy hoping for a scrap of attention.

Emerald hadn’t shared with Ace or his buddies who she was working for, but as soon as he’d left the meeting a month ago where they’d all committed to do the weeklong job and sever contact with each other for eight weeks, he’d Googled her. He’d loved seeing her perfect face, cloud of blonde hair, and unique bluish-green eyes in the pictures, but as soon as he realized who her boss was, he grew concerned. Axel Dexter was the “most eligible bachelor” in America. Any woman would die to date the guy, and there was picture after picture of Emerald and Axel arm-in-arm. Article after article

speculated about their commitment to each other and why they hadn't married yet.

Ace had known instinctively the day he'd met her that she was so out of his league it was laughable. He'd never won any awards for most handsome; women only pursued him because of his military background or kind manner. But Emerald had been so sweet to him. He'd deluded himself into thinking the appealing glances she'd given him meant she might be interested.

Stupid; that's what he was.

Despite his years in the military, he still didn't have the world experience his buddies did. He'd overheard some calling him "naïve," but Captain Grady had told him time and again that his ability to withhold judgment and preserve his innocence was a gift he shouldn't be embarrassed of. Cap hoped he'd never lose it.

Ace clenched his fist. A woman like Emerald wasn't looking for innocence or kindness. She had the perfect man in her life; Ace didn't stand a chance. She'd told all of them at the initial meeting a month ago that her boss was "the best man she'd ever known." Ace couldn't forget the way she'd phrased that, and he was more than stupid to fantasize about her.

As a sleek white jet descended to the tarmac, his stomach flipped happily and his entire body lit up. That might be her. He didn't stand a chance with a woman like Emerald, but he couldn't deny how the mere thought of her made him feel.

The jet landed and taxied close to where he waited. A door descended, forming steps, and Axel Dexter bounded out. He waved and grinned at Ace before turning back and offering his hand to someone in the plane.

Ace felt like he was watching a movie as Emerald gracefully descended those stairs. She was dressed in fitted running pants and a long-sleeved blue shirt that contrasted with her long blonde hair. She stopped on the last step. Ace's breath stuttered out of him as their eyes met. He hadn't exaggerated in his mind the breathtaking quality of those

greenish-blue eyes or the way a simple glance from her made him feel.

He swayed on his feet as their gazes got tangled up. Her perfect lips curved into an inviting smile and he rushed across the asphalt to meet her.

“Ace Fuller,” Axel called happily. He wrapped his arm around Emerald and squeezed her waist, lifting her off the last step and down to the ground in a romantic-looking move that should’ve been on the big screen. “Look at this guy,” Axel said to Emerald. “What a stud!”

Ace stopped in his tracks. His gaze swung from Emerald’s gorgeous face to Axel’s far too handsome one. He felt sucker punched as he noticed the way she leaned into Axel, the way he so comfortably wrapped up the love of Ace’s life.

They were the perfect couple in every way.

Shaking his head, Ace told himself to stop being naïve and stupid. Emerald wasn’t the love of his life; she was obviously taken. Axel seemed like a great guy, but at the moment Ace wanted to cut off the man’s ears and nose. Not kill him or anything, just make him look awful. He hid a smile at his gruesome thoughts and then forced himself to walk forward and extend his hand to Axel.

Axel released Emerald, shook his hand, and then surprised Ace with a manly backslapping hug. He pulled back and grasped his arms. “None of that hand shaking. You’re like a brother to me. Brit’s told me all about you and I am in awe of your expertise with a sniper’s rifle and so grateful to you for your service to our country. I heard you’re working with a gun manufacturer, who wishes to remain unnamed on film, to produce a rifle better than the Barrett M82. So impressive.” Axel grinned as if they were the best of friends.

Ace didn’t know how to hate someone so friendly and complimentary. “Thank you. I’m stoked about the project,” he managed, his voice sounding far too stiff, especially with a cameraman not far away. “Thank you for your service to our country as well, and for paying me a crap-ton of money to risk life and limb for a crazy TV show.”

Axel laughed. “I knew I liked you. It is crazy, but I think you’ll have a life-changing and memorable week.” He slapped him on the shoulder and turned to Emerald. “And I believe you already know my beautiful partner, Emerald?”

Partner? Ace’s brow wrinkled. What did that mean? Business partner? Life partner? Gambling partner? He hated the ambiguity of that word.

Ace swallowed and extended his hand. “It’s the fulfillment of a month of dreams to see you again, Emerald.” He hoped he sounded smooth and not like a besotted teenager, but if he were a betting man, he’d say the latter.

Axel’s chuckle, which turned into a cough, made Ace’s neck heat up. His line had been stupid. If these two were really together, he might be ticking off the man who was paying him half a million dollars.

If Ace could steal Emerald, he’d shove every last dollar back in Axel’s face.

She put her hand in his. Her smooth palm and fingers against his calloused skin stirred a longing within Ace. He wanted her hand in his, always. She was tall for a woman, probably only four or five inches shorter than his six-three. He liked her height. He liked her smile. He liked her hand in his. He liked everything about her.

Except that she was Axel Dexter’s partner, girlfriend—who knew. Whatever they were to each other added up to a fat chance for Ace’s hopes of dating this perfect woman.

“I’ve been counting the hours as well,” Emerald said.

Ace’s eyes widened, hoping she meant what he thought she meant. He glanced at Axel to catch his reaction to that comment. The man smiled widely.

“I mean, counting the hours until this adventure.” Her tanned cheeks darkened slightly and she quickly pulled her hand back.

Ace heard footsteps behind him but didn’t want to turn. If he only had these few moments to savor Emerald’s unique teal-colored gaze, he couldn’t stand to look away.



“Ah, there’s Jaycee,” Axel exclaimed. “The fun can now begin.”

“That’s right,” the woman called. “The fun has arrived!”

Ace forced himself to turn, easing close to Emerald’s side as he did so. He took in a deep breath of her alluring scent—maybe a mix of vanilla and raspberry? It was as tempting as the rest of her. Her shoulder brushed his and all rational thought fled. He glanced over at her, forgetting all about the new arrival, some woman he would spend the next week with.

Emerald smiled so temptingly at him that he almost dared to pull her in close. He wouldn’t do anything so crackpot as kiss her, but simply to bury his face in that soft-looking hair and have her in his arms would be a heaven he’d never want to leave.

“Ace ... Ace?”

Ace shook his head to clear it and focused on Axel. The polished billionaire was watching him with a knowing look in his blue eyes. Was he upset Ace was fawning over Emerald? Were they really a couple? If he blurted out that question right now, what would they all think?

“This is your new best friend,” Ace said, pointing to a petite brunette. “Jaycee Crane.”

Ace hated to sever the connection from simply standing next to Emerald, but the camera was rolling. He didn’t want to offend the woman he’d be spending a week with on day one. She had a welcoming smile and pretty brown eyes. Her diminutive height and happy grin made him think of the little sister he used to wish he had.

He stepped forward and offered his hand. “Great to meet you. Ace Fuller.”

“Ace?” She looked him over slowly, her dark eyes glinting with mischief as if they were sharing a great joke. “Is that your call sign or something?”

“No, ma’am.” He smiled, released her hand, and stepped back, brushing Emerald’s arm again as he did so. He heard her pull in a quick breath and wanted to put his arm around her

like Axel had earlier. Did that make him the biggest jerk ever? He wanted to yank her from a relationship with the generous man who was gifting Ace and his buddies with half a million dollars. Not to mention helping eight charitable women further their ability to help those in need.

“Well, don’t get any ideas thinking you can call me Squirt, Pipsqueak, or Half-pint.” Jaycee winked sassily. “I’ve heard them all. You have a cool nickname, so make sure I get one too.”

Ace chuckled. He liked her immediately. What a relief that he could relax and tease with her.

If only he could relax and tease with the perfect model standing so close he could smell her tantalizing perfume.

“You have to earn a cool nickname,” Ace said.

“Hmm.” She arched a challenging eyebrow. “So how’d you earn Ace?”

Ace smiled. “You have to earn that story as well.”

Jaycee folded her arms across her chest. “And you aren’t going to share it with two beautiful women?”

He shook his head. “Not today, Junior.”

Jaycee stuck out her tongue. Emerald laughed, and Ace’s entire body warmed at the sound. He glanced at her and was rewarded with a conspiratorial look in her bluish-green eyes. He’d tell her how he earned any nickname and even his awful real name, but he wasn’t shouting it out to be mocked on a reality TV show. He hated his given name; he had shared it with far too many girls in his grade school. When he’d begged his brothers to call him Ace instead, they’d actually complied instead of teasing. They hadn’t wanted a brother with a girl name either.

The beating of helicopter blades came from the south. They all pivoted to look and then Axel gestured. “This way. That’s your ride.”

Ace probably shouldn’t have done it, but he rested his hand on the small of Emerald’s back to escort her to the

helicopter. She rewarded him with a generous smile and his blood pumped faster.

The helicopter settled and cut its engines. Semi-quiet descended again. Axel turned to them and his eyes widened at Ace's hand on Emerald's back. Ace quickly dropped it.

"I know you're dying to know what your challenge is this week," Axel said, sounding like a talk show host. "So far, we've had a treasure hunt in Kauai; a great escape from a dungeon, a mansion, and an island in the Caribbean; and two weeks ago, your friend Tagg became an impressive sailor and found islands in the Caribbean with only a clue and a compass."

Good for Tagg. Ace was interested to see and hear all about his friends' adventures, but he was most interested to know what was expected of him as he helped "Junior" this week.

If only Emerald was coming with him, not the brunette whose name he couldn't remember right now.

"Two of the three women were able to earn the half-million for their charities. One did not. We're hoping this week is successful and Jaycee takes home half a million dollars for Save the Endangered. It's a great cause and we'd love to donate to it. Right, Em?"

Em. Axel even had a nickname for Ace's soul mate. Dang it. Even though Ace had been told to bring nothing with him, he had a knife in his pocket at all times. If he just severed the man's nose without any witnesses, would it up his chances with Emerald? Nobody would believe that the ever-kind Ace Fuller was having such despicable thoughts.

"Yes." Emerald nodded. "I hand-picked all the charities and I love each of their causes."

"I'm honored you'd think of me." Jaycee smiled pleasantly. She seemed like a very nice and funny person, but Ace dreaded spending a week alone with any woman who wasn't Emerald.

“So, for this week.” Axel rubbed his palms together, his face lit with excitement. “It’s a challenge of getting from point A to point B while surviving in extreme conditions. We’ll drop you off in Telluride. You have the next six days to traverse the mountains and arrive at your final destination in Aspen.”

Jaycee whistled and said, “How far is that?”

“Over a hundred and ten miles, hiking across some of the most rugged mountains in the Rockies with snow, mud, and extreme temperatures,” Axel said. “You’ll have to cover close to twenty miles per day to make it.”

Ace had been on his share of hiking adventures. He liked hiking, but a hundred and ten miles in six days through the mountains in early June was no easy feat. But if Axel was giving out a million dollars and trying to make an intriguing reality show out of this, he probably didn’t want it to be an easy feat.

“We’ve got a detailed trail map in your supplies,” Axel continued. “Your backpacks have everything you need for the next six days—food, water filtration bottles, sleeping bags and a tent, clean clothes, and toiletries. Any questions?”

Ace should be asking if Axel had a pistol for him. His knife would help, but not as much as a gun. Sadly, the only question Ace cared about was when he could see Emerald again after he finished the hiking trip. Would she be waiting to greet them in Aspen?

“Are there bears?” Jaycee squeaked in a terrified voice.

“Possibly,” Axel admitted.

Jaycee’s face drained of color. “I hate bears.”

That was odd. She was a champion for endangered species but hated bears? Ace wondered what the story was there.

Axel smiled reassuringly. “Ace’s backpack has a 9mm and a knife, and I promise you he’s very skilled with both. Plus, most bears will run away from you. Just talk loud.” He winked, but Jaycee still looked concerned. “I promise Ace can keep you safe.”

Ace felt reassured even if his counterpart didn't. A 9mm pistol had been proven to take out bears, and the bears in the lower Rockies were usually black bears, less aggressive than the grizzlies that appeared in Wyoming and Montana.

"You should be more worried about navigating through any remaining snow and getting those miles in each day. Those mountains are viciously steep, but luckily there is a decent trail cut the entire route." Axel said the words happily, as if their misery was something to anticipate. Ace would make the man miserable when he stole Emerald from him.

Ace almost laughed at himself. He had no chance with Emerald.

"Ace will also have a satellite phone that you can use if you are in danger or decide to forfeit the challenge," Axel continued.

Emerald shifted beside him. It was all Ace could do not to stare openly at her. He'd better get his fill; who knew when he'd see her again? The last four weeks, he'd thought of little else. He hadn't even been able to focus on his very important job of improving the preferred military sniper rifle.

"Oh, and I forgot the best part." Axel grinned and winked at Emerald. "Em is going with you two as your camerawoman."

Ace's heart stalled and then sped up. He whirled to her. "Are you serious?"

She nodded, smiling almost shyly at him. "Is that okay?"

"Is that *okay*?" He wanted to punch a fist in the air, pick her up off her feet, swing her around, and then kiss her soundly. Sadly, he held himself in control. "That's the best news since Albert Okwuegbunam signed with the Broncos." He tried to temper his exuberance but failed epically.

"Albert who?" Emerald asked, but she was grinning as if she realized that meant he was happy.

"That was a bad day for the Cowboys," Axel said.

“The Cowboys stink no matter what.” Ace couldn’t lie about something like that. Why was Axel allowing his girlfriend to go with Ace for a week? The man probably thought there was no chance Emerald would dump him.

Ace prayed for that chance, but it was slim.

“Oh-ho,” Axel returned. “Like the Broncos are much better. We both have an affinity for the underdog, apparently.”

“Or loyalty for our childhood teams.”

Axel nodded. “True. Good man.”

Ace liked him, despite still wanting to cut his ears and nose off. Well, if he could steal Emerald, he wouldn’t dismember the guy.

If he could steal Emerald, he’d even cheer for the Cowboys.

“Why would you want to hike twenty miles a day when you don’t have to?” Jaycee asked.

Emerald shrugged. “I like hiking. I’ve always wanted to do a big backpacking adventure, but I’ve never taken the time for it. We discovered during the first week’s adventure that it works better if the contestants don’t have to film themselves, so I volunteered.”

Ace prayed that she’d volunteered to film the week so she could be with him. If she was dating Axel, that was highly unlikely. Still, he wouldn’t kick a gift horse in the mouth. One week with Emerald Taylor hiking through the mountains. Time spent with her was much more tantalizing than half a million dollars.

Jaycee looked between Ace and Emerald as if she knew exactly why he was so happy about their add-on, but she only gave Ace a sly wink. If he could recruit the friendly woman to help push him toward Emerald, it might improve his chances from nonexistent to one percent.

“All your gear is loaded in the helicopter,” Axel said. “I unfortunately have a meeting in Chicago. I’ll say goodbye to

you beautiful people and see you Saturday night unless you make it to Aspen sooner. We'll have dinner at Bok Choy."

Emerald smiled. "Yes! I've been craving the spicy shrimp wontons."

Ace's gut tightened. They'd obviously eaten at this bock-yoy place before. Dang it. How could he compete with Axel Dexter? His shoulders rounded; he couldn't. Even without his billions of dollars, Axel could cream Ace in looks and charm.

Axel shook Jaycee and Ace's hands, wishing them luck, then he grabbed Emerald and hugged her tight. "Have fun playing while I do double the work."

Emerald laughed easily and hugged him back.

Ace edged away. He couldn't look. Jaycee watched him with compassion in her eyes.

Was it that obvious how taken he was with Emerald and how miniscule of a chance he had with her?

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## CHAPTER TWO

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The helicopter ride was noisy and too quiet at the same time. Emerald didn't want to be too obvious about the driving need she had to stay close to Ace, so she'd taken the seat next to the pilot. They all had headsets on to deaden the rotors' noise and communicate, but nobody was talking. She prided herself on only sneaking occasional glances back at Ace. He looked so incredibly appealing, all tough and giving her that almost shy smile that tugged at her heart. She'd loved his exuberance when he found out she was tagging along.

They landed at Telluride Airport. The trailhead was only a quarter of a mile away, so they loaded their backpacks on. Emerald had been the one to plan and give specific instructions on each item in the backpack. She hoped she hadn't missed anything.

She mounted the GoPro to the strap of her backpack and they set off. It was chilly this morning, but still a beautiful almost-June day, sunshine and probably fifty degrees. She'd purposely planned this mountain trip when there was the least chance of rain or snow. The highs would be in the seventies, but the lows could drop to the twenties. It could get chilly and miserable, but they had the highest quality gear in their backpacks and they would be fine.

They walked side by side until they hit the trail, then Ace gestured for her to go first. She smiled and shook her head. "I've got to video you two. I'll bring up the rear."

"Oh." He sounded strangely deflated. She knew how he felt. She wished they were alone and didn't have the camera.



His good humor returned as he asked, "Taking pictures of my rear? I see how you are."

Emerald sputtered in response, but he was only teasing. "I want to give the viewers something to remember."

He chuckled. "This week will definitely be one I'll remember."

"You two ready?" Jaycee was staring at the two of them.

Ace turned to her. "Yes we are, Junior. Do you want to set the pace?"

She shrugged, rolling her eyes at the nickname. "Sure. Then I won't have to try to keep up with you two's giraffe legs."

"Solid plan." Ace nodded to her.

Jaycee set a decent pace the first few miles, but when they hit some vicious incline and a bit of ice, snow, and mud, she slowed and started muttering funny complaints. The scenery was beautiful with different colored wildflowers, lush green undergrowth, a few spots of lingering snow, and thick pine and aspen trees. The trail was a bit muddy but not awful. It hadn't rained or snowed for over a week, and most of the snow had melted at this lower elevation and on the south-facing slope. As they got higher into the mountain range, though, it might be a different story.

"This is stupid and my legs are tired. Honestly, is this even possible?" Jaycee asked, a little louder than the muttering she'd been doing.

Ace glanced back at Emerald. She'd planned the adventure, so she guessed it was her Jaycee was asking. "Of course it is," she said. "I wouldn't have planned it if it wasn't possible. It'll be hard and we might not make it, but we definitely *can* make it."

Jaycee didn't respond, so Emerald continued, "From my calculations, if we can keep a two mile per hour pace, we can do the twenty miles in ten hours. We'll have sunrise at five-thirty a.m. and sunset close to eight-thirty p.m. so we have

fifteen hours of daylight. That gives us five hours to rest and eat, or make up time if we have to slow down.”

“Two miles per hour is pretty slow. Thirty-minute miles, right?” Jaycee said, encouraged. “My average running pace is a seven-minute mile.”

“Awesome. So you’re in great shape and well-trained for this. Do you do a lot of incline?”

“No. Will the incline make it harder?” Jaycee pulled a face but thankfully kept putting one foot in front of the other.

Emerald hid a smile. The incline, the decline, the weight of the backpacks, the six days of hiking without a break, sleeping in a tent, not showering, eating trail food and freeze-dried meals, not having a toilet, possibly getting overuse injuries, blisters, or chafing... It was all going to be hard, but she didn’t know if this was the moment to tell the girl.

“We’re going to rock this,” Ace said. Emerald appreciated his optimism. He glanced at his watch. “We’ve already gone four miles and it’s only nine o’clock.”

They crested the top of a peak and Jaycee stopped, letting out a little cry of dismay. Emerald followed her gaze and felt her own stomach lurch. The trail leading down was on the north slope. The snow had probably melted a bit with the warmer temps, but without the sun exposure on the south side, it hadn’t completely melted. The trail was a ribbon of ice. It might turn slushy in the afternoon, but right now it was too cold for it to have melted. Emerald panned the camera around to show the incredible view, but also the dangerous trail.

“Why didn’t you plan this insane hike for mid-summer, when it might actually be possible?” Jaycee asked.

Emerald had heard all about how positive and awesome Tess, Rania, and Molly were on the first three adventures. She liked Jaycee, and she didn’t want the girl to start the trip feeling negative and upset. Emerald might feel the same if it was half a million for her charity on the line. She tried to focus on being a cheerleader. “Like I said earlier, this will be hard, but it is possible. None of the adventures have been a walk in

the park.” She tried to say the last bit gently, but she needed Jaycee to know that her experience wasn’t harder than anyone else’s. Rania and Tanner’s escape from the dungeon, the mansion, and the island took the cake so far for scary, overwhelming, seemingly impossible, and dangerous.

“How many have already gone again?” Jaycee asked, still staring down that icy trail.

“Three.” Emerald and Axel had decided she shouldn’t say too much about the other weeks.

“And only two of them won their money?”

“Yes.”

“Huh.” She stared at the slope with obvious dread. “Do we have those ice-climbing shoe attachment things in our packs? One step on that ice and I think I’ll end up flat on my back, and who knows when I’ll stop sliding.”

“They’re called crampons,” said Ace.

“The brand I packed is called Yaktraks,” Emerald told them. She worried her lip. “I’m not sure if they’ll stop us from sliding down sheer ice though.”

Ace gave Emerald a mischievous look. “You just gave me an idea,” he said to Jaycee. “You’re looking at this all wrong, Junior, my new friend. I hope every downhill slope is like this. We’re gonna save a ton of time, wear and tear on our knees, and miles on our shoes.”

“How?” Jaycee planted her hands on her hips.

“Do we have rain ponchos?” Ace asked Emerald.

“Yes.” She pointed to the right pocket.

Ace grinned and set his backpack down. He opened the zipper she’d indicated and fished around for a while, pulling out a rain poncho packed in a small bag. Yanking it out of the bag, he spread it out on the trail and said, “Let’s pile on and ride it down. It’ll be fun and save us time.”

Emerald laughed. “You’re crazy ... I like it.”

He grinned and winked at her. “This is mild. Wait ‘til I get started.”

Heat rushed through her. She’d love to have crazy adventures with Ace.

Jaycee stared at them with wide eyes. “You’re both nuts. One of us will break a leg.”

Ace shook his head. “Nah. I’ll keep us under control with speed.” He sat down. “Now, Emerald, you sit behind me and then Jaycee behind you. I’ll risk the broken leg directing us. You can wrap your arms and legs around me and Jaycee will wrap hers around you. You can both just hold on and enjoy the ride. Man, I’m stoked about this.”

His attitude and enthusiasm were irresistible.

Jaycee shook her head. “I don’t know.”

Ace sat down and gestured to Emerald. “You want to go for it?”

“For sure.” She sat behind him, edged in close, and did as he instructed, wrapping her legs around his abdomen. She slipped her arms underneath his and threaded them around his chest. Warmth and joy rushed through her. The backpack separated them more than she’d like, but the muscles of his chest were firm underneath her hands. This was thrilling and they weren’t even going downhill yet. Ace let out a soft groan and Emerald’s body flushed with desire.

Jaycee pushed out a grunt of frustration but sat down behind Emerald. She wrapped her arms and legs around Emerald’s waist and shoulders, clinging with a death grip. There was just enough space on the rain poncho for the three of them.

“Ready?” Ace glanced back at Emerald with a boyish grin on his face. He had an innocence about him that she loved, but he was definitely all man, evidenced by the firm muscles she clung to.

“Let’s go,” Emerald said.

“Big Dog’s gotta sled,” Ace called out.

Emerald laughed.

“You two are nuts, argh!” Jaycee screamed as Ace pushed them off with his hands and feet.

They slid quickly down the icy trail, bobbing from side to side but luckily staying on the track. They would all have bruises on their backsides. Ace used his hands and feet to keep them from shooting off into the bushes and trees. He whooped happily as the wind rushed past their faces. Emerald laughed at the exhilaration of the ride. Clinging to Ace made it even better.

As they picked up speed, Jaycee screamed behind them, “Slow down! Argh!”

“Almost there,” Ace called back. “We’re doing great.”

The slope got less intense and they started slowing down. They slid for a while on flat surface and then came to a stop.

“Yeah!” Ace called out. “That was awesome and definitely helped our time. I hope the next downhill is ice covered.”

Jaycee pushed away from Emerald and stood. Emerald didn’t want to relinquish her tight hold on Ace, but she forced herself to release him. He jumped up and offered her a hand. “You okay?”

She nodded. Her cheeks and hands stung from the chilly air, but she’d loved it. “It was great. Fabulous idea, my friend.”

He grinned and bent to pick up the rain poncho, shaking it out and shoving it in an empty side pocket. “Lead the way, Jaycee. We’re going to rock these miles.”

Jaycee rolled her eyes and started walking along the now-flat trail. “Nuts,” she muttered, but she was smiling.

Emerald couldn’t help but laugh. “Being nuts is fun.”

“For sure.” Ace winked and gestured for her to go first.

“Sorry, I have to take up the rear.” She pointed to the camera.

“I keep forgetting. Wanting to be a gentleman.”

She smiled. "I appreciate it."

They started along the trail and she appreciated the view of him walking in front of her. She felt far removed from the organized, smart assistant to the billionaire. She loved the bright sunshine, the beautiful scenery, the physical challenge, and that Ace was making this fun. She was so glad she'd come.

Now if only she could get this impressive and kind military hero alone somehow.

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## CHAPTER THREE

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Ace watched the sun sink behind the west mountains and glanced at his watch as they descended to a small valley. It was only seven-thirty, but the light would be gone soon. The high peaks to the west would take care of that. His quads were aching from the downhill trek and he was in fabulous shape. Jaycee's complaining had increased the last few miles. Ace kept teasing her, calling her "Junior," and reassuring her she was tough and could make it. Most of the time she rolled her eyes or stuck her tongue out at him, which only made him laugh.

"Where are we at?" Emerald's breath brushed his neck as she spoke from behind him and leaned forward to see his watch.

He stopped and held up his wrist. "Twenty-three miles."

"Nice!"

"Even with the later start today, we rocked it. Luckily, we're all pretty much ultra-athletes." He grinned. Jaycee and Emerald had done really well. After a few icy slides down slopes without breaking an arm—and realizing she could make the long distance with all day to do it—Jaycee had relaxed and only complained every chance she got. They'd talked easily as they discussed everything from their families to the military to Jaycee's charity and the charitable foundation that Emerald and Axel had created to help veterans transition back to civilian life.

“You definitely look like an ultra-athlete, but my legs have turned to rubber.” Emerald winked at him.

He chuckled and looked down. “Rubber never looked so appealing.”

Her cheeks darkened but the look in her aqua-colored eyes made his own legs feel like rubber. Could this perfect woman be interested in an average Joe like him? He might be deluding himself, but it sure seemed like he had a chance. How could he ask if she was dating Axel? Was he a rotten person to want to steal her away from the well-intentioned, charitable, and accomplished billionaire?

“What are you two stopping for?” Jaycee called back to them.

Ace laughed. “Keep going, Junior. I’m giving the short legs a chance to get ahead.”

She chuckled. Ace really liked the rapport they all had together, but he still wanted to get Emerald alone.

Ace and Emerald walked to meet her on the trail. “We’re at twenty-three miles,” Ace informed her.

“Yes!” Jaycee whooped and did a little dance. “Ahead of the game, baby.”

Emerald laughed. “Definitely. Good thing we’re heading straight north so we have some north-facing icy slopes to sled down.”

“You all like my idea now.” Ace gestured and they kept walking to a flatter spot. “Let’s set up camp and eat a semi-real meal. Big Dog’s gotta eat.”

Both women laughed.

“Where did ‘Big Dog’ come from?” Emerald asked as they set their packs down and stretched. She pulled a collapsible stand out of her backpack and propped the camera on it. Ace wished she’d turn it off, but he was getting used to it. He’d forgotten about it most of the day.

“Just a nickname.” Ace pulled a small shovel out of his backpack and started clearing away brush from the flattest part



to set up a tent. These backpacks were full of everything they might need. It was nice to have the weight off his shoulders and back, but the backpacks were high quality and the weight was distributed evenly.

“Come on,” Jaycee begged. “You get to call me ‘Junior’ and we never got to hear where ‘Ace’ came from or what your real name is. Now you have another nickname we’re not privy to?”

Ace almost shot back that he’d known her a total of fourteen hours and it had taken him almost a year with his SEAL team to share his real name. He hated his real name so much he’d had it legally changed when he turned eighteen. If Emerald had been asking, he’d spill all, but he wasn’t doing it for Jaycee—or with that camera rolling. But he could at least give them both the story of “Big Dog,” especially because Emerald was watching him with such interest.

“Fine. If you two push that brush into a pile and put some rocks around it for a fire while I put up the tent, I’ll tell you the story while we eat dinner.”

“Done,” Jaycee said.

Emerald smiled at him and that was all the motivation he needed. With the sun setting, it had cooled off, so the girls shrugged into sweatshirts and then got to work. Ace easily set the tent up and then took each of their sleeping bags out of their packs and put them in, along with their small, inflatable pillows. It would be a tight fit. Interesting.

He glanced over at Emerald as she bent to pick up another rock to circle the fire. Heat filled him. How could he finagle sleeping close to her? He imagined whispering late into the night, his arm brushing hers outside of their sleeping bags. If Jaycee was scared of bears, would she beg to sleep in the middle rather than against a tent wall? Dang. He’d have to be a gentleman and protect Jaycee emotionally as well as physically, as he was being paid to do.

Emerald glanced up and caught him staring. A beautiful smile spread across her face and the heat inside Ace seemed to combust. He couldn’t believe how lucky he was. Despite

Jaycee's complaining, this challenge seemed easy. He even got to spend six days with the woman of his dreams. He'd probably be too wimpy to ever tell her how he felt—and he had no chance of stealing her from Axel—but at least he had this time with her. Instantly, he felt hollow inside. He didn't want Axel to have her. He didn't want to let her go. Ever.

He helped the women organize the brush, sticks, and logs they'd found and started the fire. It caught quickly. Emerald sorted through her pack, producing a collapsible pan they could use to heat the freeze-dried meals with water from the nearby stream. Since she'd orchestrated everything, she knew exactly what was in each pack.

They sat on the ground with their backs against a fallen log. It wasn't luxurious, but it felt good to sit. Ace was dying to take his shoes and socks off but feared they would stink. He'd realized he probably wouldn't get a shower this week, but with Emerald here, he cared that he might not smell good. She sat next to him and he was keenly aware of each movement and breath she took.

As they drank from their water bottles, Ace ate a bag of trail mix, and they all waited for the meals to warm up, Jaycee said, "Okay. I'm ready for the nickname story. Both of them."

"You only get 'Big Dog,'" Ace reminded her.

"All right."

He laughed at her defeated tone and looked at Emerald. "No wonder her charity is successful. I'd donate just to keep her from hounding me."

Emerald laughed with him.

Jaycee shook a finger at him, interrupting the moment. "Good. I'll hold you to that. Now the story."

"I had three older brothers," Ace began.

Emerald jolted and said, "So did I."

"Nice." Ace liked having something in common with her. He forced himself to include Jaycee in the conversation. "What about you?"

“Just a bossy older sister.”

“I have no clue what a sister is like, but brothers can tease until you want to shove them off a cliff. They’ll also thump on you until you pray Mom and Dad come home early from their date night. That’s why I look so ugly. They rearranged my face.”

“You’re not ugly,” Emerald murmured, and fire rushed through him. Could a model-gorgeous woman like her who had the perfect model in Axel Dexter actually be attracted to someone like him? It seemed a far stretch.

“Are you joking?” Jaycee asked. “You’re always joking, right?”

Emerald laughed. “He might be exaggerating, but older brothers are relentless. Mine always told me they were making me bully-proof.”

“Meaning?” Jaycee asked.

“They teased me so much I knew exactly how to put any bully in their place.”

“Good skill to have, but probably stunk getting there.” Jaycee looked to Ace. “You didn’t get very far in the story. Continue.”

“All right. Since I was the youngest, I had all kinds of nicknames like Tiny, Runt, and their favorite, Bajo, which actually means ‘low’ in Spanish, not ‘short,’ but they didn’t care what it meant because it always got me to try to fight them. *Try* being the key word. My closest brother in age is four years older, so they all were bigger and stronger than me. Until I came home from the military and thumped them separately and together.” He winked and they both laughed.

“No wonder you were so quick to call me ‘Junior,’” Jaycee said.

“Sorry. I should learn not to tease.”

“I liked it. No worries.”

He smiled at his friend but found his gaze drawn back to Emerald, as always. “Did your brothers have a nickname for

you?”

She ducked her head and admitted, “Beauty.”

“Observant brothers,” he murmured, staring into her beautiful eyes. The look that passed between them was significant and deep. Axel? Who was Axel and what could he possibly have that Ace didn’t?

Oh yeah—a handsome face, charm oozing from every pore, billions in his bank account.

“Wait a minute,” Jaycee interrupted the moment. “I thought you said your brothers were bullies to you.”

Emerald shook her head. “No. They teased me a lot, but they weren’t outright mean to me. My dad would’ve thumped them. Everybody in my family calls me Beauty. Even if sometimes my brothers said it sarcastically.”

“Beauty fits you,” Ace said before he chickened out.

“Thank you.”

A few beats passed with only the fire crackling, then Jaycee asked, “So how did you talk them out of ‘Bajo’ and into Big Dog?”

Ace shrugged. “At dinner, I was always fighting to get my fair share of food, so they started calling me a scrappy dog. I’d always counter with, ‘I’m a big dog and Big Dog’s gotta eat.’” He laughed, remembering. “Eventually it stuck, and they all called me Big Dog too.”

“We’ll call you that at dinner if you fight with us for food,” Jaycee said.

Emerald smiled. “You can have my food. I’m ready to sleep.”

“You need to eat so you can keep hiking all those miles.”

She shrugged and looked at the fire.

“Are you not hungry?” he ventured.

“Not usually.”

“What does that mean?” Jaycee asked. “You’re not starving yourself, are you? You’re model gorgeous!”

“Thanks,” Emerald said quietly, but she didn’t meet either of their gazes.

The fire popped and some birds twittered as the silence stretched.

“All those years of modeling,” Emerald finally admitted quietly. “You learn not to eat and after a while you’re just not hungry very often.”

Ace’s eyes widened. His gaze darted to Jaycee. She gave him a look that said it was on him to respond. She’d already told Emerald she was “model gorgeous.” She was right. What was Ace supposed to say? He was just a simple guy, raised with brothers and now his closest friends were his brothers in the military. He didn’t know how to encourage a woman.

“You look incredible,” he said in a gravelly voice that carried through the night. “And you definitely need the calories so you can keep your energy up for tomorrow.”

She glanced up at him and her gaze was soft. “Thanks.”

Jaycee got up and lifted one of the meals out of the fire. “I think it’s warm.”

Ace and Emerald silently retrieved their meals and they all dug in, even Emerald. Ace watched her eat with relief. He knew a lot of women struggled with body image and eating. How to convince Emerald that she was plenty thin, and she should eat so she could be healthy? He couldn’t imagine starving himself for so long that he didn’t even feel hungry any longer. He always felt hungry.

“Did you enjoy modeling?” he asked her.

“Sometimes. I did it to get through college and it’s how I met Axel, so it was definitely worth it.”

Ace’s stomach turned. Maybe he wasn’t as hungry as he thought.

“Oh, that’s how you met Axel,” Jaycee said. “How long have you two been together?”

“Almost four years. Since I graduated from TCU.”

There was a roaring in Ace’s ears. Together. Emerald and Axel were “together.” He shoveled in the last of his dinner as the women talked about their respective schooling. Suddenly his great day with Emerald didn’t seem so great. He’d been pretty certain she and Axel were a couple from all the images of them on Google together, but he’d deluded himself into believing she was interested in him. Stupid. Very, very stupid.

They all brushed their teeth and took turns going off to use the bathroom. Ace double-bagged the little bit of garbage they had and hung the bag in the trees fifty yards from their tent in case animals sniffed it out. When he returned, he found Emerald watching him, a sweet and almost expectant expression on her beautiful face.

Did he have a chance?

“I’m exhausted.” Jaycee’s voice pulled him from staring at Emerald. Jaycee gestured into the tent and gave him a sly look before asking, “Are you okay sleeping in the middle, Em?”

Emerald darted a gaze to him. He found himself wanting to cuddle close to her all night, which he knew was very wrong. He appreciated Jaycee doing a solid friend favor for him and trying to get the two of them close, but Jaycee calling her Em just reminded him of Axel calling her that.

“Sure. That’s fine.”

They all took off their hiking shoes and peeled off their disgusting socks. “Are your feet okay or does anybody need to get bandaged up?” Ace had asked throughout the day to prevent any bad injuries, but they’d both claimed they were doing all right.

“Mine are surprisingly good,” Jaycee said.

“Mine are fine,” Emerald said.

“Okay.” Ace gestured for them to go first. They both climbed inside the tent and their sleeping bags. Ace slid in last. He held himself stiffly and pushed back against the tent so he didn’t roll on top of Emerald. He could hear her soft breathing. Long moments passed and then she sat up in her sleeping bag.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Forgot to pray,” she murmured.

“Oh ... yeah, you’d better do that, or a bear might attack us and rip Jaycee apart.”

Jaycee snorted from her side of the tent and Emerald laughed.

“You aren’t scaring me,” Jaycee said. “Axel reassured me ‘Big Dog’ can protect us from anything.”

Ace smiled but also flinched at the reminder of Axel. The guy was hundreds of miles away, but Ace couldn’t get rid of him.

“Stop making me laugh so I can say my prayers,” Emerald said.

“Prayer time,” Ace declared, kneeling to say his own. He’d been raised to pray, and it’d become even more important to him while serving in the military. He focused on gratitude in his prayer and selfishly asked if maybe Emerald could choose him over Axel.

He shrugged out of his sweatshirt before sliding back into his sleeping bag. These were high-quality sleeping bags. The temperatures were dipping outside, but the tent was insulated. He pulled an arm out so he didn’t get any more sweaty. He probably stunk from the long day of hiking.

Emerald laid down. He could hear her and Jaycee’s breathing in the small tent. He wished he dared move closer to Emerald, but he didn’t feel right to take those liberties if she was attached to someone else. But if she and Axel were a couple, why would she come on this hiking trip without him? If Ace was dating Emerald, he’d never want to be away from her. He could’ve sworn he and Emerald had shared significant glances and flirted with each other, but it was probably all between his ears. Emerald was simply kind and fun to be around. He was the one reading into her every look and word.

He sighed and rolled away from Emerald so he was facing the tent wall. He needed to stop stewing about her and get

some sleep. Sunrise at five-thirty would come early. Who knew how many minutes ticked by as he prayed for sleep.

A warm hand brushed his arm and his body revved up in response. Emerald was reaching out to him? He heard her inch closer, then he felt the sweetness of her breath against the back of his neck. Was she asleep or was she intentionally touching him and breathing on him? That sounded so weird, breathing on him, but it was the most invigorating thing that had happened to him in a while.

He waited almost a ten count and then he let himself roll over. He could see her beautiful face in the dark. She was indeed rolled right up close to him, but her eyes were closed and her breathing was even.

She was asleep. Her movements hadn't been intentional. Dang it.

Even if she hadn't meant to move closer, he savored it. He studied her beautiful face and savored the touch of her breath on his cheek as the night wore on. If only he was brave enough to wrap his arm around her.

If only Axel Dexter didn't exist.



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## CHAPTER FOUR

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**E**merald woke. For a second, she couldn't remember where she was. Her face was warm, buried in the crook of a man's neck. His arm slung across her waist, with only the sleeping bag as a barrier.

She jerked back in surprise and her eyes opened wide. In the dim tent, she remembered quickly: Ace, Jaycee, and the hiking adventure.

She scurried down into the warmth of her own sleeping bag, studying Ace as his blue eyes blinked open. Heat flushed through her as his gaze grew deeper and more intense. Did he know she'd been snuggling into his neck during the night? Had he meant to wrap his arm over her? It was still there. She prayed he wouldn't move it.

At times yesterday, she'd thought he was interested in her. He was fun and friendly, but he treated Jaycee almost the same way, laughing and teasing with both of them. If she was honest with herself, he teased Jaycee more than her, but she hadn't seen him giving Jaycee any longing looks like she thought he kept giving her.

Then last night, he'd grown distant. She should not have revealed that she still had trouble with her appetite. He probably didn't want to date a woman with food issues. Four years and lots of therapists and she could swear she felt good about herself. It wasn't easy being five-eleven and over a hundred and sixty pounds—she sometimes longed to be petite like Jaycee—but she was in control of her eating disorder. Even now, she was rarely hungry and had to force herself to

eat at times. Axel always made sure she ate when he was around. He was a good friend.

The memory of Ace telling her she looked incredible made a flush of heat rise in her again.

“I guess we’d better get our hindquarters out of bed,” Ace said in a voice gravelly from sleep. “Daylight’s a wastin,’ as my dad would say.”

She smiled, hating that he was right. She needed to put her selfish desires to cuddle into Ace aside and focus on helping Jaycee win the money for her charity. She really liked Jaycee. She liked Ace more.

Emerald climbed out of her sleeping bag as Ace did the same. They both knelt on their sleeping bags in the small tent, far too close for her susceptible heart. Ace gave her a strained smile and unzipped the tent.

The cold hit her like a blast of the freezer door opening. She’d found the highest-quality insulated tent that also folded up small and attached to the backpack Ace carried. It had worked better than she realized. She wrapped her arms around herself. “It’s freezing.”

Ace bent and swept his sweatshirt up. He must’ve used it as an extra pillow; it was crumpled. “Hold up your arms,” he murmured, his eyes sweeping over her and warming her up even with the freezing temps outside.

She obeyed. She’d probably obey anything he requested of her. He tugged his sweatshirt over her head and arms, pulling it down her body and brushing the side of her abdomen with his hand. It was probably accidental, but the contact still brought fire to her veins.

Lowering her arms, she stared into his blue eyes. The sweatshirt was big and warm and it smelled like him, manly and clean.

“Better?” he asked huskily.

She eased closer, licking her lips. “Toasty.”

He smiled.

“But you need your sweatshirt. You’ll freeze in this.” She gestured outside.

“No.” Raising his hand, he tenderly brushed her hair back from her face, and his fingers lingered on the sensitive skin next to her ear. “You know what I need ...?”

Emerald was seconds away from throwing her arms around his neck and planting a kiss on his firm lips. Maybe he wasn’t as perfectly handsome as other men, but to her he was the most handsome man she’d ever seen. “No,” she breathed out. “Will you tell me?”

His smile grew and then slipped away as he leaned closer. Emerald’s breath froze and it had nothing to do with the temperature outside.

“What? What happened? Who opened the freezer door?” Jaycee sat up, her hair standing up in all directions, her eyes wide and confused.

Emerald couldn’t hide her disappointment. She imagined the scene continuing and Ace telling her that he needed her then kissing her beautifully. He gave her a longing look and then focused on Jaycee. “It’s a freezing cold happy morning to you, Junior.”

“Come on. It was funny yesterday, but now I insist on a better nickname than Junior,” she complained.

“Whine a lot?” he asked, giving Emerald a secretive grin.

Jaycee threw her small pillow at him. “You shut it. I’d like to see you do this hike with my short legs.”

Ace laughed. “Okay, how’s ... Jace?”

She nodded thoughtfully. “It’s plain, simple, effective. I like it.”

“Well, come on then, Jace. Let’s go out in the freezer and earn your half a million dollars.”

Jaycee punched both fists in the air. “Let’s do it.” Then she fell back into her sleeping bag and whimpered, “My body hurts. This is insane.”

Ace gave Emerald a conspiratorial smile but unfortunately ducked out of the tent. She reached out and grabbed her shoes. She had planned on shoving them on, but she didn't want to put on yesterday's socks.

A manly hand poked through the tent door, holding two pairs of female Smartwool socks. "I thought you might want fresh socks before you put your shoes on."

"Thank you." Emerald could add thoughtful to the list of characteristics Ace had that she appreciated in a man.

He ducked his head in and smiled. "I'll get some food out and fill up the water bottles. Stay warm for a bit." He zipped the tent back up.

Emerald sighed and started slipping on the cold socks. Tonight she'd bring fresh ones into the tent with her. She'd only packed one change of clothes for each of them, but she'd included eight pairs of socks, hoping to avoid blisters if their feet got wet from snow, mud, or sweat. She handed some over to Jaycee, but had to shake the woman awake again.

"What? Stay away, you nutso," Jaycee yelled, shaking a small fist. Her eyes settled as she recognized Emerald, but she still snarled, "Back off, Beauty, or I might hurt you."

Emerald laughed. "We've got to get moving and get those miles in."

Jaycee glared at her and took the socks she handed over. "All right, all right, I just hurt. Please don't nag me."

Emerald laughed again. "As we get moving you'll feel better."

"You are pure sunshine." Jaycee sighed. "Okay, I'll stop being grumpy. I truly want to thank you. You and Ace are awesome to help me win the money."

"Of course. We're happy to do it." Emerald liked lumping herself with Ace as if they were a couple. As Jaycee got more comfortable, Emerald liked her even more. Her complaining, sarcastic personality was funny.

They all worked together packing up and eating a quick breakfast. Emerald's legs, knees, and lower back were stiff from the miles yesterday and her feet ached. They'd get their muscles warm as they walked; it would be fine. At least that's what she told Jaycee several more times when the woman complained about how bad her legs and feet hurt.

Emerald took a minute to stretch. As she lifted her arms over her head and bent backward, she closed her eyes and thanked the Lord for another day. Opening her eyes, her gaze collided with Ace's. His blue eyes were filled with a heat that made her flush. She'd had many men give her lingering or leering glances, but this was different. It was like a magnet that made her want to slide across the dirt until she connected with him.

"All right, Big Dog and Beauty. Let's go," Jaycee called, interrupting the moment.

As they lifted their backpacks on, Emerald realized she still had Ace's sweatshirt on. She'd asked him during breakfast if he was cold, but he had just smiled and shook his head. "Big Dog's too tough to feel cold."

She'd laughed. Now she asked again, "Do you want your sweatshirt?"

He shook his head, his gaze trailing over her. "Looks better on you."

Emerald smiled and kept the sweatshirt on. They both followed Jaycee to the trail and slowly traipsed through the miles.

By noon, Emerald was down to one sweatshirt, rolling Ace's tight and storing it in her backpack. By late afternoon, she was only wearing her long-sleeved running shirt and was sweating in that.

"So we go from freezing to hiking in a tropical sauna," Jaycee moaned. "My feet hurt. My back hurts. My head hurts. My shoulders hurt. But you know what hurts worst of all?"

"Your legs," Emerald supplied, having heard this rant who knew how many times today.

“Yes! Can’t you two complain so I don’t feel like the whiny butt? ‘Whine a lot’. You seriously called me that. You’re such a jerk, Ace.”

Emerald and Ace both laughed. For some reason, her complaining was funny and endearing.

“You complain enough for all three of us,” Ace teased her.

Jaycee growled at him. “Come on, think of something. Complaining makes you feel better, I promise.”

“My only complaint is it’s been too warm and slushy for us to slide down any north-facing slopes,” Ace said.

“I’m sure we’ll find more snow and ice at some point on the trail,” Emerald reassured him.

“Good to know.” He grinned at her.

“Bunch of sunshine-y souls, aren’t you two?” Jaycee muttered.

“We’re getting... semi-close to our twenty miles,” Ace told her. “Ahead of schedule today.”

“Thanks, Big Dog. I couldn’t do this without you,” Jaycee said back.

Emerald smiled and kept walking, but something in the way these two bantered bothered her. Was Jaycee interested in Ace? Nobody would blame her, least of all Emerald, but who knew if Ace was interested in either Jaycee or Emerald or if he was just an extremely nice guy? That look in the tent this morning and him leaning closer had been replaying deliciously through her mind all day, giving her hope that she was the one he wanted.

They traipsed toward the next peak, walking along a switchback trail. Emerald tried to focus her gaze and the camera on the beauty of the trees, wildflowers, and mountain peaks, but found her eyes drawn far too often to Ace’s strong back and shoulders. As if he sensed her gaze, he looked over his shoulder and then tossed her an appealing wink.

“Just keep walking, just keep walking, walk, walk, walk, walk,” Jaycee was muttering in front of them.

“What are you spouting now?” Ace asked.

She glared back at them. “Dory.”

Emerald had recognized the Finding Nemo quote, but obviously Ace had no clue. His brow wrinkled and they kept plodding up the mountainside.

“Like the kids’ show Dora the Explorer?”

“Oh my!” Jaycee shook her head. “No! Dory from Finding Nemo. ‘When life gets you down, you know what you gotta do? Just keep swimming.’ ‘When something gets too hard, there is always another way.’ ‘Fish are friends, not food.’ Any of this ringing a bell?”

“Sorry, no,” Ace admitted.

“Oh my goodness, our handsome military hero, your education is sorely lacking. As soon as we get to Aspen, you and I have a date with Finding Nemo and Dory. Savvy?”

Ace chuckled. “Sure, Jace. Me and you watching a kids’ show. Sounds exciting.”

Emerald’s stomach suddenly felt full of rocks. Ace was kind and she thought he kept giving her meaningful looks, but he didn’t call her by a nickname. They didn’t have a “date” set up for after they finished this adventure. Jaycee was a beautiful and funny lady, working for a great cause. When Emerald had planned each of these weeks down to the right size of clothing for each participant, she’d also been playing matchmaker. From the details she’d found, she’d thought Ace and Jaycee would be a great match. Even their names were cute together. Especially if he called her “Jace” instead of “Junior.” Ace and Jace. How sweet was that? She kicked a rock and plodded up the hill. Sickeningly sweet. She was suddenly tired and wanted a break, her legs aching as bad as Jaycee said hers were.

“How far have we gone?” Jaycee muttered.

“We’re on mile seventeen,” Ace said.

“Cool. Only three miles left today then. Let’s not do extra today. Please, task master, please.”

Ace chuckled easily. “You’re the boss, Jace. This is your money we’re earning. Mine’s already in the bank.”

“Jerk.”

Ace only laughed in reply.

They were all silent as they worked hard to finish the incline. Every time Emerald checked, it looked like they were close to the top, but the mountain just kept going and going. Had they crossed another mile? It was hard to gauge. They were moving so slow, barely plodding along. Her legs felt like sludge and her shoes like concrete blocks. She tried to block out how tired she was and how her quadricep muscles ached and protested each step but it was hard.

They finally, finally crested the ridge and she heard Jaycee gasp. Her gaze darted up, hoping she hadn’t seen bears, moose, or coyote. There was also danger from big-horn sheep or the large mountain goats who could spear them.

“That’s so pretty,” Jaycee breathed.

Emerald stepped up next to Jaycee and Ace and let herself soak in the beauty of nature. The valley below was full of trees, thick green undergrowth, and blue, red, and yellow wildflowers. A pristine blue lake sparkled up at them, fed by a dancing stream, almost a mini-waterfall.

“Wow. This is why we’re here, right?” Emerald said.

“Not me,” Jaycee quipped. “I’m here to make lots of money for my furry friends.”

They all laughed and started the descent. It was a sharp enough downhill that Emerald’s quads and knees hurt worse than going up. After how far they’d gone yesterday, her body was simply exhausted.

“I’ve been wondering about something, Jace,” Ace spoke up as they eased down the slope.

“Ask away, Big Dog.”

“You love animals, dedicated your life to protecting those in danger, but you’re terrified of bears?”



Jaycee glared at him over her shoulder. "I can love them from a distance. I don't have to love them while they're ripping my head off."

Ace laughed easily. "You are hilarious."

Emerald again wondered if he was starting to fall for Jaycee. She kicked a rock and shuffled down the trail. The lake had looked so close, but with the switchbacks it was still a few miles until they reached it.

"Mile twenty-one," Ace announced. "Sorry, Jace. We overshot a bit."

"I'll forgive you, but only because we're here early, and soon I'll be swimming in that lake." She shook a fist at him. "One of these days, we're doing like ten miles and that's it."

Ace chuckled. "From the trail map, I figure we'll do the last stretch from Crested Butte to Aspen on our final day. That will only be eleven or twelve miles. We can reward ourselves if we keep this pace up." He winked. "What do you say we camp right here?"

"Can we take a bath in the lake?" Emerald asked, excited to wash off the sweat and grime of the trail.

"I know I am." Ace winked, set his backpack down, tugged a pistol out of the back of his pants and a knife from his pocket, set them down on top of the backpack, and then stripped off his shirt. "The cold water will also help sore muscles and aching feet."

Emerald simply stared at him, her mouth open. His body was strong and perfect to her. His shape wasn't the perfect type created in a gym. It was real-world tough with lean, ropey muscles and a breadth to his shoulders that took her breath away.

"Come on, baby. Let's swim," Jaycee hollered, interrupting Emerald's gawking.

Jaycee dropped her pack, peeled off her socks and shoes, and then stripped off her shirt and pants. Emerald stared at her now instead of Ace. How was she that comfortable in only her sports bra and underwear? Ace was probably loving the show.

Emerald should be the one confident in minimal clothing with her history as a model, but she'd never accepted any contracts for underwear. She'd been able to keep herself more covered.

“Come on,” Jaycee called, waiting for her at the edge. Ace was staring at Emerald too. His blue eyes were deep, as if he was wondering if she'd strip too. She couldn't tell what he wanted her to do.

She took the camera off the backpack and set it up on the small tripod. Hurrying to unlace her shoes, she happily took them off, along with her socks, then walked carefully to the edge.

“You're swimming in your clothes?” Jaycee asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Yeah, I'll rinse them while I swim and hang them out tonight. Then I'll have cleaner clothes to change into.”

Ace smiled at her, looking almost ... relieved. Did he not want to see her minimally clothed then? “It's a good plan. After we swim, we'll wash our clothes and hang them out. Okay, ready?”

“I was born ready,” Jaycee hollered. She hurried into the water, then screamed and backed up. “It's freezing.”

Ace chuckled deep and low. “Of course it is. It's a mountain lake and the first of June. The ice probably barely melted.” He extended his hand to Jaycee. “Come on. We'll go together.”

Emerald felt a pang of jealousy. Jaycee looked fabulous in her underwear and now Ace wanted to swim with her.

Ace extended his other hand to Emerald. “You with us?”

Emerald should've told him no, but she couldn't resist him. She put her hand in his and felt a rightness and warmth rush through her. Ace blinked at her and then stared deeply into her eyes as if he felt it too.

“Okay, on the count of what?” Jaycee asked. “And how deep are we going?”

“Three, and all the way under,” Ace said.

“Oh, my. This is going to be miserable,” Jaycee said. “One ... two ... three!”

Ace tugged them both forward. They all plunged into the icy water. Emerald gasped in shock as Ace held her hand and she kept going with him. They hit thigh deep and Ace dove under, tugging her with him. Emerald’s head went under the icy surface and her lungs froze along with everything else. She burst up out of the water, screaming, and heard Jaycee screaming as well. Icy pinpricks covered her body. She couldn’t catch a full breath.

Ace came up, his body glistening with droplets of water in the sunshine. He still held Emerald’s hand, but she noticed he’d released Jaycee’s. He pushed the water out of his hair with one hand and grinned. “Refreshing, right?”

“Let’s get out of here,” Jaycee insisted.

“If you can at least keep your legs and feet in for a bit, you’ll feel better tomorrow. At least maybe we won’t have to listen to you complain so much.”

“Ah!” Jaycee gasped. She splashed water at him. “You love hearing me complain and you know it.”

Ace laughed and splashed her back. Jaycee threw herself at him and tried to tackle him in the water, but of course failed to budge him at all.

Emerald watched their playfulness, feeling numb all over.

Her chill was only partially from the freezing cold lake.

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## CHAPTER FIVE

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Ace couldn't figure out why Emerald got strangely quiet after their swim in the lake. If only she'd been the one to throw herself at him instead of Jaycee. Jaycee was funny. If he had a sister, he would hope for someone like Jaycee, but he had zero interest in her as a woman.

Emerald? His interest level was at a hundred percent. If only there was no Axel in her life. He'd gotten quiet last night thinking about her and Axel. Was Emerald thinking about Axel tonight, and wishing he was here to play in a mountain lake with her? He pushed those awful thoughts away.

They eventually left the lake after trying to scrub their clothes, then thawed out in the warm sunshine. It was probably close to eighty in the afternoon sun, but as it dipped behind the peaks, he knew they'd get cold. They all changed into the dry clothes in their packs and hung out the clothes they'd worn for two days and both pairs of socks. They had plenty of socks, but none of them wanted stinky socks in their bags. Then they worked together to set up the tent and build a fire by a fallen log to rest their backs on.

After dinner, Emerald excused herself to use the bathroom. Ace watched her go longingly, her beautiful outline disappearing into the trees. The dimness of the evening was approaching and he didn't want her too far away, but he understood her need for privacy.

She hadn't talked much at dinner but had smiled and laughed at the right times as Ace told funny stories from the

military and growing up and Jaycee shared the pranks she used to play on her “bossy older sister.”

“Okay, Big Dog,” Jaycee said as soon as Emerald was gone. She lowered her voice and edged in closer. “It’s obvious you’re gone over her. What’s the deal? When are you making your move?”

Ace also lowered his voice. He didn’t know how far away Emerald was. “It’s obvious?”

“For sure, and who would blame you? I thought I wouldn’t like having the model along, but she’s incredible. Perfect, gorgeous, smart, wealthy—if the rumors of how good Axel pays her are true—but she’s also kind and fun. She’s the complete package, man. What are you going to do to win her? I know!” She snapped her fingers. “I’ll fake asleep tonight and you kiss her in the tent.”

Ace smiled, embarrassed that it was so obvious how much he liked Emerald. He completely agreed with Jaycee, though; Emerald was incredible and matched all of Jaycee’s descriptors. He was glad he had Jaycee’s approval, but he wasn’t sure how to kiss Emerald in the tent, especially if Jaycee was right there “faking asleep.”

The very idea of kissing Emerald made his pulse race.

“What about Axel?” Ace asked in an undertone, not sure how long they had until Emerald returned. “It’s pretty obvious they’re together.”

Jaycee sighed, but didn’t dispute his claim. “It is, but I personally think she deserves better.”

Ace grunted. “I’m definitely not better than Axel.”

Jaycee gave him a determined glare and her voice rose. “You’re a great man, Ace. A kind, handsome, wonderful person.”

Ace wanted to dispute her. He’d never been “handsome.”

Her voice dropped low again. “Axel seems like an impressive person, but he’s on dates with different women every night. How’s that fair to Emerald? He’s a two-timing

scum and she lets him get away with it. She deserves someone who cherishes her, like I think you would.”

Ace’s breath caught. Axel was dating a whole bunch of other women and Emerald put up with that? When he’d Googled her, he’d seen tons of pictures of her and Axel together. He should’ve thought to Google Axel’s name and see what came up.

A light step approached. Jaycee jumped away from him as if a teacher had caught them making out. He blinked at her in surprise and turned to see Emerald at the edge of the woods, watching them. Her smooth brow wrinkled and her eyes narrowed.

“Hey!” Jaycee called. “It’s my turn.”

Emerald gave her a fleeting smile as Jaycee hurried past, taking the roll of tissue and garbage sack from Emerald.

Ace stood and watched Emerald, hoping she’d come talk to him, wondering if he dared act on Jaycee’s confidence in him.

She walked right past Ace and toward the tent.

“Emerald?” he questioned cautiously, wishing he dared use her nickname like Axel and Jaycee did. Anger filled him. If Axel was cheating on her, the man had no right to call her a nickname. How dare he secure the affections of someone incredible like Emerald, yet date every pretty girl that came along? If Axel was here right now, Ace would slam him to the ground and happily cut off his ears and nose.

She stopped next to the tent but didn’t turn around. Ace walked up close, stopping right behind her. It bugged him that she wouldn’t look at him. Was she feeling guilty for maybe being interested in Ace when she was in a relationship with Axel? She shouldn’t. Axel was a jerk and wasn’t worthy of her if he couldn’t commit to her. Axel must be the master of mind games to keep Emerald by his side while openly cheating on her. Ace no longer felt any guilt for stealing Emerald from the man. Jaycee was right; Emerald deserved someone who would respect and cherish her.

“I, um, was wondering,” he stuttered, feeling like an idiot. He didn’t know how to ask, or even what to ask.

She glanced over her shoulder at him. Night was coming on fast, but he could still get lost in her incredible bluish-green eyes. “Yes?”

“Are you really okay with ... dating someone who dates other people?” That had come out all wrong. She was too smart not to know Axel was cheating on her. She was too impressive to be ignorant or put up with something like that. Ace wanted to beg her to date him and promise he’d never look at another woman. He’d commit to her for life right at this moment. Maybe they didn’t know each other very well, but he’d love to spend a lifetime finding out everything about her, protecting her, loving her. He let his eyes dip to her mouth and heat filled him.

“No,” she said firmly, her eyes narrowing. Turning to face him, she crossed her arms over her chest and squared her shoulders.

If the answer was no, why did she look so defensive?

So it bugged her that Axel cheated, but she was too weak to stand up to him and now she’d defend the man’s scummy actions to Ace? That didn’t seem like the Emerald he was growing to respect and care for deeply.

“Then why—”

His words were cut off by a blood-curdling scream. “Help, help, help!”

Ace whipped around, yanking the pistol from the back of his pants and rushing in the direction of Jaycee’s voice. The small woman sprinted out of the trees, screaming, her face pinched with horror.

A low, guttural growl sounded behind her. Ace saw a huge mountain lion stalking Jaycee through the trees.

“Hey!” he hollered, jumping in front of the lion and waving his arms menacingly, puffing out his chest to look even bigger. “Get back!”

The lion stopped in its tracks, yellowish-brown eyes roving over Ace as if trying to decide how much of a challenge he would be to fight, not wanting to give up on the chance for a good meal.

“Go! Back off!” Ace kept yelling and then took a step toward the creature, showing him he meant business. He hoped he wouldn’t have to shoot and kill such a magnificent animal, but he would do it to protect Emerald and Jaycee.

They faced off. Ace debated another step forward or a warning shot as he continued to yell and wave his arms. The animal had probably gone after Jaycee as she was squatting down using the bathroom and looking even smaller than she was. Then she’d run, which made her prey in the lion’s eyes. Ace doubted the animal would want to fight someone who looked threatening.

“Get back!” he yelled again.

“Go!” Emerald yelled from behind him. She clapped her hands loudly and added her screams to his. “Get away!”

Ace felt his chest burst with pride. She was smart, and brave.

“Go!” she yelled again, and he realized she was right beside him.

He held out a hand and pushed her back. “Stay back,” he cautioned. It was one thing to be smart and add more loud voices to his, but he would not allow her to put herself in harm’s way.

The lion gave them one more defiant look but turned and slowly walked away, almost as if making a point that it wasn’t afraid of Ace but wasn’t going to fight him.

Ace watched it go, then turned back to the women. “Good job,” he told Emerald.

She nodded to him. The look in her eyes was partially admiring and partially frustrated. Was she mad he’d held her back? She was an independent woman, but he had the gun, the knife, and the fighting skills.



Jaycee was trembling. He barely had time to tuck the gun into the back of his waistband before she hurled herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and letting out a sob.

Ace wished he was holding Emerald, but he couldn't deny his new friend who was obviously still terrified. She alternated crying and professing what a "studly hero" he was.

He held her for a while and then ushered her back toward the campfire. Glancing at Emerald, he hoped his expression conveyed that he needed help comforting the woman and he wouldn't mind Emerald taking over. Emerald's look was now full of agony and frustration. She fiddled with the camera that she'd moved closer to camp after their swim.

Looking out at where the mountain lion had been, she finally sighed and turned to them, asking, "Are you okay, Jaycee?"

"Only because of Ace. What if that beast comes after us again?"

Ace shook his head. "He won't. He wants smaller prey. Were you squatting down when he first saw you?"

"Y-Yes," she managed, still clinging too tightly to him. "He came right up to the garbage sack I was going to put my tissue in."

"That makes sense. He smelled the food containers, and then you ran. He thought you were prey, that's all. We're safe together. He won't come back. Especially with Emerald adding her yells and standing next to me." He gave her a smile that she didn't return.

"I don't know if I can do this. How am I going to sleep? How am I ever going to use the bathroom again?"

Ace didn't laugh. Her fear was palpable. "It's okay. We'll stand guard for you. We can all stay together. You'll be okay. I promise. You've got this."

Jaycee looked up at him and he could feel Emerald staring at the two of them. He didn't wish for Emerald to be scared like Jaycee was and he was so impressed by her bravery, but he would much rather be comforting her.

“Can I sleep in the middle tonight?” Jaycee squeaked.

Ace smiled. “Sure.” He glanced at Emerald. She was still studying them, and she wasn’t smiling. He obviously wasn’t getting a kiss tonight and after Jaycee’s scare, he doubted he’d get any time alone with Emerald. How was he going to steal her from Axel now? He knew ninety-nine-point-nine percent of women would find Axel more charming, handsome, and obviously more wealthy. But if the jerk couldn’t be faithful and that upset Emerald, maybe Ace had a chance. Her narrowed eyes and the obvious tightness of her shoulders said his chance might be gone. Maybe his question had made her feel bad because she obviously didn’t like being cheated on, but she loved Axel desperately. The two of them had been together for four years.

How was Ace going to steal her with only four more days?

His own shoulders rounded as he escorted Jaycee to the tent, reassuring her she’d be able to fall asleep because of their intense hikes the past two days, and also reassuring her they were safe. Emerald followed close behind.

He held the tent flap and luckily Jaycee finally untethered herself from his side. He gave Emerald a smile. She barely returned it. Dang. His one attempt to talk to her had obviously backfired. He wasn’t surprised. He’d never been smooth with women, but this woman was special.

Somehow, he’d have to convince her of that.

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## CHAPTER SIX

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**E**merald was disgusted with herself when she woke feeling much the same as she'd fallen asleep. Ace wanted to date both her and Jaycee. He'd even asked if Emerald was okay with that. It made her furious at him, but she still ached to be close to him and was consumed with jealousy when she remembered Jaycee in his arms. She completely agreed that he was a "studly hero." He had bravely faced down that mountain lion. She'd tried to help, but he hadn't needed her. Had he pushed her behind him simply because he wanted to protect her? Or did he think she wasn't feminine enough? She'd never be petite like Jaycee at five-eleven, but she'd thought Ace found her attractive... until now.

If Jaycee wasn't in the picture, Emerald would forget every ounce of pride she had and pursue Ace until he gave her a chance, but she wouldn't share him with Jaycee. That was awful. Had those words really come out of his mouth? They seemed so unlike Ace. But what did she really know about him? She'd fantasized about the kind of upstanding man she thought he was, but fantasies weren't real life. She needed to tamp down her attraction to him and focus on enjoying the hike. She'd have to think of Ace as a friend and hope he and Jaycee were happy.

As dawn arrived and the tent lightened, she opened her eyes. Jaycee and Ace were both sleeping, Jaycee pressed tight against him. Ace's arm was slung over the woman's waist. That's probably how Emerald and Ace had looked yesterday morning. Emerald's stomach churned.

She squeezed her eyes shut tight again. Why had she come on this adventure? She'd carefully matched each couple, secretly hoping they would fall in love. That had backfired in the initial meeting with the ex-Navy SEALs when she'd been the one to fall ... for Ace.

Even if he was interested in Emerald, she wouldn't share him with anyone else.

The thought made her stomach curl again. He and Jaycee would be great together, and he was clearly interested in the beautiful brunette. It was just like Emerald had planned before she met Ace personally.

Dumb, dumb, dumb.

She had to get out of here or she'd scream.

Scrambling out of her sleeping bag, she tripped over the two of them in her haste to get out the tent door.

"Hey!" Jaycee shot up, looking blurry-eyed.

"Sorry," Emerald mumbled, bent over as she tugged at the zipper.

Ace sat up, studying her in the muted light of pre-dawn. His fingers brushed hers as he calmly took the zipper and slid it open. She couldn't draw her eyes away.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yep, fine. Ready to hike." She hurried out of the tent, zipping it closed behind her.

Immediately she heard them talking in rushed but quiet tones. She couldn't make out what they were saying. Maybe it was for the best. Did she really want to hear their conversation? Ace was probably fawning over Jaycee and saying nice things to her like he had been saying to Emerald. Initially, he'd seemed more drawn to Emerald, but now it was obvious that he and Jaycee liked each other.

He'd had the gall to ask her if she was okay being with someone who dated other people. She'd never thought Ace could be a jerk, but that was a slime-ball thing to say.

Jaycee could have him.

As they got going with the day, she pretended nothing was wrong and tried to join in their banter, but judging by the looks Ace kept giving her, she failed miserably. The morning was chilly, but by midday it had warmed up again. They passed a couple male hikers, the first people they'd seen on these backcountry trails, and stopped to chat for a few minutes. Jaycee told them excitedly about the challenge, their route, and that they were ahead of schedule. The blond teased that maybe he'd come meet her in Aspen Saturday night. Jaycee only laughed at him. The dark-haired taller guy never stopped gawking at Emerald.

When they finally said their goodbyes, Emerald was more than ready to put some distance between them. She hoped they were joking about coming to Aspen.

The dark-haired guy rushed out, "Aren't you that gorgeous model who lives with Axel Dexter?"

She was living in Axel's guest house in Wander Wood while her condo in Uptown Dallas was being finished. She wanted to be on their way and away from this man gawking at her, so she simply said, "Yes, that's me," and started walking.

She could hear one of the men, she thought the blond, whispering behind her, "Don't do it, man. Axel Dexter isn't somebody to mess with."

Thankfully, Ace and Jaycee started walking as well. Emerald glanced over her shoulder, wondering what the guy was cautioning his friend not to do. He was right; Axel wasn't someone to mess with, but he wasn't here. Ace would protect her. She didn't sense these men meant her harm, but they stared at her as if she was on the Vegas strip.

She caught Ace's gaze on her. His blue eyes were conflicted, as if he'd pummel them if she'd only ask. She gave him a faltering smile and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Why did Ace look like he would fight all her battles? Why did she want him to? She was frustrated with Ace and her own reaction to him. As soon as they were safely

away from the men, she gestured for Ace and Jaycee to go in front of her. “Filming,” she murmured.

They both obeyed, but Ace still gave her concerned looks over his shoulder. Jaycee started complaining about her legs hurting and Ace teased her, taking his attention off of Emerald.

She should be happy.

She wasn't.

By late afternoon, they were getting close to the twenty-mile count. Jaycee was ecstatic about how great the hike was going, despite how bad she hurt. Emerald could sense Ace trying to catch her eye, but she studied her feet as they ascended yet another mountain.

“I hope we find another lake,” Jaycee was saying. “But no more mountain lions.”

Ace laughed. “Just stay by one of us taller people, Jace. The mountain lion thought you were a rabbit it could easily eat.”

“Har-har,” Jaycee said.

*One of us taller people.*

Most men were taken by Emerald's beauty, but some were intimidated by her size. Ace was clearly interested in a smaller woman like Jaycee. Emerald shuffled up the trail, frustration filling her. Who knew what Ace wanted?

A gust of wind brought Emerald's head up. Were they headed into a storm? As they reached the next summit, the wind whipped her hair into her face. Luckily it was at their backs, so it pushed them rather than forming a wall to walk through.

“There's rain coming.” Ace pointed to the dark, ominous clouds hanging over the mountain range. “Let's get off this face and find a sheltered spot.”

Emerald made sure the camera was recording and the battery wasn't running low. This would be good to film, even if it was terrifying.

All teasing thankfully ceased as they put their heads down and jogged quickly down the steep slopes. Emerald's legs were tired from three days of long miles over extreme inclines and declines. The backpacks were designed to distribute the weight evenly, but she was still sick of carrying the heavy pack.

She'd planned this week knowing the extreme miles each day would be a challenge, along with extreme temperatures and maybe some threats from animals or dangerous terrain. Living the challenge was both harder and easier than she'd imagined. She didn't mind the mile after mile. Luckily, none of them had gotten horrific blisters, injuries, or chafing, but plodding up and down mountains day after day had lost its appeal. The excessive miles, inclines, and sometimes shuffling through snow might be to blame. It was more likely the fact that the relationship she'd hoped to develop with Ace wasn't happening, and now she wondered why she was even here. She'd be desperately behind at work next week, and this was not the rejuvenating escape she'd hoped for.

More importantly, it was not the time she'd envisioned with Ace.

She debated claiming she had a work emergency and having Axel send a helicopter for her. It would probably look orchestrated that she suddenly needed to leave, and she didn't want either of them to realize she wanted Ace all to herself. She'd be disappointed if any of the other contestants quit early, especially after she'd spent so much time planning their adventures.

Emerald was no quitter.

She jutted out her chin. She was going to finish, even if it hurt every minute that she couldn't have Ace.

The wind grew stronger and a few errant raindrops hit her face as they finally reached the bottom of the incline. It was a narrow canyon with a stream. They hurried to clear a spot to set up the tent, refill water bottles, and get some food from their packs. Zipping the backpacks up tight, they left them

outside the tent. The rain was picking up as they all ducked inside.

Emerald felt stiff and uncomfortable, more emotionally than physically. They shuffled around, taking off their shoes and socks and laying them at the end of their sleeping bags. Their backpacks were waterproof and would be okay if it rained like crazy, but if their shoes were wet, they'd probably get blisters that would make the rest of the week sheer misery.

"How's everybody's feet?" Ace asked.

"Stinky," Jaycee retorted.

It didn't smell so great in here, but Emerald suspected that was on all of them.

Emerald laughed. She really liked Jaycee and could see why Ace was interested in the feisty, beautiful lady. "Just tired," she said. "What time is it?" With the sky darkened by the storm, it was hard to tell.

"It's only six."

"How far did we get?" Jaycee asked.

"Twenty-two-point-two miles," Ace reported.

"Sweet! Dang, we are rock stars." Jaycee beamed at both of them. "Thank you both for being here for me. I could never have done this alone. I swear if I earn the money, I will do such good things with it."

Emerald felt warm in the tent. It was nice to be off her feet with her shoes off and even nicer to have Jaycee's praise. She wasn't doing much to help on the trail besides filming, but she'd planned this adventure and hand-picked Jaycee. Despite her errant desires to push Jaycee out into the rain and fling herself into Ace's arms, she was glad to be here supporting Jaycee. The three of them had a good rapport. If Emerald wasn't so infatuated with Ace, this trip would be fun and a grand adventure. She needed to tamp those desires down and focus on enjoying the beauty of nature and their friendship.

"I promise tonight I won't be a wimp and I'll let Emerald sleep in the middle."



Emerald shrugged even as anticipation filled her. She'd love to snuggle into Ace, but that made her mad. She wasn't into men who two-timed. "It doesn't matter to me where I sleep." That was a lie and earned her a sharp gaze from Ace. She wondered why he didn't ask to sleep in the middle himself. He could alternate hugging each woman close. She held in an angry harrumph and focused on setting up the camera.

They all drank from their water bottles and started eating a cold, dry dinner, rehashing the day and plotting how far they'd need to go the next three days to finish the challenge. They were seven miles ahead of schedule, which was nice, but they couldn't let up yet. Twenty miles a day over rough terrain was intense, especially because the rain pinging on the tent would make tomorrow muddy and slow them down.

"So you *live* with Axel?" Ace asked at a break in the conversation, looking at her then back at the package of almonds in his hands.

Emerald wondered about the inflection in his tone, the random question, and why he'd even care. "I live in his guest house," she clarified. "I'm buying a new condo in Uptown, but it's not finished. There was no reason to renew my apartment lease for another year."

"Oh," was all he said.

Things got quiet as they finished eating and listened to the rain beating against the roof of the tent. They piled the food and garbage in the corner and then stretched out on top of their sleeping bags. Jaycee insisted Emerald sleep in the middle. It was odd that Jaycee didn't want to cuddle in the night with Ace again, but Emerald didn't put up a fuss. She didn't want either of them to know how drawn she was to Ace, and how mad that made her.

The tent was warm and with the rain outside, they felt insulated from the world. They all lay there, nobody talking, just breathing quietly and listening to the rain. Emerald should check the batteries on the camera—guaranteed Jaycee would

say something cute and the producers would eat up the way Ace responded—but she couldn't muster up the energy.

"It's gross to think about sleeping without brushing your teeth," Jaycee said.

Emerald nodded her agreement.

"Even worse, I'll probably need to pee in the middle of the night," Jaycee continued.

Ace groaned. "Jace, I swear you're the most interesting woman I've ever met."

Emerald froze. Why was she lying between these two? In Ace's mind, was interesting a good thing? Or was he simply saying that Jaycee was different than most women? Emerald thought she was great, so Ace probably loved that she was different.

Dang. She didn't like being jealous of her friend.

"I like when you call me Jace," Jaycee said, and Emerald felt even more uncomfortable. "So we've got Big Dog and Ace for you, which you're going to have to explain soon. Any nicknames besides Beauty for you, Emerald?"

"Axel calls me Em," she said quietly.

She felt Ace stiffen beside her. She darted a glance at him, but he was studying the roof of the tent.

"I like that," Jaycee said. "Do you care if we call you that?"

"No, that's fine." But her voice was as stiff as Ace's taut body. "Can I call you Jace like Ace does?" She was testing the waters to see if it was a private nickname for only Ace to use.

"Sure," Jaycee said, then she snorted. "Jace and Ace. Ha! We're quite the pair, right?"

"That's right," Ace agreed when Emerald said nothing. He rolled over to face the tent wall. "I'm going to try to sleep. If the rain tapers off in the night, we should try to get an early start. The mud's going to slow us down."

“Okay, party pooper. Forget chatting all night with two beautiful women. Get your beauty sleep.”

“I will, ‘cause I need it.” Ace tried to say it gruffly, but it was easy to hear the humor in his voice. Of course he enjoyed teasing with Jaycee. What man wouldn’t?

Tomorrow would be miserable with rain and mud, but right now was even worse. Jaycee and Ace were obviously into each other and Emerald was the weird third wheel—sleeping between them, no less. Why had Jaycee asked her to sleep in the middle? They had no privacy, especially because Jaycee didn’t want to be alone for a second, so Emerald had no opportunity to ask the woman if she loved Ace or if she’d please step back and let Emerald have a chance.

She gritted her teeth in frustration and said a prayer for help to stay positive and focus on helping Jaycee win her money. She begged for help not to be envious. Jaycee and Ace were both incredible people. She should be happy they’d found each other. Instead, she was letting herself be eaten up with jealousy. She usually didn’t think of herself as selfish, but she sure was right now.

Rolling onto her right side, she stared at Ace’s broad back. It was pretty lame that she was so consumed with this man when she had any number of men after her. What did it matter that Ace didn’t want her? It shouldn’t.

Silent tears slid down her cheeks.

It obviously mattered to her. A lot.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

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Ace wished he'd been able to go to sleep when he said he was going to. Instead, he'd listened to Emerald's soft exhales and felt them against his neck. He wanted to roll over and hold her close, but she'd acted so strange all day. And the thought that she lived with Axel like those men had said made him sick. She said she lived in his guest house, but still. She lived on his property. They'd been together four years. How could Ace come between them?

Whenever Jaycee had a moment to whisper in his ear, she'd been telling him he had to go for "Em" and that Axel wasn't worthy of her, but Ace wasn't getting any signals that Emerald *wanted* him to go for her.

Thursday morning dawned cloudy with only a slight drizzle. Ace woke at four-thirty. When he sat up, Emerald stirred as well.

"Oh, good," Jaycee said. "You two lazy bones are finally up. I've been needing to pee like a racehorse for hours."

Ace laughed. Jaycee was overboard, but she was funny. He would've preferred being alone with Emerald, but he was glad Jaycee was along.

They hurried to eat a dry breakfast, break down camp, use the bathroom, and embark on their hike. It was still predawn as they started up the other side of the narrow canyon. With Yaktraks on their running shoes, they fared okay in the mud. Everybody was silent as if dreading getting through this long, miserable day. If the rain didn't stop, it could be dangerous as

well as miserable. Luckily, they were ahead of the game in miles, but they still needed to do at least ten today and then get back to their normal grueling pace on Friday and Saturday. Hopefully the rain wouldn't last through the weekend.

They traversed more slowly, occasionally slipping even with their spikes. Uphill was harder than ever and downhill was treacherous. They couldn't make up time by going down quick. There was much less ice now than the first day thanks to warm temps and fewer straight-north slopes. Sliding down this mess would surely mean injury. Today's route had a lot more drop-offs than they'd previously seen. Sliding off this trail could result in injury or death.

They hit a section of shale, ice, and mud that worried Ace. He glanced off the side and could see straight down to the next switchback, at least a forty-foot drop. Beyond that, it was hundreds of feet to the valley below. He moved around in front of Jaycee to pick his way down and make sure he could catch the girls if one of them slipped.

"Shnikies!" Jaycee yelled. He turned and she was sliding toward the cliff's edge on loose rock and mud, her arms flailing and her dark eyes full of terror.

Ace grabbed her arm and yanked her toward the mountain.

"Oh, thank you," she gasped, clinging to him. The poor woman was shaking as badly as she had after the mountain lion scare.

"I've got you," he told her.

A scream of terror sounded behind him.

Ace released Jaycee and turned, yelling out in horror as Emerald plunged off the cliff.

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Emerald watched Jaycee slip. Her heart raced until Ace caught the other woman and pulled her away from the edge and to safety. She said a prayer of gratitude that her friend was safe,

but as Ace held Jaycee in his arms, that roar of jealousy sounded in her ears.

She shuffled toward them, trying not to look at them but failing. Her eyes were riveted to their embrace and how great they looked together.

Loose shale and mud shifted under her feet.

She screamed as her feet shot out from under her. She hit hard on her backside and her momentum took her toward the edge of the trail.

The ground disappeared.

Her stomach tried to claw its way out of her throat. She couldn't even cry she was so terrified as she free-fell toward nothingness.

She slammed into a tree, catching it with her arm and her backpack. Her momentum stopped abruptly and she clung to the tree, gritting her teeth against the burning pain in her arm.

“Em!” Ace’s voice came from above.

She glanced up. The horror in his blue eyes told her the fall had looked just as terrifying as it felt.

“Are you okay?” he asked urgently.

She tried to assess, but her heart was pounding out of control from the adrenaline rushing through her. She couldn't be sure what hurt or if the intense fear was making her body throb. “I think so,” she managed.

“Don't move.”

Emerald wrapped both arms around the tree that stuck straight out of the side of the mountain. She found a protruding rock to lodge her feet onto and take the strain off her arms. Looking up, she thought she'd fallen about twenty feet. Looking down, she realized the trail was at least another twenty feet below her. The ground directly below her was a little more sloped, not a straight drop-off, but after about ten feet it became vertical again. How would she get down without overshooting the trail and plunging off the next cliff?

“Em?” Ace called. “Is there rope in one of our backpacks?”

Emerald thought through what she’d packed in each bag, ignoring the warmth of him calling her “Em”. How could she be so caught up in that and the concern in his voice when she very well may die? She shook her head and tried to think.

“It’s in mine,” she said, a sick feeling rushing through her. No way could she let go of the tree to take off her backpack and fish out the rope. Ace had probably meant to lower it from above anyway.

“Okay. No worries. I’m going to come below you. Hold tight.”

His voice didn’t sound like “no worries.” Was she going to die? Emerald had never thought of herself as dramatic, but she was ready to start screaming and begging the good Lord to preserve her life.

With that thought, she squeezed her eyes tight and did start praying.

She heard Ace’s footsteps scrambling down the switchback trail. Far too many long, terrifying minutes passed before he called to her from below. “Okay, I’m here. Let’s talk this through, Em.”

She glanced down at him. Her stomach swooped thinking about dropping that far, but Ace being there reassured her. He was strong. Only the concern in his blue eyes contradicted the calm and reassurance he radiated.

“That tree is on a slope. It doesn’t drop off steeply until the last ten feet. I want you to turn over onto your stomach and use the tree to ease down as far as you can.”

Emerald’s body trembled with fear. She felt too weak to hold herself, but she trusted Ace. She tried to pivot, but her backpack was snagged on something. Tugging a few times, she feared she’d throw herself away from the tree, but she couldn’t stay here all day. She tugged harder and the backpack ripped free. Breathing to calm herself, she slowly turned over onto her belly and eased her hands to the lowest branches of

the tree, shuffling carefully and bending her knees to keep her feet on the rock.

“Good. Now there’s a solid root about three feet down. Stretch and see if you can put your feet on it.”

She slowly stepped each foot off the rock and down the steep slope, her arms taking most of her weight now. The right one that had slammed into the tree ached in protest. She’d definitely injured her shoulder. She searched with her feet, needing to get the pressure off her arms before she dropped, but didn’t feel any supposed root. She prayed even harder for help.

“You’re almost there. Inch down just a little more.”

If she inched any further, she’d have to let go with her hands. She tried to lengthen her body and had never been so grateful to be tall.

“Yes! You’re there,” Ace called.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. It’s a good-sized root. It should hold you.”

Should? Yikes.

“I’m trusting you,” she said.

“You can,” Ace replied. Something in his voice filled her with hope and reassurance even when she shouldn’t have any. “Let go of one hand and you’ll feel the root support you.”

Emerald squeezed her eyes shut tight and released her right hand, inching down a bit further. Her feet were supported by a large root just like Ace had said.

“Now keep holding on with your left hand and release your backpack with the right. You can slide it right off and get rid of that weight.”

She pulled in a breath and clung to the tree with her left hand. Fumbling with her right, she unlatched the top strap, but her fingers were too slick with sweat to get the one at her waist. Her breath came in frenzied pants and she was



trembling from head to toe. *Please don't let me die*, she begged.

“You’ve got it. No hurry,” Ace said.

She appreciated his reassurance, but her arms or legs would give out if she didn’t hurry. Taking long, shuddering breaths, Emerald said another mental prayer.

Finally, the clasp at her abdomen gave. She slid the backpack off her right shoulder and then, trembling, she switched hands and let the left strap slide off.

The backpack hit the slope directly below her and launched through the air. She watched it go with a sickening sensation, as if it was her body sailing down with no way to stop. The backpack would surely fly past the trail below and smash to bits hundreds of feet below, just like Emerald soon would.

Ace snatched the backpack out of the air and yanked it back to the trail. Emerald caught her breath as Ace said, “Saved the camera. All’s good now.”

Emerald laughed uneasily. Ace had rescued her backpack, but it probably only weighed twenty-five pounds. She weighed one-sixty. No way could he snatch her out of the air like he had with the backpack. No way.

“Do you want to hold tight and I’ll run back up and lower the rope?”

“No. My arms and hands are already tired.” Just the thought made Emerald’s hands threaten to give out.

“Okay, we’re fine. We’ll get you down soon. I want you to let go with your other hand now,” Ace instructed.

Emerald didn’t want to, but she tentatively obeyed. She pressed into the steeply sloped earth with her abdomen and arms. The rock she’d had her feet on earlier dug into her stomach.

“Can you slowly crouch down on the root and then grab on to the rock you stepped on earlier?” Ace called.

“I-I think so.”

Her head pounded with fear. She inched down, reaching for the rock with her hands and finally grasping it.

“Okay, hold on to that rock and I want you to kneel on the root your feet are on.”

She made the mistake of looking down. Beneath the root there was more than a ten-foot drop to the trail and Ace. Beyond that, hundreds of feet of nothingness. If she knocked Ace off the trail when she dropped those last ten feet, they’d die.

Jaycee had made her way down the trail and was watching from a short distance away, hands clasped together, her face pinched and white. The look of horror on Jaycee’s face reaffirmed Emerald’s fears. She was in serious danger. If she fell off this small cliff, nothing would stop her from plunging over the next deadly incline.

Nothing except Ace.

“I want you to hold on to that root and lower yourself off the edge. Then I’ll have you.”

“I’ll knock you off the ledge and we’ll both go down the cliff.”

Ace chuckled easily.

“What are you laughing at?” She glared down at him.

“I’m tougher than that. You won’t knock me off.”

“I’m a tall girl and I weigh a lot,” she shot back at him.

He tilted his chin, all manly and irresistible. “You’re thin and I can easily catch you.”

Emerald took a deep breath, said another prayer, and faced the mountain slope. She carefully lowered herself over the root, grabbing on to it with her hands and then easing her body off until she was holding herself in midair with only her hands. Her shoulder hurt, but it held her.

Ace’s strong hands wrapped around her calves and she gasped in surprise. “Let go, Em. You’ll slide right down into my arms.”

Nothing had ever sounded so appealing.

Before she let herself overthink it, she let go.

Ace's hands slid along her body—firm, perfect, representing every happy, safe, and exhilarating place she'd ever wanted to be. His hands came to a stop on her waist and he firmly held her aloft, his larger palms almost encompassing her waist. She looked over her shoulder at him and he smiled up at her. "I've got you."

He had her. That was all she wanted. Ace to have her ... always.

His eyes were liquid blue heat as he slowly let his hands slide up to her armpits, lowering her an inch at a time. Warmth and tingles spread through her at his strong but gentle touch.

He lowered her to her feet and turned her to face him, sliding his hands around her lower back. Flinging her arms around his neck, she clung to him, planning to never let go. Standing on solid ground was comforting. Being encircled by Ace's arms was heaven.

She glanced at him. He was still staring at her with those incredible blue eyes she could get lost in. He wrapped her up tighter, letting out a shuddering breath. "Ah, Em, you're okay. You did great."

She buried her head in the crook of his neck and snaked her arms around his shoulders. Her body shuddered and her pulse was still racing. She was safe, but it was going to take a minute for her body to get the memo. Luckily, Ace's embrace pushed her fears to the side. She'd be a mess when they had to start walking on this muddy slope again.

"I've got you," Ace murmured into her ear. "You're okay."

"Thanks, Ace. I would've been dead without you. I don't know how I'll ever repay you."

"Nah. You're too smart and tough. You would've been fine without me." He gave her a charming smile, leaned closer, and his lips brushed her ear as he whispered, "But you could give me a kiss to thank me for helping you."

Emerald blinked at him. Her insides felt like they were glowing. Every part of her wanted to forget about him wanting to date both her and Jaycee and kiss him until the sun sank behind the nearest peak.

Jaycee.

Ace might think he could date both of them, but Emerald would never do that to her friend. She turned slightly and met Jaycee's eyes just up the trail. The woman smiled kindly at her.

"Is your shoulder okay?" Jaycee asked.

Ace pulled back slightly, concern wrinkling his brow. "Is it? You wrenched it pretty hard when you hit the tree."

Emerald forced herself to step out of his arms and rotate her shoulder to test it. She winced as the muscle protested. "I did wrench it, but I think it'll be okay."

"Oh, wow, Em. You are so freaking tough," Jaycee gushed, rushing forward to grab Emerald in a hug. "I was praying so hard and I'm so happy you're safe."

Emerald wanted to still be clinging to Ace, but she appreciated the other woman's friendship. If only there wasn't some weird love triangle going on between the three of them.

As Jaycee released her, Ace studied Emerald as if she might shatter at any moment. "Do you think you can make it down these switchbacks? We can rest and reevaluate at the bottom, or be done for the day."

Emerald straightened her back and slung her backpack over one shoulder, checking to make sure the camera was rolling. The angle was wrong to get most of her fall, but she couldn't make herself care. She was safe. "We can be done when we hit mile twenty. I won't be the reason Jaycee doesn't earn her money."

Ace's eyes lit with admiration.

Jaycee squeezed her arm. "You're the best, Em, but we can take it slow if you're hurting."

"I'll be okay."

“I guess worst case we could call Axel and he’d send a helicopter for you, I’m sure.”

Emerald nodded. Did Jaycee want her gone so she could have Ace all to herself? She hated herself for wondering that, but the pesky thought refused to be ignored. “He would, but I’ll be okay.”

She snuck another glance at Ace. The warmth in his eyes had instantly cooled. She jutted out her chin. She’d show him how tough she was. She wouldn’t be the one calling for a helicopter or slowing them down.

Brushing past him on the trail, she started walking down, albeit cautiously as it was still muddy and slick. For the moment, she didn’t care if she was in charge of videoing. She should care so she made herself stop to take the camera off and clip it on her shoulder facing backward at the two of them, and then she started walking again.

“You go, girl,” Jaycee called after her.

Emerald smiled despite the angst she felt over Ace. It had been heaven to be in his arms, but he was only doing his job of protecting them both. Disappointment rounded her shoulders as she trudged carefully down the trail. She needed to stop wanting Ace so much. Jaycee was awesome and they made a great couple.

Ace and Jace.

She hated that so much.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

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The rest of the day was absolutely miserable for Ace. Jaycee trudged behind him and muttered complaints most of the time. She was a funny lady, but she was wearing on him. The rain picked up again and Emerald plunged ahead on the inclines and declines. She hugged the mountainside of the trail, but she refused to stop until they reached twenty miles. They all slipped at various times, but luckily their Yaktraks gave them the extra grip they needed and nobody fell again like Emerald had.

Watching her fall and then helping her back to safety had taken years off his life. He'd wanted to kiss her and hold her for hours when he'd finally had her in his arms, but sadly she'd pulled away and then Jaycee had interrupted. Jaycee claimed she wanted to push them together, but she kept interrupting when Ace might have a chance with Emerald.

Then Jaycee had mentioned Axel. Emerald luckily hadn't gone for the idea to call a helicopter, which impressed Ace even more. The woman had grit. At the same time, though, the remembrance of Axel and all he could do for Emerald deflated Ace's fledgling hopes. He made great money with Harrison Guns, and the half-million Axel was paying him for this adventure would all go into savings and investments. He would be just fine financially, but never close to Axel's status. He didn't want to think Emerald only cared about good looks, charm, and money, but he could imagine Axel was ultra-appealing for most women, and Axel and Emerald were tight. Dang Axel.

They set up the tent for the night in a sheltered valley and tried to clean themselves off the best they could before stepping inside. They ate another dry, cold meal and Jaycee complained about another night of not brushing her teeth and needing to pee. Emerald and Ace exchanged a look and then started laughing.

“Jace, you could complain about being hung with a golden rope.”

Jaycee glared at him. “Yeah, well, you might not complain, but you’re ... stupid. You’re so stupid you could drown standing up in the shower.”

Ace laughed harder and couldn’t resist giving it back to her, his mind going back to childhood years of his brothers teasing him. “You’re so stupid you stared at a can of orange juice for hours because it said concentrate.”

Jaycee cracked up and Emerald laughed too.

“Yeah, well, you’re so stupid you thought a quarterback was a refund,” Jaycee hurled at him.

“You’re so stupid if you got locked in the grocery store, you’d starve to death.”

“Well, you’re so stupid you could get hit by a parked car.”

“Your sister must’ve been really mean,” Ace said, laughing. He was out of stupid childhood jokes to hurl at her.

“She was,” Jaycee insisted.

Ace laughed and looked at Emerald, wanting to include her, even though the whole insult trading was silly, but after today he needed the laugh. “You want in on this?”

She held up her hands, smiling, but she looked sad for some reason. “No, thanks.”

“Your brothers were too nice to you,” Jaycee said, then she smiled softly. “Because you’re so awesome and pretty they couldn’t be mean to you. I love that they call you Beauty.”

Ace nodded, completely agreeing. What man wouldn’t fall at Emerald’s feet?

“Thanks,” Emerald said. “But it was probably because my dad was so soft on me and would’ve beat them if they weren’t nice.”

They all laughed.

Jaycee yawned. “Well, it’s been a rough day on me. I’m praying for sunshine tomorrow, a lake to swim in, and a hot dinner. Thanks for being awesome, my friends. Even with my complaining, Emerald’s terrifying fall, and the miserable mud and rain, we’re going to make it. I have faith in how tough we are, and I love you both.” She slid into her sleeping bag, not waiting for their reply.

Ace smiled at the small woman. “Love you too, Jace.” He looked to Emerald, giving her a welcoming grin. Jaycee would go to sleep and they could talk, snuggle, maybe he could see how close she and Axel really were and if Ace had any chance with her.

She gave him a strange look and slid into her own sleeping bag.

Ace swallowed and stared at her. He’d hoped they’d get a minute alone with Jaycee falling asleep—or maybe faking it to help him out—but Emerald rolled away from him. He was left with no choice but to try to sleep himself.

He stretched out on top of the sleeping bag and closed his eyes. Two more days to impress Emerald and then she’d be back in Axel’s arms. He had little chance of winning her away from the billionaire.

Darkness cloaked him, much stronger than the dark, rainy night outside.

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Emerald had a hard time falling asleep as she listened to Ace’s short breaths and Jaycee’s longer ones.

*Love you too, Jace.*



The words played over and over again in her head. Their teasing and insults were funny, but it just reminded her all over again that she was the outsider.

Ace loved Jaycee.

*Ace loved Jaycee.*

Who could blame him? She was hilarious, beautiful, petite, charitable. The woman had dedicated her life to rescuing endangered animals. Emerald probably seemed like a worldly, selfish brat compared to her. Ace had probably expected her to call Axel to send a helicopter when she got hurt.

She finally drifted off and woke to bright sunshine. Thank heavens. Two more days of this weird situation. She was more impressed with Ace by the minute and didn't know how much longer she could hide her longing for him. She needed to stay out of the way so Jaycee and Ace could develop a relationship.

She blew out a grim breath. At least she could get great video footage for the two of them. There was no way she would "date someone who dated other people" as Ace had suggested. No matter how appealing he was, she would never be into a two-timer.

She opened her eyes and realized she'd rolled onto her right side and was facing Ace. His eyes were open and he smiled slightly. "Good morning, Beauty," he said softly, as if not wanting to wake up Jaycee.

"Good morning, Big Dog," she returned.

His smile grew. Maybe his face wasn't perfectly chiseled like Axel's, but he was the most handsome man she'd ever seen. Why did she have to be so attracted to the man she couldn't have?

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Good. My shoulder's okay. Thanks."

He lifted a hand and gently brushed the hair away from her neck, his fingers lingering on the sensitive skin. She trembled in response. "That terrified me." He swallowed and said, "You're so beautiful, Emerald."

They stared at each other as she relished his touch, look, and compliment. What did it mean? Why did he seem invested in her again? Was he only being so intimate because Jaycee was still asleep? She didn't want to think or talk about that, but she did find herself blurting out, "You called me Em when I was in danger yesterday."

He nodded, his smile sliding away. "Do you want me to call you Em?"

"Yes, please."

His smile grew. "Okay ... Em."

The nickname was like a caress.

She willed him to inch in closer and kiss her. When he didn't, she asked, "Are you ever going to tell us where Ace came from?"

His fingers traced along her neck and cupped her jawline. "I might be convinced to tell *you*."

"Really?" Her pulse skittered and her hands itched to reach out to him. "What could I do that would convince you?"

He grinned and eased closer to her, his hand sliding across her jaw and into her hair. He tugged her closer.

Jaycee shifted in her sleeping bag behind Emerald. "Holy crap, I have to pee! Are you two awake? Yay, the sun is shining."

Emerald sat up quickly, turning. Jaycee grinned happily at her and guilt filled her gut like rocks. What was she doing almost kissing Ace when he loved Jaycee? She was a horrible person to want to shove Jaycee out of the way and make her own play for Ace.

"It's going to be a great day," Emerald said. "We'll work up a sweat in the sunshine and find a lake to swim in."

"Yeah, baby!"

Emerald could feel Ace's eyes on her. She was hyperaware of him. He still hadn't sat up in the tent. She reached over him to undo the zipper. He slowly sat up, his body brushing her

side. Her breath whooshed out. He ran his hand over hers and tugged the zipper up.

Her hand zinged from the contact. She murmured, “Thanks,” and hurried out of the tent. She had to keep her distance from him, or she’d forget he loved Jaycee and plant a kiss on those intriguing lips.

They hiked at a decent pace, even though it was still muddy from the rain of the past two days. They were ultra-careful near any drop-offs, but the sun was welcome and Emerald worked up a sweat. She hoped they found a lake to swim in, even if the water was freezing. She wanted to wash off the mud and sweat. Maybe they could wash and hang out their extra set of clothes. All their clothes were pretty nasty at this point, and her shoes hadn’t dried out from the rain.

After lunch, she knew a blister was forming on her left heel, but she ignored it. Tomorrow was the last day. They’d earn Jaycee her money and she’d say goodbye to these two.

Then her blister could heal, along with her heart.

She really liked them both. Sadly, she more than liked Ace, but she couldn’t act on that. Would Jaycee and Ace develop a relationship beyond this week? She tried to be happy for her friends, but the ugly jealousy ate at her gut. At least Ace hadn’t said any more about Emerald “dating someone who dated other people.” She would’ve probably punched him in the gut and yelled that he needed to choose.

Her shoulders rounded. He’d choose Jaycee.

They took a break to refill their water bottles in a stream. Ace’s gaze darted up the trail and he muttered, “Two men are coming. Please get behind me.”

Emerald felt an odd pang of fear. It was silly, but they’d only seen a few scattered hikers and those two men who had leered at her and said odd things about Axel. She and Jaycee both edged behind Ace.

As the men appeared on the trail, Emerald’s fear grew. It was the same two men from before. They’d been going the

opposite direction last time they saw them. Were they following them?

The men were all smiles, but Emerald didn't buy their friendliness. The taller, dark-haired one who'd asked if she lived with Axel was at the front.

"Hey!" The blond guy waved. "You're getting close to Aspen. That's great."

Emerald should've relaxed at their friendly smiles and greeting, but she felt uneasy and Ace's shoulders were tight. She could see the muscle rippling through his shirt.

"We've rocked this trail," Jaycee responded, seeming oblivious. She edged around Ace. He didn't hold her back, but he looked like he wanted to. "Did you guys turn around? I thought you were going to Cimmaron."

The dark-haired guy shrugged. "We're just exploring. We're headed to Crested Butte tonight." He looked straight at Emerald. "You want to come?"

"No," Emerald said quickly.

"Please?" the blond guy said. "We've got a nice hotel. You could take a shower and get pretty, and we'll take you out to dinner. We'd take real good care of you."

Emerald's eyes widened at his implication. She wanted to gag.

Ace folded his arms across his chest. He looked intimidating, but there were two of them and they were both well-built. "She said no. Move on. Now."

The men grumbled and one of them cursed.

"You want to start something with me?" Ace asked.

Emerald had never seen anyone look so impressive and tough and brave.

The men looked at each other and then surprisingly they both shut their mouths and walked past them. They each gave her a leering look. Ace's fists clenched and they both quickly looked away. Ace put a hand on her arm as if to reassure her.

The warmth of his fingers made her feel comforted but also made her want him to touch her more.

Ace watched until they were out of sight, then turned to her. “You okay?”

She nodded and smiled. “Thanks for being here.”

Jaycee’s eyes were wide. “Sheesh. Do men come on that strong to you all the time?”

Emerald shrugged, but Ace’s eyes got an overprotective glint in them that she kind of liked.

“Everybody wants to think you’ve got some charmed life being gorgeous and with Axel,” Jaycee continued, “but it must be rough to have jerks like that hitting on you all the time.”

Emerald nodded. “Some are obnoxious.”

Ace glanced away, his mouth tightening. He pulled out the map and focused on it. A few seconds later, he pointed. “I think over that next peak we’ll be close to the town of Crested Butte. As long as nobody else is in that spot, we’ll stay there.”

Jaycee and Emerald exchanged a look, but neither of them said anything about his overprotectiveness around those men. It was a bit disturbing that they had shown up again. Hopefully they really were staying in Crested Butte at a hotel and weren’t waiting for them somewhere.

“Have you been to Crested Butte?” Jaycee asked as they started walking again.

Emerald shook her head, no. Ace nodded, but his focus seemed to be on the spot where those men had disappeared.

“Isn’t it the cutest town ever? I wish we could go there. You’d love it, Em. If only we could go stay in a hotel there. Not with those jerks, but there are a few nice hotels. We could take a shower and eat a real meal and then go for ice cream.” Jaycee moaned. “Ice cream at the Third Bowl. It’s homemade. Have you been to Third Bowl, Ace?”

“Yeah, it’s great,” Ace agreed.

“Okay, it’s decided. I’m giving up my half a million. Salted caramel pretzel with hot fudge drizzled over. It’s calling to me.”

Ace actually laughed, finally pulling his gaze from the trail where the two men had disappeared. “One more day, Jace. You got this.”

She smiled at him. “Thanks to you.”

Emerald looked away from their private moment.

“If you’re both okay to do one more extreme up and down, the map shows that we’ll be at a small lake where we can camp. Tomorrow will be about thirteen miles to Aspen. The last ten is a great hike. I’ve done it before.”

“I can’t believe we’re really going to make it.” Jaycee threw her arms around Ace’s neck and hugged him tight. “Thank you, you beautiful man.”

Yet again, Emerald looked away.

Jaycee grabbed her in a hug too. She couldn’t begrudge the friendly woman anything, but it didn’t take away her jealousy or her desire for Ace.

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## CHAPTER NINE

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Ace was all stirred up. He couldn't believe those men had blatantly stared at Emerald and propositioned her like that. He should've taken them both out and made sure they knew to stay far away from Emerald.

His eyes darted around constantly as they hiked. He listened for any signs of the men waiting for them, but they had disappeared. He should be relieved, but he wasn't.

He would protect Emerald and everything about those men sat wrong. Why had they changed their hiking plans and come all this way, then given up so easily when he told them to move on? He knew he could best them, but they didn't know his training level. It made him uneasy. There were too many good ambush spots on the trail.

He didn't let his guard down, but he did let his mind wander to how it had felt to touch Emerald's beautiful face in the tent that morning. Dang Jaycee and her interruptions. He loved the woman like a sister or friend, but if he had a second alone today, he'd tell her she'd better fake asleep good tonight so he could kiss Emerald before their time was up.

Tomorrow, Axel would show up. Would Ace be able to resist the impulse to punch him as soon as he saw him? He was so frustrated thinking about him two-timing Emerald, and for some reason Emerald seemed completely loyal to him. Well, there were a billion reasons a woman would be loyal to Axel, but he didn't think Emerald was consumed with money like that. She'd been so great and down-to-earth on this hiking trip. But when Jaycee had said something about Emerald's

charmed life and being with Axel, Emerald had basically agreed.

They reached the lake. Jaycee was in obnoxiously good spirits as they swam—or rather waded—into the freezing water and washed off quickly. Ace didn't dare set down his gun or knife in case those men had lingered and were even now waiting for their moment to attack, so he just washed off as best he could.

He could hardly pull his gaze from Emerald in her wet long-sleeved T-shirt and running pants. With her clothes plastered to her long, lean body, she was even more irresistible. He turned away while the women changed into dry clothes and hung out their wet ones, hoping they'd be dry for their final hike tomorrow. None of them could stand to put shoes back on, so they walked around barefoot, avoiding rocks and twigs as they cleared a spot to camp and set up a fire.

Ace listened to make sure the men didn't sneak up on them, but his gaze as usual was fixed on Emerald. He let himself look down her lean legs and stopped as he saw a trickle of blood running from her heel to the ground. "Em! You're hurt."

She whipped around and stared at him. "What?"

He hurried to her. "Your ankle."

"Oh." She looked down and then back up at him, her bluish-green eyes appealing as ever. "My shoes were still damp today and I rubbed my heel raw."

"Oh, Em." He loved that she'd asked him to use the nickname, and he loved the way her gaze softened when he said it. She was so brave. Why hadn't she said anything? The other days, he'd made a point to ask if any blisters were forming, but today he'd been too consumed with those men and Emerald. "Sit down. I'm doctoring you up."

"You're a doctor now?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Can I be the nurse?" Jaycee asked, never wanting to be left out.



Ace rolled his eyes. “Yes, you can. Find the first aid kit, please. Which backpack, Em?”

“Yours,” she said, staring into his eyes.

“I’m on it,” Jaycee called.

Ace directed Emerald to sit on a stump and knelt in front of her. He was no kind of doctor, but his blood pumped faster at the thought of touching her and doctoring up her wound. Those men were long gone, and the impending deadline of Axel showing up tomorrow was pushed away as he slowly slid her running tights up and cupped her firm calf in his hand.

“The blister is on my heel,” she said softly.

Ace grinned and continued running his hands along her calves, enjoying watching her shiver with the sensation. “You sure? I can check your entire leg if needed.”

She smiled softly.

“All right, I found it!” Jaycee called.

Ace groaned. If he’d had a sister, he imagined she’d be every bit as annoying and funny as Jaycee. “Thanks, Jace,” was all he said, holding out his hand. Jaycee claimed she wanted to help him get with Emerald and steal her from Axel, but she was constantly interrupting them. He’d have to talk to her and recruit her help so he could find a way to get Emerald alone, and soon.

Desperation built inside of him. He wanted to kiss Emerald more than he wanted to create the perfect sniper rifle. His time was running out to get her to fall for him. If he had any kind of chance with her, it would be gone tomorrow night when they saw Axel again. He felt like a bomb was ticking faster and faster inside of him.

Any longer without her lips on his and he’d explode.

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Emerald quivered from Ace’s touch. He kept running his palm along her calf. The sensation was incredible; her sore muscles

responded to the gentle massage and her skin responded to Ace's hand on her. His touch was more incredible for her than any man's had been. Why did he have to be so great and at the same time a jerk who wanted to date her and Jaycee?

When Jaycee interrupted—again, handing over the first aid supplies—Ace groaned. Was he annoyed at the interruption?

Ace gently cleaned the blister with an antiseptic wipe. It stung and she must've winced. He bent even lower, lifting her leg and blowing on the wound to take the sting out. Emerald's eyes widened at his tenderness and her stomach flipped.

"Better?" he asked in a husky voice, staring up at her.

"Yes, thank you," she managed.

His hands did a number on her sensitive skin as he took his time putting ointment on the blister and then covering it with a large bandage.

"Jace, are there any clean socks left in one of the backpacks?" he asked.

"I will look, Doc."

"You're the best assistant ever."

Emerald stiffened. She was struggling with their endless flirtations. In some ways, she didn't want this week to end, knowing she probably wouldn't see Ace again, but mostly she wanted to be done with it.

Ace took the socks from Jaycee, thanking her again, then gently slid them onto Emerald's feet, staring up at her as if he'd kiss her any second. Her skin tingled from his touch and her body quivered with anticipation of having him even closer. She slowly leaned down closer to him, forgetting Jaycee was there. His blue eyes filled with an eager light and he rose toward her.

Jaycee's stomach growled. Loudly.

Emerald's gaze darted to her friend, who was watching them with wide eyes.

She clutched her stomach. “Sorry. I need real food. I’ve told you this!”

Ace chuckled, stood, and shoved the bandage wrapper in the garbage bag they’d carried with them, hung off of Ace’s backpack. “Only about a hundred times,” he teased Jaycee. “Let’s get Jaycee fed so her stomach doesn’t draw the bears.”

Jaycee’s eyes widened. “Bears? You know I hate bears.”

“We know.” Ace gave Emerald a lingering look. Was it possible he was as frustrated with the interruption as she was? If he and Jaycee were together, why didn’t Jaycee seem upset that Emerald and Ace had almost kissed? She’d been right there, watching them. She had interrupted, but it didn’t seem as if she’d done it on purpose.

Ace set to work starting a fire. Emerald and Jaycee found the freezer meals and everybody chose what sounded good to them. Ace cooked three for himself since they didn’t need to preserve supplies any longer, teasing that, “Big Dog’s gotta eat.”

Dinner was much better tonight. They ate a hot meal and Emerald was actually hungry. They all chatted easily, but she noticed Jaycee and Ace giving each other secretive glances. She even caught Ace mouthing something to Jaycee at one point. She sighed. They were definitely into each other and once again she felt like the third wheel.

They cleaned up dinner and put out the fire as the sun set. Emerald excused herself to use the restroom. As she came back toward the tent, she could hear Ace and Jaycee talking in hushed, fervent tones, their heads bent together. Her gut lurched. She should be the bigger person and give them a moment alone.

They both looked over at her at the same time. Jaycee’s eyes were gleaming, and Ace gave Emerald a look that heated her blood. How would she walk away from him tomorrow? She should dislike both of them for trying to involve her in some weird trio, but she liked them too much. Maybe neither of them thought it was a big deal because they weren’t dating seriously, or maybe telling someone you loved them was just a

game for them. For her, the emotions Ace stirred within her were very, very serious. If he told her he loved her, she'd knock him over and kiss him.

But he hadn't told Emerald he loved her.

He'd told Jaycee.

Emerald's heart sank. No matter that she believed he was the one for her, it was time to get out of the way so Ace and Jaycee could have some alone time.

She didn't want to picture them kissing, but she squared her shoulders and told them, "I'm going to walk down by the lake for a bit."

They both nodded. Jaycee elbowed Ace in the gut. Forcing a smile, she walked to the bank and then along it. It was growing darker by the moment, but she could still see okay as her eyes adjusted. The water lapped peacefully against the edge.

She heard footsteps pounding behind her. Turning, she saw Ace easily jogging up to her. His face broke into a grin and he asked, "Care if I join you?"

Emerald stopped to face him, hugging herself. She hadn't grabbed a sweatshirt and the temperature had dropped quickly when the sun went down. "Is Jaycee okay being alone? I know after the mountain lion scare, she hasn't wanted to be."

He stepped closer. Emerald's heart slammed against her chest.

"She said she'd be fine." He chuckled. "She's hiding in the tent because that 'sturdy layer of nylon' will protect her from a mountain lion or bear."

Emerald smiled, but the way he laughed at the cute things Jaycee said just reaffirmed how much he liked her. "We'd better go back so she isn't scared." She moved to go around him.

Ace caught her arm in a gentle grip. She paused and stared into his blue eyes. "I think she'll be okay for half a minute."

Emerald couldn't make herself move as he released his grip on her and trailed his fingers up her arm, pivoting to face her fully.

“Em ...” His voice turned low and husky.

Emerald would never be able to resist this man.

When his arms came around her back and he pulled her securely into his arms, she quivered with joy at his touch. Maybe kissing him would be wrong, but his touch felt so right.

He smiled at her and slowly dipped his head. Her anticipation mounted and desire filled her.

A horrifying scream sounded from the tent. Almost simultaneously, a roar made Emerald's teeth rattle and her body chill.

Ace jerked away from her and muttered, “Stay behind me, Em,” then he ran toward the tent.

Emerald hurried after him but did as instructed and stayed behind him. He had the gun in the back of his pants, as always, but if that roar was indicative of how big the bear was, her worries over Ace and Jaycee's relationship were the least of their troubles.

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## CHAPTER TEN

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Jaycee screamed, yelling in a tear-choked, panicky voice, “Get away!” over and over again.

“Hey!” Ace added his yells to Jaycee’s as he stopped twenty feet from the tent, staring at the large black bear. “Go! Shoo!”

Jaycee was still in the tent screaming at the bear. Ace instantly realized their mistake. In his hurry to get to Emerald, he hadn’t tied off the double-bagged garbage and hung it away from the tent. The bear must’ve been close and had smelled their dinner and then found the trash. The trash bag was ripped apart and the contents strewn in front of the tent. The bear growled at Ace and didn’t back away like he’d hoped. He whipped out the gun and shot a warning shot into the air.

“Go! Get back!” Ace hollered, puffing himself up to try to look bigger.

Emerald stepped up to his side and fear for her safety rolled through him. He held out a hand to gesture her back, but she also stood tall and added her yells to his. Tense seconds passed as they yelled and gestured and the bear faced them down, adding his own growls to the cacophony of noise. The bear’s growls made Ace’s skin prickle. He’d felt fear in the military, and he knew taking down a bear with only a pistol was going to be tough. His biggest fear, however, was for Emerald and Jaycee. He couldn’t let them get hurt.

The bear studied them for a bit, let out one more growl, and then finally turned and sauntered away. Ace let himself

breathe again. He squeezed Emerald's arm. "Good job. You're the bravest woman I know."

Emerald gave him a sweet smile.

This was it. It was finally his time to kiss her.

He bent his head.

"Ace!" The heart-wrenching call came from the tent. "Is it gone?"

Emerald backed away from him. "Jaycee," she said simply.

He nodded, disappointment surging through him. He put the gun back in his waistband, took Emerald's hand, and hurried toward the tent. "Jace," he said softly. "The bear's gone. You're safe." He unzipped the tent, bent, and shuffled inside. Unfortunately, Emerald let go of his hand as Jaycee threw herself at him.

She clung to him, sobbing. "I was so scared. Thank you for saving me."

Ace shifted to sit and held her against his side. "You're okay. He was just after the garbage. He's gone. Sorry, I forgot to tie it off and hang it away from the tent."

He waited for Emerald to duck inside, but he could hear her picking up the garbage. He didn't like her out there. What if the bear came back? "Em?" he called softly. "Come in here. I'll clean that up in a second."

"I've got it. You help Jaycee."

Jaycee leaned into him, her body shuddering. "Can you call Axel? I can't sleep here tonight. I can't do it. I have to quit."

"You're not going to quit." That was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard. "The bear's gone. He won't come back."

"How do you know that? This is probably its home. It's going to come rip us apart in the night. I'll never be able to sleep knowing it's out there. It's not like it can't shred this tent in a second." She quivered. "I heard shuffling and thought it

was you and Em. I opened the tent and it was right there, ready to kill me.”

“Black bears don’t attack often. He only came because he smelled food,” Ace said, trying to reason with her. “I promise you will be safe. I’ll stay up and watch for the bear if you need me to.”

Jaycee only clung tighter to him. “I can’t do it. There’s no way I’ll sleep. Please call Axel. Please get us out of here.”

“Em?” Ace pleaded. Jaycee was completely irrational. He had no idea how to calm her down. “Come talk to Jace ... please.”

Emerald ducked inside the tent, her eyes darting between the two of them. Ace disentangled himself from Jaycee’s grasp—no easy feat—and hurried out the door. “I’ll clean up the garbage,” he said as he left.

Emerald had done a good job picking up the shredded garbage. He finished and then double bagged it, carrying it down to the far side of the lake and hanging it from a tree. If the bear smelled it again, at least he could rip it apart further away from their sleeping spot.

Ace returned to the tent. He could hear Emerald’s soft murmurs and Jaycee’s more panicked tone, but he couldn’t make out what they were saying. Taking the shovel, he scraped the dirt away from the tent, hoping to bury or push any food particles and smells farther away from them. He said a prayer for help and understanding, hoping Emerald could calm Jaycee down. They’d been through a lot. She couldn’t quit the night before they finished.

Finally, Emerald called, “Ace. Can you come in here?”

He set down the shovel, brushed off his hands, and unzipped the tent, ducking inside. He zipped it shut behind him and squatted down, peering at the two women. Jaycee’s face was tear-stained. Even in the near-dark, he could see the fear radiating from her eyes. Emerald looked beautiful, composed, compassionate, and oh-so-appealing to him. He couldn’t fault Jaycee for interrupting their moment once again,



but he feared they wouldn't get another one before they met up with Axel tomorrow. Not with how scared Jaycee still looked.

"She's going to stay," Emerald said firmly even as Jaycee's lower lip quivered. "We're going to pray together and then she'll sleep in the middle and we'll both watch over her."

Ace nodded. He could work with that plan. Selfishly, he wanted to sleep by Emerald and try for a kiss after Jaycee fell asleep and then they could cuddle and talk the night away. But he doubted Jaycee would sleep with how scared she was. He had to put his selfish desires aside for tonight. Was he also giving up any chance with Emerald? She probably wouldn't glance his direction again once Axel was in view.

"Who would you like to pray, Jace?" he asked.

She drew in a shaky breath. "Can we each say a prayer? My sister and I used to do that when we were scared at night."

Ace looked to Emerald. She nodded and said, "I'll go first."

Man, she was incredible. As they all knelt, clasped hands, and bowed their heads, Ace was overwhelmed with the sweet peace Emerald's prayer brought and the rightness of her hand clasped in his. She finished and he muttered amen and then started into his own prayer, feeling the Spirit testify that everything would be okay. He wished that meant with him and Emerald but knew it probably meant getting these two back to safety.

By the time his prayer closed, Jaycee wasn't trembling quite as hard. Her prayer was sincere and maybe in a more begging tone than his or Emerald's, but he was certain she felt better when they all echoed a third amen. A pure harmony filled the tent. Nobody moved for a few beats.

Then Jaycee said, "Thank you, friends. I'm going to try to sleep now while I'm feeling this peace."

"That's smart," Ace said. He moved his sleeping bag closest to the door, setting the gun right next to him. Jaycee slid into her sleeping bag and Emerald followed suit on the left

side of Jaycee. Ace stared at Emerald, hoping to catch her eye, but she rolled onto her left side, away from him.

He slunk into his own sleeping bag, discouraged. He should be worried about the bear returning, but he'd take a battle with the bear over losing the hope of Emerald giving him a chance. They'd see Axel again tomorrow, and then Ace's hopes would be flushed down the toilet.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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**E**merald alternated between worrying the bear would return and the sick feeling she'd had as she'd watched Ace protect and comfort Jaycee. He was such a good man, as evidenced by the incredible prayer he'd offered and his protection of both of them. It didn't make sense that a good, spiritual man like Ace thought he could date both of them, but she had been certain he was going to kiss her right before the bear came. Why would he do that when he was obviously into Jaycee? Jaycee and Ace's flirtations and the times she'd seen them with heads bent together, whispering as if they couldn't get enough of each other, rushed through her mind.

She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed for help. Eventually, she drifted off to sleep and woke to the sun lighting up the tent. Ace was already outside. Jaycee stirred not long after and they took turns using the bathroom and getting dressed and ready to go. They ate a quick breakfast, Jaycee constantly looking around for signs the bear had returned.

Ace's eyes met Emerald's in a searching gaze. She gave him a quick smile and glanced away. Hopefully they'd have a good hike today. Afterward, she'd deal with the awfulness of goodbye, giving up all hope of ever developing more with Ace.

They packed up quickly and then set off. Jaycee seemed to settle, and she got happier and happier each mile they put between them and the "scary bear." The climb above Crested Butte toward Aspen was viciously uphill and sometimes shale

that slid, but it was a road rather than a trail most of the time so they could walk side by side and chat. Jaycee got more animated and grateful as they went. When they spotted Aspen, she grabbed Ace and hugged him tight, planting a kiss on his chin and then laughing and exclaiming, “You’re so tall that I can’t even kiss you properly!”

Emerald’s stomach churned. She was happy for Jaycee winning the money. She should be happy the two of them were together.

She wasn’t.

Jaycee grabbed her next and hugged her. “We did it. Thank you. Thank you!”

Ace chuckled. “We’ve still got a couple miles, Jace.”

“Oh hush, you party pooper.” Jaycee grinned, grabbed each of their hands, and walked quicker than she had all week. “I can hardly believe I won the money, there are going to be so many happy animals next week.”

Emerald smiled.

“I can’t wait to be at the hotel,” Jaycee continued. “I’m going to order room service, shower, and take a nap, and then we’re going to dress up fancy and eat a delicious meal with Axel Dexter.” She sighed. “I’m so happy right now. Are you two ecstatically happy?”

“Ecstatically,” Ace muttered drily.

“Don’t rain on it. Don’t do it,” Jaycee warned him. She looked at Emerald. “We’ve got rooms at the St. Regis?”

“Yes, ma’am, and dinner reservations at Bok Choy.”

“Ooh, that sounds delicious. Tell me again, shrimp ... what was it?”

“Spicy shrimp wontons. You’ll love them.” Emerald felt her own mood lift with Jaycee’s exuberance. The bright sunny day and the mountain town of Aspen was beautiful. Soon she’d see Axel, and his zest for life always made her happy. She found herself glancing over Jaycee’s head at Ace. He met

her gaze, his blue eyes full of a desire for her that she couldn't possibly be imagining.

She stuttered and caught herself before she tripped.

“Em!” Ace exclaimed, hurrying to her side.

She smiled at him. “I’m fine.”

He studied her but sadly didn't pull her close and check on her. The route leveled out and Jaycee cried out, “We need some pics!”

“What?” Ace stared at her. “That camera has been on all week.”

“Yeah, but we haven't posed for pics,” Jaycee insisted.

Ace rolled his eyes.

Emerald nodded her agreement. “We do need some good still shots. Turn around so you get the mountain in the pictures.” She took the camera off her backpack and gestured for them to cozy up. They obliged without complaint, which only made her wince. She turned it off video and took several snapshots of them.

“Em, you should get in here,” Ace said.

“No. It's not me winning the money,” she said, and took more photos as Jaycee did all manner of cute poses. Even after hiking this many miles, the woman looked gorgeous.

Jaycee rose on tiptoes and squeezed Ace tight.

Emerald forced herself to turn the video back on and capture how cute they were together. Finally, she declared, “Okay, enough pics. I'm ready for a hot shower to rinse off the grime, then I'm soaking in a hot bath until I fall asleep.”

Ace looked at Emerald. His blue gaze was smoky and almost sensual.

She forced herself to look away. She was tired of him toying with her, yanking her in when he was obviously with Jaycee.

“I’m with you,” Jaycee chirped. She talked about the food they would eat and the ways she would soak her tired body as they walked the last mile into town. They were still a couple miles from the hotel, and for some reason those two miles on flat asphalt seemed as hard as any they’d done so far. Emerald was exhausted and ready to be done with this entire thing.

They finally reached the St. Regis, cheering and slapping hands. Ace wrapped his hand around hers after she slapped it and tugged her in for a hug. She let herself savor the feel of his muscular body close before pulling away and muttering, “Time for that shower.”

He nodded, though he didn’t look happy about her pulling away, and escorted them through the main door and into the lobby.

Emerald checked them in, smiling at the looks of disdain some of the patrons threw their way but there were others who asked about their adventure and expressed their admiration of the long hike. They were dirty and stinky, but despite her angst over Ace, Emerald was happy. It was an awesome accomplishment to hike as far as they had in six days, especially over vicious inclines and declines with a bear, a mountain lion, and a terrifying fall to add to the intensity of the experience.

The bell hop walked them to their rooms, rolling their heavy backpacks on the suitcase cart. None of them had any cash to tip him and she could tell that bothered Ace. He muttered, “I can’t wait to have my wallet back.”

She nodded. “Axel will bring all of that, but I arranged with some local shops to have clothing and toiletries for each of us in our rooms.”

“You’re the best, Em.” Jaycee gave her an exuberant hug. “I still can’t believe we made it. Thank you both!” She gave Ace one more hug, beamed at them, and then scurried into her suite.

Ace and Emerald stood facing each other. He hadn’t watched Jaycee go. What did that mean? It could just mean he knew Jaycee was into him and wanted to make sure Emerald

was as well. Could he really be a player like that? Many people accused Axel of being a player, but Emerald knew the goodness of his heart and that he wouldn't ever intentionally hurt anyone. Was Ace the same? Had she misread something? But no, he had definitely asked if she was okay dating someone who dated other people, he'd been overly friendly and cute with Jaycee the entire time, and he'd told Jaycee he loved her.

Right now Ace studied her, and only her. It was as if his blue eyes were begging ... for what?

“Are you excited to see Axel?” he asked quietly.

Emerald thought that was a weird question. “Of course.”

His brow furrowed. He pushed a hand through his hair and muttered, “I'd better follow Jaycee's example and shower, get some food in me, and maybe take a nap.”

Emerald nodded, though she felt deeply the loss of what might have been between them. “Sounds good. I'll see you at dinner.”

He tilted his chin up to her, watching her steadily. Emerald turned and ran her keycard over the lock, walking into her suite. Before the door swung closed, she glanced back. Ace was still watching her. His gaze seemed to be begging her for something, but she didn't know what he wanted. Maybe when he saw her all fixed up for dinner, he'd finally make a move. But did she want him to make a move if he was dating Jaycee too? How did she demand he choose? She was so confused and frustrated. She didn't know what to do.

She thoroughly enjoyed a long shower but decided against room service. She wanted to be hungry for one of her favorite restaurants. She dressed in the pale blue silk dress she'd ordered for herself. It fit perfectly. She curled her hair and was applying lipstick when a rap sounded at her door. Her heart leapt, hoping it was Ace, but it was probably Axel. It was almost time for him to arrive. It would be great to see her best friend and nice to have her phone and purse back, but part of her didn't want this time and whatever chance there might have been with Ace to end.

She hurried to the door, barefoot but ready for dinner. Swinging it wide, her welcoming smile faltered.

The dark-haired man from the trail stood there, grinning broadly at her. “Remember me?”

“We saw you on the trail,” she said dumbly. They’d obviously followed them, waiting until she wasn’t with Ace.

“Yes, beautiful, you did. And now you’re going to help me get a wad of cash.” He wrapped her up tight, clamping his hand tightly over her mouth to muffle her scream.

Another man appeared. He must’ve been hiding just outside the door. He shoved a needle into her arm. The cool liquid raced into her bloodstream.

Emerald tried to thrash and fight her way free, but the two men held her fast.

Blackness assaulted her.



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## CHAPTER TWELVE

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Ace paced his room feeling like a caged animal. He'd showered, eaten a steak pasta from room service, reasoning he was so hungry he'd still eat dinner, gotten dressed in the suit that was waiting for him, and then waited and waited. He hadn't heard if Axel had shown up yet, but it felt like D-day. Ace hadn't been smooth enough to get Emerald to fall for him or kiss him when it was just the two of them—well, Jaycee had been around, but the other woman hadn't been competing with him for Emerald's attention. As soon as Axel got here, Ace could kiss his dreams of Emerald goodbye.

He pushed a hand through his hair. He was an idiot to pace his room and stew. He needed to take action. No more pride; he was going to tell her exactly how incredible he thought she was and beg her to give him at least one date. If she shot him down, dinner would be awkward tonight, but he couldn't let his dream woman walk back into the arms of her cheating billionaire boss without knowing how deeply Ace cared for her.

Shoving his keycard in his pocket, he hurried out his door and across the hall to Emerald's room. He rapped on the door and waited, rapped on the door and waited some more.

Had she gone out? Had Axel come and they were in there kissing and ignoring his knock? Letting out a growl of frustration, Ace paced the hallway.

The door to the stairs burst open and Axel came rushing through them. He looked disheveled and more stressed than

Ace thought the ever-happy man could look.

“Ace!” He ran to him and grabbed his arm. “Have you seen Em?”

Ace shook his head. “I’ve been knocking, but ... no answer.”

Axel passed a keycard over the door. Ace’s stomach felt hollow. So they were staying in the same room? Doomsday was here. Ace might as well bury his hopes and dreams. He was going to have words with Axel about dating other women. It might be none of Ace’s business, but Emerald deserved the man’s complete adoration and attention.

Throwing the door open, Axel tore through the room, screaming desperately, “Em! Em!”

Ace caught the door before it closed and watched as Axel ran into the bedroom and bath then back out. He heard a couple doors opening in the hallway behind him, but ignored whoever it was as he watched this polished man come unraveled. What had happened?

He felt an unreasonable burst of happiness. Emerald wanted to date Ace. Even though he’d flubbed pursuing her this week—or Jaycee, a bear or mountain lion had interrupted him—she’d fallen for him anyway and now she’d told Axel they were done. That would explain the man’s frenzied actions.

“What’s going on?” Jaycee was at his elbow, staring at Axel running around screaming Em’s name.

“I have no idea,” Ace murmured back.

Axel rushed to the two of them and demanded, “Jaycee, get back in your room. Stay there. Deadbolt the door. Answer to no one but Ace or me.”

Jaycee jolted back. “Excuse me?”

Axel turned to Ace. His blue eyes were wild. He took a deep breath and seemed to calm down a bit. “The police are going to help, but they have to stay hidden as per the

kidnappers' request. We don't have time to get the FBI here. I need you."

Ace's gut churned uneasily. "Em?"

No. If anything had happened to her ...

Axel nodded. "They texted me from a burner phone. They gave me instructions on where to meet them after I get the money wired to their account, then they must've destroyed the phone. I can't get any response and my best tech guys can't track the number. I was praying she was here, and they were just trying to pull one over on me..."

Somebody had kidnapped Emerald for ransom.

The room spun. For a moment, Ace wanted to panic, but then his training kicked in. His panic turned to laser focus. He clenched his hands into fists, ready to do battle. "How soon?"

"We've got thirty minutes to get there."

Now Ace understood the way Axel looked and the frenzied way he'd searched Emerald's room. The man loved Emerald. Ace wanted to push the other man out of the way and run around screaming for Emerald himself. He prayed desperately for help and strength. This was no time to flip out or be jealous of Axel and Emerald's love. Emerald needed both of them right now.

"You love her a lot?" Jaycee guessed, casting Ace a compassionate glance.

"Of course I do," Axel said, tugging at his tie.

Ace took the words like a fist slammed into his solar plexus. Of course Axel loved Emerald. Who wouldn't? How would it be to have the love of a woman like Emerald? Ace would never know, but he would help save her.

"You ready?" Axel looked to Ace.

"I need the gun and knife."

"I've got weapons," Axel reassured him. He looked to Jaycee. "Please lock yourself in. We'll contact you as soon as it's safe."

For once, Jaycee didn't seem to have anything to say. She gave Ace one more sad glance and then scurried to her room.

Ace hurried after Axel to the stairs. Waiting for the elevator wasn't an option and he needed to move. He hoped Axel had a sniper rifle but doubted it. He'd have to be content with a pistol or rifle.

Axel loved Emerald.

Ace had guessed as much, but now he'd seen how deep that love was. Ace had only known the incredible woman a short time and spent this week with her. He had no right to feel like he loved her too, or that he would be better to her than Axel would.

Hopefully this scare would make Axel commit to Emerald and only Emerald. Hopefully they could rescue her. Ace would fight by Axel's side to rescue Emerald.

Then he'd have to let her go.

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The drive was longer than they expected. Ace's nerves were cinched tight. The police were following them at a distance and also had trackers on Axel in case the kidnappers tried something unexpected. The sun was behind the trees but probably still an hour from setting. That would make the situation more difficult. Ace needed to sneak in; darkness would've been helpful.

When they finally pulled off the rutted dirt road and into the driveway of an older cabin, Ace was more than ready to do battle. He slunk down in the seat in case anyone was watching out the windows. During the drive, they'd only spoken about the details of the texts Axel had received and the plan to rescue Emerald. Ace didn't know if Axel felt the tense silence in the car. He seemed too preoccupied worrying about Emerald. Ace had no reassurances for him, but he felt the man's pain. His own pain echoed it.

If anyone hurt Emerald, he'd fillet them.

“Okay.” Axel spoke without moving his mouth. “Give me a couple minutes to distract them.”

“One minute—sixty seconds—then I’m coming in.”

Axel flashed a brief smile. “Gotcha.”

He pushed open the driver’s side door, having already disabled the interior lights. At the same time, Ace pushed open the passenger door just enough so it still looked closed. Axel stood, walking slowly toward the front door as he’d been instructed. As soon as he hit the porch steps, the door flew open.

Ace tried to peer over the dash without being seen, but he couldn’t see much beyond Axel’s back as he walked in and then the door shut. He quickly counted to thirty. That was good enough. Axel was in there negotiating; he needed Ace’s help to protect Emerald.

Ace inched the car door open wider, just enough to slide out. He darted to the closest section of trees, glancing around and listening. No sentries. Were these guys amateurs and hadn’t thought to post any, or were they highly professional and already stalking Ace? Without the tech of the U.S. Navy at his command, this operation was different than most he’d been on.

He waited a few more beats, but the birds happily twittered in the trees. Raised voices sounded from inside the cabin.

It was time to move.

He darted from tree to tree, able to get right close to the back door of the cabin. He easily picked the lock.

Easing into the cabin, the voices were louder, angry-sounding. They masked the sounds of his approach but terrified him. If emotions were this hot, there was no telling what the criminals would do. He had to get in there before someone got trigger happy.

Treading carefully down the hallway, he reached the main living area and the noise. He picked out the two men who’d run into them twice on the hiking trail. Axel stood opposite

them. The dark-haired guy stood right close to Emerald. Ace's gut churned with anger.

She looked exquisite in a pale blue silky dress with her long blonde hair in loose curls. Her aqua-colored eyes looked cloudy as if she'd barely woken up, but they were full of fear as her gaze swung from Axel to the criminals.

Axel's hands were up but his voice was in control. "It is not my fault that you don't have Wi-Fi at this cabin. I promise you I wired the money. Leave Emerald here and the three of us will drive to Wi-Fi."

"Why don't you tie us both up and drive to where you have service?" Emerald asked, obviously trying to protect Axel. "If the money isn't there, you can come back for us."

"Let's do that. We need to go," the blond man whined.

Ace was ticked that he hadn't pummeled these two on the trail and threatened them to stay away from Emerald. They were stupid criminals. He probably would've scared them away with a few well-placed punches. They didn't even have a way to see if the money had transferred? Stupid criminals were sometimes scarier than professionals. They made stupid mistakes.

The taller dark-haired man shoved his pistol into Emerald's forehead and a knife against her neck. Ace's blood chilled. If he had his sniper rifle, the man would already be dead. As it was, Emerald was now at risk. "Figure out a way to show me you wired the money, or I kill her."

"No!" Axel exploded. "Don't hurt her." He pointed to his own forehead. "Put the gun to my head. Emerald is much smarter than me. She'll be able to figure it out, or you kill me."

"No! Axel!" Emerald screamed. "Please don't hurt him."

Ace had the 1911 ready to fire at the first opening. His pulse raced as he focused on what he needed to do to disarm the man before Emerald got shot or stabbed.

Axel's sacrifice just solidified what he already knew: Axel loved Emerald and would do anything for her. Including give

his own life. Ace wished he could be the one risking his life for Emerald, but that wasn't his role.

It was Axel's.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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**E**merald woke with her head pounding, disoriented. She blinked and looked around at a dusty wood floor and the pine walls typical of a cabin. Trying to sit up on a lumpy couch, she felt the pressure in her head increase.

“She’s awake,” she heard a male voice from behind the couch. “Stand up nice and slow, beautiful.”

Emerald grasped the couch and slowly stood. Her vision went black for an instant and then finally cleared.

“He’s here,” another voice called. “And he came alone like we told him to.”

“Good. Hopefully he can show us the money’s transferred. You’re such an idiot getting a cabin with no Wi-Fi. Data can’t get through all these flipping trees.”

Emerald blinked and stared at the two men. The dark-haired guy was the one who’d leered so disgustingly at her on the trail then came to her room. How much time had passed? It felt like he had captured her moments ago.

The blond guy swung the door open and Axel strode through. Relief rushed through her. Axel would give them the money and hopefully they’d let them go.

Axel’s gaze swung straight to her. “Are you okay?”

She nodded and managed, “Just a bit of a headache.”

Axel studied her as if trying to decide if she was telling the truth. She was so grateful her friend had come for her but



couldn't help wishing Ace was with him. The two of them together could protect her from anything.

"I transferred the money." Axel addressed the dark-haired man with steel in his tone. "Now let her go."

The dark-haired guy grunted in disgust. "Cameron, the idiot, got us a cabin with no Wi-Fi and no data. I can't see that the money is transferred."

"It is."

"Put your hands up," the dark-haired guy demanded.

Axel obeyed.

"How do we know we've got the money? And don't you dare say I should trust you."

"It is not my fault that you don't have Wi-Fi at this cabin," Axel said easily. He sounded relaxed, but Emerald could see the intensity in his blue eyes. These men were going to regret kidnapping Emerald. "I promise you I wired the money. Leave Emerald here and the three of us will drive to Wi-Fi."

Emerald didn't want Axel in danger. "Why don't you tie us both up, leave us here, and drive to where you have service? If the money isn't there, you can come back for us."

"Let's do that. We need to go," the blond man whined.

The dark-haired man shoved his pistol into Emerald's forehead and a knife against her neck. Emerald's chest constricted and her heart seemed to stop at the pressure.

"Figure out a way to show me you wired the money, or I kill her."

"No!" Axel exploded. "Don't hurt her." He pointed to his own forehead. "Put the gun to my head. Emerald is much smarter than me. She'll be able to figure it out, or you kill me."

"No! Axel!" Emerald screamed. "Please don't hurt him."

"Can you figure it out?" the dark-haired guy asked.

She nodded, trying to appear confident, praying she could get a hot spot. “I can.”

He pumped his eyebrows at her. “My phone is in my pocket. Get it out and figure out how to get Wi-Fi.”

She swallowed her disgust and fear, reached in and yanked his phone out of his pocket.

“That’s right, beautiful. You have sixty seconds to figure it out.”

She held the phone up to his face to unlock it. He eased back slightly with the knife.

“Point the gun at me,” Axel demanded, “and give her some space to work.”

“Okay, hero,” the guy sneered. He stepped to her side so the knife was next to her upper back and then turned to point the gun at Axel.

The world exploded.

Rapid gunshots came from the hallway.

Emerald dropped the phone and scurried away as the man next to her was hit by a bullet. The knife blade ripped through her dress and sliced her lower back as he fell. She screamed in pain, pressing her hand to the wound. When she pulled her hand away, her fingers were covered in blood.

Ace leapt into the room.

“Ace!” she cried out, forgetting about the pain of the knife wound. He looked tough and heroic and perfect as he charged into the room dressed in the suit she’d ordered for him.

“Nice shots,” Axel called to him, checking the moaning men on the floor. “Incapacitated but not dead.”

“One thing I can do is place a bullet,” Ace said. His gaze swung to her and his blue eyes softened. “Em.”

Police burst through the front door, calling for them to get their hands up. Ace set down the gun and put his hands up. Emerald followed suit, feeling blood running down her backside.

The police cuffed the crying, protesting criminals and finally told them all they could lower their hands. Emerald could only focus on Ace as she heard the police talking to Axel. She started Ace's direction, but an officer stopped her. "Ma'am, you're bleeding. The EMTs are on their way, but I can look at it."

"It's fine. It's just a graze." She ignored him and hurried to Ace.

His blue eyes were full of concern. "Em ... he cut you?" He tried to look around to her wound.

She grabbed his face between her hands and told him, "I'm fine. I just need ..."

He stared at her. "You need...?"

Her head was pounding even harder. She didn't know if it was from the drugs they'd put in her system to knock her out, the stress and horror of moments before, the knife wound, or her intense need for Ace. She was getting lightheaded and couldn't think straight. She decided it was easier just to show him.

Pulling herself to him, she pressed her lips against his and kissed him with all the desire that had been building inside her the past week.

He jolted as if stunned but he quickly returned the kiss, cradling her close to his strong chest and making her world light up with happiness and pleasure. The sting of the knife wound was hardly noticeable as Ace's lips took over her world.

She whimpered and clung to him. She wanted Ace, needed him, and she never wanted this perfect and incredible kiss to end, but her head was getting fuzzier and fuzzier.

Leaning heavily into Ace, she tried to increase the pressure of her kiss, show him how much she needed him, but her lips slipped to his neck and her arms grew weak. His face was distorted, but his arms held her strong.

"Em!" She heard Axel hollering for her and then everything went dark.

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Ace was stunned when Emerald planted a kiss on him to end all kisses. The feel and taste of her was more incredible than anything he'd experienced in his life. He held her close and planned to kiss her until the police forced them apart.

She grew heavier in his arms, her lips left his, and then she collapsed against him.

“Em!” he heard Axel roar from not too far away.

Ace should've felt guilty for kissing Emerald when he knew how much Axel loved her, but he couldn't find anything in him to regret it. His only concern was Emerald.

He lifted her easily into his arms and felt the blood coming from her lower back. He cursed himself for being so selfish and kissing her when she needed medical attention.

The police stared at him as Axel hurried up close and checked Emerald's pulse. “Ah, Em,” the man groaned, looking over her as if he couldn't pull his gaze from this woman he loved.

The EMTs hurried through the door. Ace forced himself to load her on the stretcher they'd probably brought in for the men he'd shot. The EMTs secured her, did a quick evaluation, and slapped on a sterile pad to staunch the bleeding, then hurried back out the door with her.

Ace and Axel both jogged after her. They reached the ambulance and one of the EMTs glanced between them. “Only one of you can come.”

Ace met Axel's gaze and saw the concern and fear in it. He couldn't ever forget how the man had been willing to die for her. Ace nodded to him and forced out, “You go. I'll go check on Jaycee.” It about killed him and it felt so wrong, but Axel's face filled with relief.

He clapped Ace on the shoulder. “Thanks, man. I couldn't have saved her without you.”

“Take good care of her,” he managed.

“Of course.”

Axel jumped into the ambulance and they closed the doors behind him. Ace watched the ambulance go, his stomach rolling. He'd just sent his dream woman off with the man who loved her but repeatedly cheated on her. He hung his head, praying Emerald would be okay and praying the scare would force Axel to be loyal to her.

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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**E**merald awoke again to a throbbing head. This time there were no kidnappers but a hard hospital bed, the beeping of machines, and Axel slumped in the chair next to her. Axel looked disheveled and not himself at all.

Where was Ace?

She took some slow breaths and then reached for the cup of ice on the small table next to her bed. The unhealed flesh of her lower back tugged and she let out a whimper of pain.

“Em!” Axel leapt to his feet. His blue eyes lit up as he took her in. “There she is! Ah, you’re back. Are you okay?”

“I think so. My head’s pounding.”

“Dang, sorry. Do you want some medicine?”

“Not right now. Let me give it a minute to settle.” She took a sip of ice chips and asked, “How long have I been out?”

“Well, you passed out while you were kissing Ace ...”

She remembered that kiss but nothing beyond it. “I remember the kiss.”

He winked. “Of course you do. It looked like a good one. They got you to the hospital in Aspen quick and sedated you to stitch you up.”

“They sedated me for stitches?”

“It was bad, Em. You have dozens of stitches, some internal and some external. You also lost a lot of blood.”

“Is that why I passed out?”

“Probably a combination of the benzodiazepines in your bloodstream that they used to knock you out, the stress, and the blood loss.”

She nodded and sucked on some more ice. The IVs in her arms would rehydrate her, but the ice felt good in her mouth. She glanced around. “Where are Ace and Jaycee?”

Axel’s lips pressed together. “Ace said he’d take care of Jaycee and said I could go with you. The EMTs would only let one of us come. Sorry, I selfishly wanted to be with you. I’m so used to being here for you, you know?”

“It’s okay, Axel.”

“Thanks, but I should’ve let him come. You could be kissing him right now, planning your future.” His sparkle returned to his blue eyes. “I take it the week went well? Do you feel up to telling me about it?”

She closed her eyes, hating to disappoint Axel. Of course Ace had gone to take care of Jaycee. “The week was good, but ...”

“No buts.” Axel wrapped his hand over hers. “What happened?”

Tears squeezed out of her closed eyelids.

“Em!” Axel immediately stood and wrapped his arms around her, cradling her awkwardly with all the tubes. “What happened?”

“Too much to talk about,” she blubbered. “But Ace and Jaycee are together.”

He pulled back slightly and stared at her. “Are you sure?”

She nodded and more tears came. She wasn’t a crier. The concern in Axel’s eyes said he knew exactly how heartbroken she must be to be crying over a man who didn’t want her.

“Ah, Em, I’m sorry.” He sat next to her on the bed, cradling her close. Despite the tug at her stitches, she wrapped her arms around him and held on. She was so grateful for her

close friend. She shouldn't be so torn up over Ace, but he was incredible and their one shared kiss was better than any kiss she'd ever experienced. It would be rough to let him go, but thankfully she could bury herself in her work.

Axel held her as she cried. She'd let herself have this cry, and then she'd somehow hitch herself up and move on.

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Ace made it back to the hotel and relayed the story to Jaycee. For some reason he left out the kiss. He didn't need to feel any worse about experiencing the kiss of a lifetime and knowing it would never happen for him again.

Jaycee eyed him perceptively. "So you love her?"

"She's with Axel," he muttered.

Jaycee jutted out her chin. "The jerk isn't worthy of her. I mean, Axel's a great person. He does a lot of good, but he thinks he's the gift to women and he'll *never* be faithful to Emerald."

Ace stared at her. "I can't compete with Axel Dexter, Jace."

"Yes, you can. In Emerald's eyes you can. I've seen the way she looks at you. Come on, bro, man up! Fight for her."

Ace didn't mind fighting, but this was a fight he was certain to lose. He indulged Jaycee and his own fledgling hopes by asking, "What should I do, Jace?"

"Get to the stinking hospital. Go be there for her and if needs be, knock Axel on his butt. Then ask if she wants a real man or a guy who's going to keep cheating on her."

Ace rolled it around in his mind. She had kissed him, and it had been incredible. That had to mean something, right? "Okay, I'll try." His voice sounded wimpy and uncertain.

"You got this! Can I come with you?"

"Sorry, Jace. I need to do this on my own."



She smiled. “All right, deny me the show. I’ll be praying for you. Let me know how it goes.”

He let her hug him and then hurried out of the hotel room and down the hallway. Googling the hospital on the phone he still had from Axel, he saw it was almost two miles away. He didn’t mind running, but he wanted to get to her fast. He still didn’t have his wallet or phone, but the front desk got him a taxi and told him they would bill his room. He’d pay Axel back later.

The driver was there waiting for him and within minutes, they were at the hospital. He raced inside, got the room number for Emerald, and got in trouble with a nurse for sprinting down the hallway. As he approached her room, he slowed down and took a breath to compose himself. He glanced in the window of the room, hoping to get a glimpse of her beautiful face.

His body froze and his blood ran cold. Axel was sitting on the edge of her bed, cuddling Emerald close. Her arms were around the man’s back, clinging to him. He couldn’t see their faces, but it didn’t take much imagination to fear they were probably kissing.

Ace studied the couple embracing for as long as he could, then he spun and strode out of the hospital. It was a cool June night in Aspen. He stormed back toward the hotel, needing the walk.

He was mad. Mad at Jaycee for making him come. Mad at himself for listening. Mad at Axel for loving Emerald but not being faithful to her. Mad at Emerald for loving Axel, despite his faults. When the anger cooled, he wondered where he’d be emotionally. Right now he hung onto the anger. It felt better than facing the pain. He suspected it was going to be a rough healing process.

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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**E**merald kept hoping Ace would show up to the hospital, but he didn't. Jaycee stopped by, but she wasn't herself and she didn't have much to say. She kept casting venomous glances at Axel, who was in the corner of the room working on a laptop, and she didn't stay long. Emerald didn't have the heart to ask her what her future plans were with Ace.

By the time Emerald was released and loaded into Axel's jet to go home, Ace and Jaycee had already left Aspen. That hurt. Maybe they'd decided to be together, but why hadn't Ace come to check on her? He hadn't even said goodbye. If she remembered the kiss right, she'd definitely initiated but he had kissed her back. Maybe he felt guilty about that now that he was fully with Jaycee.

The next week was busy catching up on everything she'd missed while she was hiking with Ace and Jaycee. Axel surprisingly hadn't hounded her about Ace.

Axel had taken charge of the next week of their reality show so she could heal, but now the week was coming to an end and she wanted to greet Sarah and Denzel as they finished their week at the castle reenactment. Emerald had been so excited when she'd found the castle and a company that hosted wealthy people who wanted to pretend they lived in the time of knights, tournaments, ladies, and banquets. She'd contacted the company and they'd been more than willing to set up challenges and have only her couple as guests at their castle—for a hefty price. Luckily, Axel couldn't care less if this show was ever profitable. It was fun for both of them and gave them

the chance to help various charities financially and with increased exposure.

On Saturday evening as the sun set, she and Axel rode in his Lexus sport utility to the Dallas Love Airport. It was only eight miles from his home in Wander Wood, so it was silly to take the helicopter. Sarah and Denzel would be flying to Dallas together tonight instead of going straight to their respective homes, so Emerald could at least be part of their week. Emerald was eager to meet them and hear about their week, but she was struggling to get too excited about anything. She missed Ace. He wasn't interested in her, but she couldn't put him from her mind.

The few times Axel had brought Ace up, she'd changed the subject. She could tell he was biding his time before he started bugging her for details or telling her she needed to move on. She wasn't ready to talk about it.

She looked out the window as the airstrip approached. They were early; traffic had been lighter than they expected for Saturday night. The cameraman had been with the couple for their last day of filming that ended late last night. He'd flown on the jet with them, but the jet wasn't here yet.

Axel parked the car close to where the plane would land and came around to get her door. The parking lot and airport where all lit up. "You okay?"

"Yeah, the stitches are itchy but I'm feeling good."

They stood on the tarmac close to his car and he studied her. "That's not what I'm talking about."

She glanced away. A man strode out of the parking lot and angled for them. A super-appealing man with bright blue eyes and a tough body that she wished was holding her. "Ace?" she whispered.

"Yes, that's what I'm talking about," Axel said. "Ace. I think you should go find him."

"Ace," she managed, pointing but unable to pull her gaze away. He looked determined and kind of angry. As their gazes

met, his blue eyes softened. It was all she could do to stay on her feet.

“Em.” He said her name so sweetly, so worshipfully. Could he feel for her like she did for him? What about Jaycee?

“Ace!” Axel hollered. “Just the man we’ve been hoping would show up! How’d you know we’d be here?” She knew her friend had been hoping Ace had fallen for her like she’d fallen for him.

Ace glanced at Axel and fury filled his gaze. Emerald worried for a minute that he would hit him. What was going on?

Ace spoke through a clenched jaw. “I have Denzel on a find your friends app.”

“Ah, nice. We have his phone. You’ll have to take Emerald and get out of here before he comes though. You know, the whole ‘not supposed to see each other until the filming is over’ issue.”

Emerald would love to escape with Ace, but he had a lot of explaining to do.

Ace’s gaze swung from Axel to Emerald then back to Axel. “You told me you’d take care of her,” he gritted out.

Axel blinked at him, obviously confused by the anger radiating from Ace. “Yeah, she’s doing good.”

“How dare you?” His voice was low and threatening.

“How dare I ...?” Axel’s brow wrinkled.

“You have no right to date other women when you have someone as perfect and incredible as Emerald loving you.”

Axel looked to Emerald and then pointed at himself. “Emerald loving *me* ... Like *loving*, loving me, not just as a brother and friend?”

“You know she loves you,” Ace growled, “Stop playing stupid and taking advantage of her goodness.”

Emerald’s breath whooshed out. Did Ace think ...? Was that why ...?

Everything came together like the pieces of a puzzle.

“You think Axel and I are dating?”

“Yes.” The fire in his eyes burned into her. “You live with him, you share the same hotel room, there’s picture after picture of you two online together. Jaycee confirmed that you two were together but Axel continually cheats on you. Late last night, there were new pictures all over the internet of him going on a date with that actress Savannah Heat. When I saw them, I knew I was done letting him treat you like that. I had to come find you and knock him on his butt if I need to. Whatever it takes to get him to treat you right.” A muscle popped in his jaw and his fists clenched. “Why do you put up with that, Em? You’re a strong, smart, beautiful, and successful woman. You can get out. There are other people who care for you.”

The look in his eyes turned tender on his last few sentences. Emerald prayed he was the one who cared for her. Her words rushed out quickly. “Oh, Ace ... You’ve got it all wrong. Axel and I work together. We’re best friends, but we definitely are not dating or living together like you’re implying. He’s like a brother to me.”

Ace blinked at her and then his incredible blue eyes widened. It took a few seconds for what she was saying to sink in, and then all the fire instantly disappeared. His jaw went slack. He looked to Axel.

Axel held up his hands and chuckled. “Sorry for the misperceptions. I know the media has sometimes fed on rumors of us dating or whatever, but Em and I are work partners and best friends. It’s a platonic relationship for both of us.”

Ace blew out a breath. “Wow. And here I was hating you, thinking you mistreated Em, thinking you were such a jerk.”

“You thought I was a jerk?” If Axel had one fault, it was that he wanted everybody to like him. That was impossible when you were in the public eye, but it seemed to hurt him that somebody as great as Ace would think he was a jerk.

“When Jaycee told me about all the women you were dating and I thought you weren’t being faithful to Em... I wanted to knock you out. Or cut your ears and nose off.”

Axel chuckled. “Makes sense. Glad you finally asked, rather than starting the cutting.”

Him bringing up Jaycee again brought all the pain that Emerald had felt back to the surface. “What about you and Jaycee being together?”

His brow wrinkled. “What do you mean? Jaycee’s my friend.”

She swayed on her feet. Axel moved to support her but Ace was quicker, wrapping his arm around her waist. His touch brought heat and joy and hope to her life. “You’re not dating Jaycee?”

He shook his head. “No. She’s like the annoying little sister I never had. You thought I was after Jaycee?” He passed his free hand over his face. “What did I do that made you think that?”

“You were always whispering together. You held her so tenderly whenever she was scared, and your names are cute together.” He arched his eyebrows as if that was a very dumb reason for her to think they were together, but she rushed on with the clincher. “You told her that you loved her.”

“I did?”

“Hey, guys? I hate to interrupt,” Axel said. “But the plane’s landing and I don’t think we need the cameraman to view this conversation. Do you want to go somewhere private and talk?”

Ace looked to Emerald. She nodded quickly. If he really wasn’t with Jaycee, she wanted to talk out the misunderstandings, and then she wanted him to kiss her for a very long time.

“Go then. I’ve got this.” Axel winked at the two of them.

Ace tilted his chin up to him. “Thanks, man.”

Axel gave him a thumbs up.

Ace directed her with his arm around her waist. They walked quickly away from the planes and into the lit parking lot. He stopped at a silver Audi, gesturing. “Do you want to get in?”

“No.” She wanted to be standing, and hopefully hugging soon without a console between them.

“So, you and Jaycee?” She gave him a pointed look but was having a hard time thinking straight with his arm still around her waist.

“We’re friends. We were always whispering because she was telling me to go for you and we were trying to make plans for me to get you alone.” He tilted an eyebrow. “Not a lot of privacy on a hiking trip with three. Especially when one of the three is terrified of bears.”

She smiled, remembering the lack of privacy but also all the warm looks and touches he’d given her. She’d been so confused, but now she wasn’t. She relaxed against him. “I wish you would’ve just asked me about Axel.”

“I tried.”

“When?”

“Remember the conversation when I asked if you were okay dating someone who was dating someone else?”

She pushed out a disbelieving breath. “Yes. That was when I assumed you wanted to date both me and Jaycee.”

His eyes widened and his jaw dropped. “You’re kidding? That’s horrible. I would never two-time anybody, but especially not the most perfect woman in an existence.”

Emerald smiled at that.

He shook his head. “You probably thought I was such a jerk.”

“I tried to think that, but you’re too good of a person and I was far too impressed with you to ever think of you as a jerk. I was just miserable because I wanted you all to myself.”

He planted his hands on the roof of the car on either side of her arms, easing in close and effectively pinning her against the car. “Em ...” His voice was husky and awe-inspiring. “I’m so sorry about the confusion. I came here because I was so angry that Axel was misusing you after he promised me he’d take care of you. Seeing those pictures of him last night with that actress was the last straw. I was planning on knocking him out and demanding he be faithful to you.”

She was listening to his explanation, but her breath came in fast pants as he leaned a bit closer and she anticipated his lips on hers.

“When I went to the hospital and saw you two hugging—”

“What?” That pulled her from her kissing fantasies. “You came to the hospital?”

He nodded. “I ran to your room, determined to beg you to give me a chance. When I looked through the window, you were in Axel’s arms.”

She shook her head. “He was hugging me to comfort me because he’d told me you said you’d take care of Jaycee and you pushed him to take care of me.”

He gave a strangled laugh. “What a pair we are. Both assuming things, and neither being brave enough to just come out and ask.”

“Hey, don’t insult my bravery.”

He laughed more sincerely this time. “Sorry, I’ll just insult my own.” Determination filled his face. “Em, I’m not going to waste one more second not knowing. Would you be interested in dating me?”

“Yes!” she all but screamed. She wanted to pull him close and kiss him, but she’d kissed him last time. She wanted him to make the move this time.

“I don’t know what dating will look like. We live in different states, but I can’t stay away from you, Em. You’re the only one I want to be with.”



She bit at her lip and said shyly, “As long as the dating includes lots of time with you and lots of kissing, we can make anything work. I’ve got a private jet at my disposal.” She flung a hand to wherever Axel was.

He smiled briefly, but then his gaze dipped to her lips before meeting hers again. “Lots of kissing?”

“Loads and loads.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled herself closer to his face.

“I’m in.” He bowed his head and kissed her.

This kiss was even more powerful than the first one. She wasn’t suffering from loss of blood, but she still grew lightheaded from the wondrous pressure of his mouth on hers and his body close. They were officially dating. Kisses like this were only the beginning.

As they pulled back, she fought to catch her breath and then asked, “I also need to know your real name.”

He chuckled and trailed his fingers along her cheek, making her tingle. “Okay, but no laughing or teasing, and especially no telling Jaycee.”

She nodded, trying to look serious. “I swear it.”

He smiled. “McKenzie.”

“What?” She couldn’t keep a giggle from her voice. “That’s a girl name.”

He scowled, but his blue eyes twinkled. “You swore not to laugh.”

“Sorry.” She pressed her lips together.

“Sorry I have a girl name or sorry you laughed?” He pulled her in tight again.

“Sorry for both.”

“Now I’ve trusted you with my deepest, darkest secret. You have to share something with me.”

She blinked up at him, her emotions running high. “I’m trusting you with my heart,” she whispered.

The mirth faded from his eyes. He nodded solemnly. “You can, Em. I’ll cherish and protect it. Cherish and protect you.”

“Forever?” she asked, feeling vulnerable and maybe premature. They’d only just committed to dating.

“Forever,” he echoed in a husky voice.

Her worries melted away.

He bent, sealing his words with another amazing kiss.



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## ROMANCING THE CASTLE

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“You excited? Nervous?” Axel had an energy about him that couldn’t be contained.

Denzel smiled. “You claimed that Brit told you all about me.”

“Yeah?”

“Then you should know I never get nervous or excited.”

“Ha!” Axel laughed easily as the plane smoothly touched down on the runway. “We’ll see if we can change that this week.”

“I highly doubt it.”

Axel pumped his eyebrows at him. “Emerald thinks she’s quite the matchmaker. She’s at seventy-five percent on the couples falling in love with each other. Though the last one made her sad.” He pressed his lips together. “I won’t talk about that but maybe if I can’t make you nervous about the extreme situation you’ll be in at least I can see you get nervous about the beautiful woman you’ll spend a week with.”

Denzel kept his smooth smile. “That, my friend, is the last thing I’d get nervous about. I might as well be a monk.” He’d never even told his SEAL team why he wouldn’t date or fall in love. It was self-inflicted punishment for his lack of control with his Aphrodite but nobody knew anything about her. Even Ryker and Satchel who’d been with him that weekend had never gotten anything out of him beyond he’d gone on a walk on a beach with a beautiful woman.

“Oh-ho!” Axel wrinkled his nose. “We’ll see my friend. Women have ways of making us eat our words, and doing it happily.”

The plane stopped and the cameraman who’d slept most of the flight came to life and got his camera rolling. Axel gave a winning smile to the camera and winked at Denzel. “And now, you get the opportunity to meet the woman who will change your life. Drumroll, please.” He tapped his hands on the plane door, laughing to himself.

Denzel cringed at the dramatics but didn’t say anything. Axel opened the door of the plane which swung down to make steps. He allowed the cameraman to go first then jogged down them, calling back to Denzel. “Come on, she’s here already.”

Denzel *did* feel a strange flutter of nerves. He hoped the woman he’d be spending the next week with was a nice person. He put on a practiced smile and walked confidently down the steps. As he reached the asphalt, he focused on the woman. Tall, lean, with long, dark curly hair and the kind of deep brown eyes a man could get lost in. Her beautiful mouth dropped open and then pressed into a thin line at the sight of him.

“Aphrodite,” he murmured, feeling like Tagg and Tanner had both just slammed their fists into his gut. What was she doing here and how was it possible she was even more beautiful than his memories of her? The memories of their brief but unforgettable hour together crashed into him. He reached out and braced himself against the plane so he didn’t fall over.

“Black Panther,” she said. She looked uncertain, unsteady, so beautiful. Did she hate him? Had she moved on and even now was married with three perfect children and a husband who got the privilege of holding her every night?

Denzel pulled in a shaky breath as he envisioned himself taking out her husband and begging her to love him.

Axel looked between them. “You two know each other?”

Aphrodite nodded shortly, narrowing her eyes at him and folding her arms across her midsection as if to protect herself. Denzel knew he deserved much worse than this cold reception but it still sliced through him like a hot knife. He'd give up every future dream for her. If she'd only let him hold her close one more time. No. He needed to get away from here. She hated him, and rightfully so. He hated himself.

He yanked his gaze from her beautiful face and managed to say in a semi-composed voice to Axel. "I apologize, but I can't possibly be part of this show."

Aphrodite gave a gasp of outrage as Axel's jaw dropped wide.

"Well," she said all snippety and so appealing all he wanted was hold her close again, "I *don't* apologize but there is no way I'm doing this show with *him*."

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Cami is a part-time author, part-time exercise consultant, part-time housekeeper, full-time wife, and overtime mother of four adorable boys. Sleep and relaxation are fond memories. She's never been happier.

Join Cami's VIP list to find out about special deals, giveaways and new releases and receive a free copy of *Seeking Mr. Debonair: The Jane Austen Pact* by clicking [here](#).

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## ROMANCING THE TREASURE

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Tess looked over the pool as they reached the edge and some of her bravery slipped away. “Do you think there’s anything in there?”

“Nothing dangerous,” Brit said. “Maybe some fish.” He lifted his shirt over his head and draped it over a bush, leaning down to untie his shoelaces. There had been flip flops in the bottom of the clothing bucket, but they’d forgotten to grab them.

Even in the dark, she could see him far too well. She stared in awe at the muscles in his shoulders, arms and back as he unlaced then pulled off his shoes and socks. He straightened and caught her staring. “What?”

The muscles in his chest and abdomen were as glorious as every other part of him.

“Uh ... you’re stinking beautiful, that’s what.” It flashed through her mind that the treasure was “beautiful.” Not as beautiful as him.

He jolted and she couldn’t see his eyes well enough to get a firm read on it, but she thought she’d embarrassed him.

“Sorry,” she said. “You already know I talk far too much. Forget I said anything. You go swim.”

“You’re swimming too. You’re the one that came up with the idea.”

“Well I can’t just strip my shirt off, can I?”

“Well, um ...” She’d obviously made him uncomfortable. “I won’t look.”

“Oh.” That was almost as disappointing as thinking they’d found the treasure when they hadn’t. He didn’t even find her attractive. Otherwise he would probably find it impossible not to look. What did she expect? She didn’t have some model-perfect shape; she was far too curvy and short. She was simply a naïve girl with no world experience who had talked far too much today. He was the perfect specimen, a military hero, and a super nice guy. Women probably chased him everywhere he went.

“There are plenty of extra clothes for both of us. If you want to swim in your t-shirt and shorts, you could change into dry clothes in the tent after.”

It wasn’t a bad plan. She took off her shoes and socks and started wading into the water. It was chilly, but she was hot and sticky so it felt wonderful.

“It’s nice, eh?” Brit asked.

“Really nice.”

He waited a short distance away. Tess waded toward him. Even though he’d said there was nothing dangerous in this water, she preferred being close to him. She was thigh-deep when the bottom changed from silty sand to uneven rocks. Tess stumbled and fell forward. She splashed face first into the water. She inhaled in surprise and it went down the wrong tube. She choked and gasped for air.

Arms surrounded her and lifted her out of the water. Brit held her close to his warm chest with one arm while he lifted her left arm up into the air. “You’re okay, I’ve got you,” he said.

Tess coughed and coughed, finally clearing her airway. The coughing calmed and she pulled in a few ragged breaths. Brit lowered her arm but held on to her as if she’d drown if he let go. His arms around her felt ... incredible, outstanding, better than the massage jets in her parents’ hot tub. She was warm and tingly all over just being close to him.

He looked concerned, so she smiled to reassure him. “I told you I’ve never had adventures. Ten steps into a waterfall pool and I would’ve drowned in waist-deep water if you hadn’t rescued me.”

He chuckled and she joined him. His chuckle turned into full-blown laughter. She loved it, loved hearing him laugh, loved making him laugh, loved being close to him.

His laughter calmed and he looked her over with the most appealing smile. “Oh, Tess, I like you.”

“You *do*?” She ignored her own stupid question and wasted no time wrapping her arms around that broad, beautiful, strong, firm back of his and tilting her head up, moistening her lips in what she hoped was an appealing way.

He stared down at her as if she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever encountered. Her heart thumped out of control and she thanked her lucky stars, the good Lord above, and Axel Dexter for making this moment possible. Forget finding treasure. Brit was more important than any treasure she could imagine.

His head slowly lowered toward hers. His arms surrounded her lower back and pulled her flush against his glorious chest and she happily awaited the moment of impact. His lips would claim hers and her life would officially be perfect.

Brit’s gaze traveled over her face and suddenly ... he froze. Like, absolutely froze. His body stiffened against hers. She’d already been experiencing the beauty of his incredible muscles before, but right now they were so rock hard and rigid they were almost ... scary.

“What is it?” She cowered against him. “Bears, wolves, feral pigs?”

Brit let out an unsteady laugh and released her from his arms. He stepped back and said quickly, “It’s nothing.”

With those lame words, he ducked under the water. He rose up and pushed the water back from his hair and wiped a hand over his face.

Tess was in awe at how glorious he looked, all tough and shiny with water droplets streaming down him, but she was confused and honestly ticked that he'd pulled away from her like that. What happened to her kiss of a lifetime? What had she done? Something she said?

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Keep reading [here](#).