

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, their faces nearly touching. The man has a beard and is looking down at the woman. The woman has long hair and is looking towards the man. They are in a snowy landscape with evergreen trees in the background. The sky is dark with falling snow, creating a soft, romantic atmosphere. The overall color palette is cool, dominated by blues, greys, and whites.

# Dane's *Storm*

*A sign of love novel*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Mia Sheridan

# *Dane's Storm*

**A Sign of Love Novel**

**Mia Sheridan**

Dane's Storm  
A Sign of Love Novel  
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# Table of Contents

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Epilogue](#)

This book is dedicated to Darcy, my sweet butterfly, my purple  
rose.



## *The Cancer*

*Fiercely protective and passionately loyal,  
the cancer will go to great lengths to defend those  
he loves.*

# PROLOGUE

Flynn Purdom stood at his kitchen sink rinsing his coffee cup and watching as snowflakes gathered at the corners of the window in front of him, falling from a clear dusky sky. He'd used his ham radio to access the national weather system frequency, and it'd informed him a storm was likely coming in the next few days. A couple of storms had already passed through, but by the time they'd reached his cabin, they'd only caused a small dip in temperature and a few inches of snow. A quick glance up as he'd been out checking his traps suggested that the higher altitude was where the storm was exercising its fury.



Nature's wrath could be a bitch, but he'd much rather deal with her than with the evil that ran rampant through the United States government. His family had said he was crazy to move here alone, but why care what they thought? They were all idiots. When the government started rounding them up, they probably wouldn't even notice; they'd be too busy staring at the latest Hollywood gossip on their cell phones, or reading a social media site about what some kid they barely knew in middle school ate for dinner. Damn sheep. Being led straight to slaughter. Not him. No, siree. See if they called him crazy then.

Yawning, he dried his cup and placed it on the counter next to the dinner plate and utensils he'd washed and dried hours ago. It was early, but he woke early, too, and his bed was calling.

Just as he was turning from the sink, a fluttering of bright blue in the corner of the window displaced some snow and caught his eye, causing him to turn back. He leaned closer, but as quickly as it was there, it was gone. *Huh*. The tip of a mountain bluebird's wing more than likely, but it had him staring out the window again toward the woodshed. *Well damn*. If that storm hit here tomorrow, he'd hate to have to trudge outside when he could stay warm and cozy in his cabin. Sighing, he walked to the door and put on his coat and boots.

Stars were just appearing overhead as the landscape dimmed a darker shade of gray. Flynn collected an armful of firewood from the shed and was walking back toward his cabin when they emerged from the trees. He stopped. *What the? A*

surprised grunt burst from his throat, and one log fell from the top of the pile and landed at his feet.

It was a man, his eyes wild, skin flushed and shiny with sweat, and cradled in his arms was a woman. Flynn's shocked gaze moved to her. She was clearly already gone—her skin as white as the snow, her body stiff. As Flynn stared, the man made an agonized moaning sound and fell to his knees, still clutching the woman's body.

Flynn dropped the firewood and ran for his radio.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Audra

My car rounded the corner, the mountains in the distance coming into view. Somehow, the majesty of that vista still elicited an internal sigh that went straight to my bones. Magnificent. Solid and unmoving. Something I knew I could always count on in a world where little was certain.

My work parking lot only held a scattering of cars at nine in the morning, mostly vendors who had an office or retail space in the brick warehouse I was transforming into a one-stop wedding mall.

Pulling into a spot and hopping out of my car, I opened the trunk and removed the large packages

of flowers and branches I'd purchased that morning at the flower mart. My eyes closed as I inhaled the sweet, heady fragrance of lilies. I closed the trunk with my free hand and headed toward the building's entrance.

Seven years ago, I'd sold the few things of value I owned—my grandmother's wedding ring, a couple of antiques from the attic—and opened a floral business named Thistles and Thatch. At the time, I barely made enough money to pay the electric bill, but the building itself was paid off. I'd inherited my father's home when he passed away, so with no mortgage, I made ends meet, waiting patiently for my fledgling business to grow as I honed my craft and found my style.

Initially, with little money for supplies, I was creative and used things like burlap, old grain sacks

and twine to wrap my bouquets, marketing the look as freshly farm-picked. I'd mixed and matched unique combinations like sugarbush and eucalyptus, even adding the occasional fruit-laden branches. I used things other florists might have considered weeds, things I thought looked wild and dreamy when paired with more traditional flowers. I'd also hand-drawn each tag, giving every bouquet a unique and personal touch. My arrangements had caught on through word of mouth, and business had grown. Some days I was in my shop all morning putting bouquets together, and out all afternoon and evening delivering them. After a while, I'd secured a few parties and realized that weddings and events were where the money was. So I began putting most of my profit into advertising in bridal and local social magazines.

When brides began regularly asking me for references for other vendors, I'd thought, why not use the extra space I had to rent out to wedding professionals? We could all recommend each other and in essence, a bride need only go to one spot to check off all her vendors. The building was on the outskirts of Laurelton, Colorado where I lived and normally, didn't bring in a lot of traffic, but if customers could come to one location to fulfill a variety of needs, it would be perfect. Or so I hoped. I was banking on it—literally.

I'd rented out the one usable space to a photographer, and with that rent, had begun to slowly create more offices and studios. The Bridal Gallery now included the original photographer, a videographer, a custom stationer, a bridal gown shop, and soon, Pastries by Baptiste, which

required a space outfitted to accommodate a chef's kitchen that would be finished in the next month or so.

I'd eaten peanut butter sandwiches for what felt like every meal for the past two years, hadn't bought a stitch of new clothing, and had thrown every last penny of profit into the construction. When I stepped through the doors, my heart burst with pride.

I smiled as I glanced around the main foyer, breathing in the smell of flowers and new paint. The building was now a gorgeous mixture of old and new, vintage and contemporary that had come together exactly as I'd hoped when I dreamed up the idea. The dark, wide-planked hardwood floor beneath my feet was both elegant and rustic, and the brick walls were the perfect contrast to the



grand, glittering crystal chandelier hanging from the tall second-story ceiling. There were retail spaces to both the right and left, and at the back wall, a wide staircase. The upper floor was open and featured distressed, steel railings. Soothing classical music played softly through the sound system I'd installed. Directly in front of me was a round, antique table I'd found at a flea market and the huge flower display I changed each week. This week's design featured faith roses, astilbe, fox glove, thistle, privet berries, and seeded eucalyptus. I ran a finger along a trailing stem of berries, assessing the freshness of the arrangement and deciding that it still had a few days left in it.

I smiled again as I took in the whole space at large. Once I paid off the loan I'd taken to complete the construction work, I would start

funneling more money toward advertising.

“Beautiful morning, isn’t it?”

I turned my head to see Victor stepping into the doorway of his shop. “It is. They’re saying we might get some snow this week. I can already smell it in the air.”

I stepped toward him and he leaned in slightly to inhale the perfume of the lilies in my arms and sighed. “Lilies and first snowfall. It should be a perfume.”

I laughed. “It’s probably already a room freshener, but I’m sure it smells nothing like the real thing.”

He turned into his shop and I followed him. “You’re probably right. You can’t manufacture nature’s perfection, though it doesn’t stop Glade from trying—or douche companies, for that

matter.”

I spit out a burst of laughter as Victor grinned.

“Sick.”

“But accurate. Come check out the Bell/Larkin shoot. They won’t be in for half an hour or so.”

I set the flowers on Victor’s desk and moved to the black and white prints he had set up on his viewing table, along with the book he did for his clients. I loved Victor’s style, which was a combination of posed and photojournalistic. He took the predictable shots every bride wanted: the cutting of the cake, first dance, tossing of the bouquet; but he also managed to capture magical moments both unplanned and un-posed. *Candid photos*. Those were my favorites. As I perused the shots, my gaze snagged on one smaller photo off to

the side. It was of the groom as he waited at the altar for his bride. In the corner of the picture, you could see the bride starting her walk down the aisle, and it was clear he was seeing her for the first time. He was young and handsome, with dark hair and light eyes. Eyes that might fill with laughter easily and often. I scoffed internally. *You don't even know him.* And yet, my gaze lingered on his face. It wasn't familiarity for that man particularly. It was the reverence and adoration in his expression that both tugged at my insides and pressed against an old bruise.

I turned to Victor. The smile I conjured felt overly sunny and slightly brittle. He studied me momentarily. "That's what it's all about, isn't it?" he asked softly, nodding toward the photograph with his head, but keeping his gaze on me. "We

provide all the fripperies, but it all comes down to that, doesn't it? That look. That look right there."

I nodded before breaking eye contact. "It . . . should. Yes." I smiled again. "It's a beautiful collection, Victor. I'm sure they're going to be thrilled." I turned, gathering my flowers. "I better get these in water. And I have an appointment with a bride who could possibly be a huge account coming in at nine thirty so I . . . I better prepare."

"I'm sure you'll wow her. Good luck."

"Thanks," I called as I walked out his door. "I need it." I climbed the stairs and headed to my shop at the front. I'd reserved one of the larger spaces for myself, one with a spacious back room where I had several refrigeration units and a couple of decent-sized work tables. It also conveniently had an elevator that led to a side door on the bottom

floor so I could easily transfer my floral arrangements to my car when they were ready for delivery. Mostly, though, I'd wanted the view of those mountains through the front office window. They . . . anchored me somehow.

I bit my lip as I walked, a feeling of . . . melancholy sitting in the pit of my stomach that hadn't been there when I'd entered the building. That photo had unsettled me, conjured up a sadness I thought was long faded, a smoky memory that had at first stolen my ability to breathe, but in time, had drifted away. So why had my lungs suddenly felt so constricted in Victor's studio?

I frowned, my pace slowing, when I heard voices already coming from my shop. I knew my assistant, Jay, arrived at eight. But my first appointment with Felicity McMaster, the bride I'd

mentioned to Victor, wasn't scheduled for another twenty-five minutes. My skin tingled with nerves. *Oh please don't let her be early.* I wasn't ready. Selling myself was the part of this job that made me anxious. The flower designing I loved, and the artistic element filled my heart. The rest was a necessary evil. I needed to get my game face on.

*That damn photograph.* I felt blindsided, and I didn't even know exactly why. As if I'd been walking through a peaceful, familiar field, and a landmine had suddenly blown up under my feet. And that hadn't happened for so long. So, so long. *Get a grip, Audra.*

I halted and stepped into the doorway of the now-empty shop that would house Pastries by Baptiste soon. I took a deep breath, summoning my courage before continuing to my shop.

“Good morning,” Jay said as I pulled the door open. He stood from where he was seated at his desk, widening his eyes in silent communication that told me he was as surprised as I was that the two women sitting at the round table where I met with clients were already here. He gestured to them. “Audra Kelley, this is Felicity McMaster and her mother, Alice.”

I moved forward, smiling and moving the flowers to my left arm so I could offer my right hand to the two women. Felicity was a slim blonde with a dainty, upturned nose, wide, blue eyes, and a rock on her finger the size of Gibraltar, and Alice was an older version of Felicity. Of course, I already knew who they were. I’d seen their picture in the style pages of the local paper and looked up Felicity’s engagement photo. “It’s so nice to meet



you. I'm sorry, did I misunderstand the time of our appointment? I apologize if I kept you waiting."

"No, no," Alice said, waving her hand. "We simply have a million things to do today and need to get out of here by nine forty-five. We didn't think you'd mind if we came early."

"No, of course not," I lied. I pushed the bundles of flowers toward Jay, and he disappeared through the door to the back room, shooting me an encouraging smile over his shoulder. I slipped off my coat, putting it over the back of my chair, and set my purse on the floor before taking a seat next to Felicity.

"As you can imagine, planning a wedding with five hundred guests in two months is going to be quite the task. We need the very best vendors to help pull it off."

I smiled. “Yes, of course.”

I already knew a little bit about the wedding from my initial phone call with Alice. If I got this job, it was going to be a *huge* account. A local wedding magazine was going to be showcasing the nuptials in a “winter wedding” feature, and I’d already let my mind wander to designs. A winter wedding—with a budget like the McMasters had mentioned—was a chance to do something unique and amazing. Of course, it could also be incredible publicity, *free* advertising. And I needed all the *free* I could get right now.

“I’m so honored to have the opportunity to develop designs for your wedding. May I ask how you found my name?” I’d been shocked when they’d called to set up an appointment at all, considering what a boon it would be for *any* vendor

to work their event, and considering how small potatoes I still was.

“Actually,” Alice said, “you did the flowers for the Art in Auction event we attended a few months ago. We’d never seen such beautiful arrangements. We were surprised to hear such a no-name floral designer did them. But we decided to meet with you anyway.”

*No-name floral designer. Meet me anyway.* I managed what felt like a weak, somewhat embarrassed smile. “Well, thank you. I appreciate the chance.” It’d been a lucky break to get that job, and because of it, I’d secured several other highbrow charity events. And because of those unexpected projects, I’d been able to reduce a nice chunk of the loan I owed the bank. I pulled the tablet of paper and the pen sitting in the center of

the table toward me and wrote Felicity's name at the top. "Do you want to start by telling me your vision for the flowers?"

Felicity glanced at her mother. "Peonies, roses, and tulips." Spring flowers for a winter wedding? Ugh. *Only the rich and famous believed they could bend nature to their own will.*

"I realize they'll have to be flown in from a greenhouse," her mother added on a small laugh, "but Felicity wants what Felicity wants." She shot her daughter an indulgent smile as if she was proud of Felicity's apparent penchant for making decisions that were both difficult and costly. "The other five florists we've met with promised it wouldn't be a problem."

My heart dipped. *Five?* I nodded. "Oh, I see. Yes, you could go that route," I said slowly, "or you

could do something more . . . individual, unique. Something that speaks not only of your excellent taste, but of your love story.”

Felicity frowned and her mother looked a little shocked, maybe even confused, as if this might be the first time she was considering that her daughter’s wedding involved a love story. “My . . . love story?” Felicity asked.

My heart picked up speed. “Well”—I cleared my throat—“flowers tell a story, not only with their beauty, but with their meaning.” I pulled the pad nearer to me and began sketching a bouquet, the smooth strokes of the pen providing calm, allowing me to drift into my own head, away from the nerves assaulting me. “Timeless garden roses,” I murmured, “sensual succulents, tender paperwhites, and sweet anemones with a touch of

depth at the center, speaking of those secret things shared only between the two of you.” I shot her a knowing smile, and she looked briefly surprised but then tilted her chin, one side of her mouth tugging upward. The small upward lift of her lips boosted my courage, and I continued sketching, drawing a few more flowers as I listed them, creating the bouquet on paper.

My mind wandered even more, my hand seeming to move of its own accord, the way it did sometimes when creativity blossomed inside me.

“What’s that one?” Felicity asked, pointing to a flower I’d just drawn.

I blinked at it, surprised I’d included it. Maybe it was because my mind had drifted, maybe it was because the emotion—one I still wasn’t sure I could name—of Victor’s photo simmered inside

me, maybe it was because I'd spoken of true love. "That's a hellebore, sometimes called a winter rose." I paused. "There's a local legend about this flower. Would you like to hear it?"

Both women nodded in unison, their eyes following my pen as I added greenery, kale, and air plants to make the bouquet rich and lustrous.

"An old Indian legend tells of a chief who fell desperately in love with a beautiful woman named Aiyana who was said to live her life in such a way that each day, she inhaled the sunrise and exhaled the sunset. She was not of his tribe, but her spirit called to him so he made her his bride. They lived in happiness and harmony for many years when she tragically drowned, leaving the chief's heart broken and his life empty. A few days after she was buried, the chief was shocked to see small flowers pushing

through the winter-hardened earth above her final resting place. Delicate green hellebores who turned their faces to the mountains and the sky, inhaling the sunrise and exhaling the sunset.”

I glanced up at Felicity and Alice, and they looked rapt with attention. “But soon an unexpected snowstorm came and the chief was fearful it would cover those delicate flowers and block out what he believed to be his bride’s view of the sky, her everlasting happiness. So he stood beside where they grew and curled his body over them and provided shelter as the storm raged and he froze in place. The sky god recognized the chief’s great love and sacrifice and turned him into a tree. And now, if you see a tree whose branches cover a patch of hellebores, you know it’s the chief, forever bent in protection over his beloved,



together for all time. And the hellebore signifies true, unending love.”

I drew a quick grouping of stems, wrapped in a ribbon, and ended with a flourish as I looked at Felicity, my heart beating heavily in my chest, my throat clogged.

Felicity sighed dreamily and her mother gripped her hand on the table. “David does look at you that way, Felicity. Like you exhale the sunrise itself.”

Felicity’s eyes widened. “He does?”

Her mother nodded and the two shared a tender look. “Oh yes.” Alice looked back at me. She shook her head and laughed softly. “Well then.” She glanced at my drawing. Even I had to admit it looked lovely, as far as drawings went. “It is . . . beautiful. Unique.” She tilted her head. “And

it would certainly make a statement.”

She glanced at Felicity who then grinned at her mother. Alice looked at me once again. “We’ll need matching centerpieces for fifty tables, flowers for the altar . . . oh the works. Send me a quote and my husband will put a deposit in the mail.”

I felt my eyes widen as my heart leapt, though I still felt slightly dazed. “I . . . I’ll get you a quote by tomorrow afternoon. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Wonderful.” They both stood and shook my hand one more time as I gave them a breathless smile. They began to move toward the door when Felicity turned back toward me so suddenly I startled. She pointed at the black ink drawing, still sitting on the tabletop. “Can I have that? The drawing is beautiful. Do you mind?”

I blinked. “Oh, no, of course not.” I ripped the page from the pad and handed it to her. She offered me another smile and then Felicity followed her mother out the door. As it clicked shut behind them, I sank back into the chair.

Jay, who had come out of the back at some point without me even noticing, rushed to my side, pulling up a chair next to me and gripping my shoulders.

“You’re brilliant,” he whisper shouted.

I put my hand to my forehead. “Am I going to be able to pull this off, Jay? Five *hundred* guests and a magazine spread.”

“Hell to the yes. You got this.” He frowned at me for a moment. “Aren’t you happy?”

*I think so. I should be.* Only I felt . . . strange. Still off balance. “Yes. Yes, of course. This is huge.

I guess I'm just shocked." I gave him a small laugh.

"Well get un-shocked. You have work to do."

Jay put his hand up and I high-fived him, laughing again and giving my head another shake, trying to break out of this odd feeling of disconnection. Telling that story . . . it was like the weight of those words still sat on my heart.

As if reading my mind, Jay asked, "Where'd you hear that story anyway?"

"Oh, I"—I shook my head—"I can't really remember."

He narrowed his eyes, aware of my dishonesty, but didn't push. "Hmm. All right. Well, I never knew you had such a romantic streak. It's certainly not from experience." He raised an eyebrow, alluding to my lack of a love life. "But it worked in case you have more where that came

from. I'm going to make another pot of coffee. We have the Spellman wedding to get ready for and the McMaster quote alone could take all day.”

I smiled, gathering my things and taking them to my desk on the other side of the room, next to the window. The door to the shop opened and closed as Jay left to make coffee in the employee kitchen down the hall. For a moment I simply stood by the window, staring at the mountains beyond, thinking of a handsome chief, and the woman he loved enough to stand over her in protection for all eternity. Sadness welled up inside me at the knowledge that a love like that was not my destiny.

## CHAPTER TWO

**Then . . .**

*Audra moved the brush slowly down the canvas, going over the line she'd already drawn. Her picture was done, and she was pleased with the result, but the model held her pose at the front of the room as the other art students focused intensely on the likeness they were still attempting to capture.*

*Movement out the window caught Audra's attention and her breath hitched as she watched Dalila Townsend's brother take a seat on the bench in the small park area next to the building. Her brow furrowed in confusion for a moment as she*

*glanced at the empty seat Dalila usually occupied. Didn't he realize she wasn't here today?*

*He'd been picking Dalila up after class—every Tuesday and Thursday at five—since they had started a month before. At first Audra had thought he was Dalila's boyfriend, until they'd struck up a conversation one day, and Dalila had caught sight of him out the window, saying, "Oh, there's my brother. I have to go," before breezing out the door. At the revelation that the boy was Dalila's brother, something Audra wasn't sure how to name had lifted in her chest, as if taking flight inside her. It couldn't be relief. Why, she wondered, would a girl like her be relieved that a boy like him didn't have a girlfriend? Or at least, if he did have a girlfriend, it wasn't Dalila. And it would never be her, of course. An invisible girl like her*

*would only ever watch boys like him through windows and across rooms.*

*“Pitiful,” she muttered under her breath, drawing her shoulders straight. She knew she should turn her gaze away from the window. She knew it was slightly weird—okay, maybe really weird—to watch him like she did, but she couldn’t help it. She was drawn to him. Not only to his looks, but his mannerisms, his expressions, the goodness she saw in him.*

*Today, he was bent forward, his elbows on his knees as he ate a sandwich. He glanced to the left and Audra’s eyes moved to where a stray dog sat watching him as closely as she was.*

*The boy paused, his hand halfway to his mouth, as he stared at the dog. Audra tilted her head, a small smile playing on her lips as she*



*watched the interaction. The boy hesitated for several moments, seeming to be weighing the situation. The dog continued staring, sad eyes imploring. The boy's shoulders rose as if on a sigh, and he held the sandwich out to the dog. The dog approached him timidly, yet hopefully, taking the sandwich from his hand and eating it in one single gulp. He said something to the dog and reached his hand out tentatively. The dog took a step forward, nudging the boy's hand with his head, and was rewarded with scratching under his chin and behind his ears for several minutes before a car honking somewhere nearby startled the mutt and he turned, running off.*

*Audra glanced at the sketchbook on her lap as she quickly and effortlessly drew the exchange between the boy and dog, switching pencils as she*

*added detail. Movement in her peripheral vision had her closing the pad of paper quickly, right before her teacher approached from the side.*

*“Beautiful,” he murmured, looking at the completed drawing perched on her easel. “The shading is . . . absolutely stunning. Lovely work, Audra.” Pleasure filled her at his compliment, the look of genuine respect in his eyes. He smiled. “You always draw in black and white, though. Aren’t you ever inspired to add a bit of color?”*

*Audra smiled, shrugging, not sure how to answer his question. He patted her on the shoulder, chuckling softly, and walked to the next student. She glanced at the drawing, thinking about what the teacher had asked. Why did she always draw in black and white? Was it because that was the way she saw the world? Colorless? Yes, her heart*

*whispered. Yes. She thought of her home, of the melancholy that permeated those four walls, of the way she'd always felt part of the shadows. But also of the way—secretly, deep inside—she yearned to seek the yellow warmth of the sunshine.*

*She glanced at the pad in her lap, opening it to the picture of the boy and the dog, the one she'd drawn with colored pencils. Audra's world felt as if it was black and white, shades of somber gray, but surprisingly, to her, he was in color.*

\*\*\*\*\*

*“Hello?” Dane called, stepping into the room, empty except for a girl at the sink near the front. She whirled toward him, water droplets flying off*

*the handful of brushes she held, her eyes wide with surprise. "Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," he said, walking toward her. "I'm, ah, looking for my sister."*

*For a moment the girl continued staring, the bunch of brushes clasped tightly in her fist, her mouth shaped in an O. Finally, she blinked and shook her head slightly, reaching backward and turning off the water, before facing Dane once again. "Your sister's Dalila Townsend, right?" she asked softly.*

*Dane moved closer, nodding. "Yeah. I usually pick her up." His brow furrowed as he glanced around the empty room and then at the girl.*

*"Dalila mentioned last week that she wouldn't be in class today . . . something about an eye appointment?"*

*Dane grimaced, rubbing the back of his neck. “Ah, shit, that’s right. I totally forgot.” He glanced back to the girl. She looked down at her shoes for a moment and her dark braid fell over her shoulder. More hair seemed to have slipped out of it than was contained within it. He really looked at her now and an unexpected tingling raced through his blood. She was pretty in an unusual, exotic way. She was small and delicate, something about the set of her cheekbones and the slope of her forehead hinting at a native American ancestor. Her chin was pointy as was her little nose. But it was her big, thickly lashed eyes that captivated him, seemed to hold him prisoner for a moment. And her mouth . . . it was narrow, but her lips were full, and so perfectly pink. He swallowed. “Are you the teacher?” he asked in confusion. She looked*

*about his age, maybe younger. An aide? He took a step closer so they were only a few feet apart now. Up close her skin was clear and smooth, a bloom of pink staining both cheeks.*

*She blinked and then shook her head. “No. I”—she furrowed her brow—“um, I’m a student. I get a discount on the class for cleaning up the room when it’s over.” She glanced next to her at the sink where Dane noticed a broom leaning against the wall, a dustpan clipped to the handle. When he looked back at her, he noticed the color in her cheeks had deepened. Regret knotted his stomach. Shit. He’d embarrassed her. Seeking to change the subject, he glanced at the easel to his right, his eyes widening at what he saw.*

*He glanced at the girl and her eyes moved from the easel where he’d been looking back to*

him. “We had a model visit the class today,” she explained. “She was . . . obviously . . . well, topless.”

The corners of Dane’s eyes tightened as he turned toward the easel. “I see.” The girl moved to stand beside him, gazing at the drawing. She took her full bottom lip between her teeth, tilting her head. “I’m not exactly an expert,” Dane said, “but I don’t think they’re supposed to be . . . sharp.”

The girl’s lip quirked and then she pressed her lips tightly together as if suppressing a smile, perhaps not wanting to insult the artist in question. “Well, everyone sees the world differently, I guess. He obviously sees a woman’s body as . . .” She furrowed her brow as if trying to come up with the appropriate description.

“Advanced weaponry?”

*She laughed, her face lighting up in a way that made Dane's stomach muscles clench. Their eyes met, and Dane saw the surprise in her wide, dark gaze along with the amusement. She hadn't expected him to make her laugh and the knowledge that he'd surprised her sent a thrill of satisfaction through him.*

*He took a few steps to stand before the next easel, bringing his hand to his chin and staring at the next artist's vision of womanhood—grimacing at the breasts that looked like rotten fruit. "Please tell me this is not how she really looked."*

*The girl shook her head, still considering the drawing. "No," she murmured. "I would have suggested medical attention."*

*It was Dane's turn to laugh. Audra shot him a somewhat guilty smile, her lips tipping up at the*



*same time her brow wrinkled. She was so damn pretty. Those eyes, those lips, that pointed chin. He tore his gaze away as he moved toward the window to stand in front of the last easel in that row. His expression sobered as he gazed at the drawing, the woman's face turned away, her hair cascading around full, round breasts, nipples exposed through the strands. It was . . . mesmerizing. It looked so real Dane could almost believe it was a black and white photograph if he squinted his eyes. "Wow," he whispered as he felt the girl's warmth come up beside him. "This one is incredible." He glanced at the girl and saw the shy pleasure in her expression, as well as the blush that was back on her cheeks. He turned toward her. "Is this yours?"*

*She turned, looking at him as she nodded, some elusive energy flowing between them. It felt*

*warm and good, and Dane wanted to step into it, gather it somehow.*

*He stared at her for a moment. “You’re”—he glanced at the drawing—“amazing.”*

*She let out a breathy laugh, still looking shy. “Thank you.”*

*“I’m Dane.”*

*She smiled softly, her eyes skittering away, but finding their way back. “Audra.”*

*Audra. Dane returned her smile. He went to move closer to her and knocked the chair in front of the easel, a stack of what looked like sketch pads falling to the floor. “Damn . . . sorry,” he said, bending to pick them up.*

*Audra sucked in a breath, falling to her knees where the pads had landed. “It’s okay, please. I’ve got it,” she said, a note of alarm in her voice.*

*“No, it’s my fault,” Dane said, picking one up and placing it on the chair. But he’d set it on the edge and the loose pages from within fell out, raining down on their hands as they both tried to gather the pads of paper. They both froze as a drawing came to rest on the knuckles of Dane’s right hand. It was him from just a little while earlier, feeding that stray that had looked at him with such hungry longing in his gaze that Dane couldn’t resist sharing his sandwich, even though he’d been as famished as he always was after the swim practice he’d just come from.*

*His eyes flew to the girl’s, and she looked horrified, her throat moving as she swallowed. “I —”*

*He looked down, noticing that there were several drawings of him—feeding the stray, deep*

*in thought, smiling as he threw a football back to a group of little kids playing in the park. Dane picked one up—he was sitting on the same bench, his hands in his coat pockets as he stared off into the distance, a look on his face that was peaceful, introspective. He remembered that day—remembered the shirt he'd been wearing. It was the three-year anniversary of his dad's death, and he'd been thinking about him as he watched a family enjoying a picnic in the park. Something about the scene had made him both miss his dad and feel a sense of gratitude that, though he'd lost him, he still had so many good memories of what a good man he'd been. The realization had brought a rightness to his heart, a peace. And the girl, she'd caught that moment. She'd seen something in it that had compelled her to capture it.*

*He looked up at her and she shook her head, her lip trembling. “I always finish my assignments early. And I sit right by the window . . . I didn’t mean to invade your privacy . . .” Her words were whispered, her expression still wary, fearful, her neck blotchy and her cheeks bright red. She was obviously scared to death of his reaction.*

*His chest squeezed as his lips tipped upward, a smile meant to reassure her. She blinked several times, her chest rising and falling as her gaze washed over his face, those pink lips parting as she released an exhale of breath.*

*He looked again at the quickly drawn sketches, seeing himself through her eyes. This girl, she had really seen him. Not just his face, or his wealth, his athleticism, or his popularity—all those things others thought defined him. The things*

*even he sometimes used to define himself. No, she had seen the things he hoped he was—the qualities inside that mattered to him. And as he looked into her eyes, he realized that he wanted very, very much to see her too.*

# CHAPTER THREE

**Audra**

**Now . . .**

The day went by in the blink of an eye as I worked my tail off to get a quote drawn up for the McMasters and prepared the flowers for a wedding we'd been hired to do the following morning. I was thankful for the preparation that allowed me to lose myself in the hands-on work, my brain quieting as I focused on creating one centerpiece after another, arranging the flowers just so.

I made Jay leave at six thirty, but I stayed, finally shutting off my computer, yawning, and

calling it a day at around nine.

Fat, fluffy snowflakes fell from the sky as I drove toward home, but it didn't feel overly frigid. The snow would likely be gone by morning and Trina Spellman would get a crisp, but lovely wedding day with blue skies and air that smelled like winter—icicles and a far-off tinge of smoke.

I let myself into my dreary, rundown gabled-front home, the house I'd lived in for most of my life, and hung my jacket on the coat tree by the door. After a quick shower, I changed into a worn pair of sweats and stood in front of the microwave as I waited for a frozen pasta meal to heat. Another exciting Friday night. I didn't mind. *Mostly*. Or . . . usually. Usually I didn't mind. I liked the peaceful regularity of my life. I enjoyed the quiet, the expected. Most days I was so exhausted I



practically fell into bed anyway, only ever at home to eat and sleep. Even in the winter, I usually had a weekend event that kept me busy, kept me working.

So why did I feel this strange sadness tonight? Why did the quiet of my house seem not as tranquil as it normally did, but . . . lonely? So lonely. I tapped my fork on the counter as I watched my dinner spin on the glass tray in the microwave in front of me. It was that photograph and that story. They'd both dredged up the edges of memories I didn't want to think about.

When my meal was done, I took it and a glass of wine into the living room and sat on the couch, placing the steaming box of pasta and my wineglass on the coffee table in front of me. I clicked on the television to a local news station and began eating

as I watched. I glanced at my dad's old recliner, picturing him sitting there the way he had once upon a time, his expression glum, his eyes distant, physically present but emotionally unavailable.

Sadness settled in my gut, that old familiar guilt that surrounded me here.

I should move. There were a few good memories in this house, but nothing I liked about it aesthetically, nothing I could really call my own. Everything was old and worn and someone else's style. The warehouse where I worked spoke of me and what I loved, but I couldn't exactly live there. Yes, I should sell this place, but it needed so many repairs before I could list it, and right now, I didn't have the money to make even one of them.

When I was done with my meal and my wine, and had watched a little more news, I brushed my

teeth and got in bed, pulling the covers up to my chin. I closed my eyes and began drifting to sleep, a howling sound coming from somewhere deep inside of me. I fisted the blankets, my eyes popped open, and I exhaled a sharp gust of breath when I realized it was only the wind. Yes, only the wind.

*Wasn't it?*

I dreamed, and in my dream I was underground. *Live. Breathe!* My heart galloped and my lungs burned as I pushed through the hard soil, the world opening up in a sudden blinding stream of glittering white. *Snow.* It was snow. Frozen crystals melted as I stretched upward, breaking open the final hard crust of ice. Up, up to where the sun was breaking over the mountains, flooding the world with color. With the sudden freedom, happiness spiraled through me, making me want to shout with

glee. And that's when I turned and saw his face. Leaning over me, he wore that same look of reverence I remembered. But as suddenly as happiness had gripped my spirit, so did misery. "You didn't protect me," I said. "Why?"

His expression grew sad as well. "You didn't let me."

I woke with a start, my alarm buzzing in my ear, and tears burning the backs of my eyelids. "*You didn't let me.*"

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Monday morning dawned clear and chilly. I felt better, revived. It was a whole new week, a chance to start fresh, and I had so many exciting things

going on. I'd sent the McMaster quote on Saturday after I'd arrived home from delivering the Spellman flowers to the church, and then decorating the reception hall with centerpieces featuring golden dahlias, cream and pale pink garden roses, bright orange ranunculus, cymbidium orchids, and herbs and fern for the greenery. They'd turned out stunning, if I did say so myself, and I'd spent extra time on photographs for my online portfolio.

The McMaster quote had come to a total that made me feel slightly nauseated as I'd never sent such a large figure to anyone. I thought I'd been more than fair in my pricing, and only quoted what they'd asked for, so I'd taken a deep breath and hit send. A reply came back Sunday morning saying everything looked good and a deposit would go in the mail on Monday. I'd been thankful I was alone

so no one could hear the excited squeak I hadn't been able to contain.

And now I was back at work, ready to seize the day, or at least seize some coffee. I put a strong pot on brew and straightened the kitchen as the machine hissed and gurgled, loving when the rich aroma filled the room.

Cup in hand, I walked carefully to my studio, sipping the hot goodness on the way to avoid the liquid I'd filled right up to the brim from sloshing over.

I threw my purse and keys on my desk and sat down, taking another sip of my coffee before logging on to my computer. I did a little bit of work as I finished my first cup, but was basically caught up as I'd worked most of the weekend from home.

"Morning," Jay said as he came in the door.

I looked up, raising a brow at the bags under his eyes and his slow pace as he walked the dozen or so steps to his desk and sunk into his chair. “Rough weekend?”

“No. This is what an amazing weekend looks like.”

I laughed. “You make it seem so appealing.”

He put his elbow on his desk and rested his cheek on his hand, pushing his face into a contorted expression of exhaustion. “You should have come out dancing with me Saturday. You missed an epic night.”

“I see that.”

Jay let out a long-suffering sigh and raised his head. “Tell me there’s coffee.”

“There is. Grab a travel cup. I need you to come with me to look at flooring for Baptiste’s

kitchen. I have to get it installed so he can move his equipment in by the first of the month. I need his rent.”

“Ugh. Okay.”

I laughed. Jay liked to party and come dragging into work on Mondays, but he was wonderful. I knew I could count on him, because he was not only a diligent employee, but a hard worker too. But mostly, he had a heart of gold. His only flaw was that he tried ruthlessly to get me to want more of a social life and I just . . . didn't. I liked my quiet, predictable life and that was that. I didn't need more. I didn't *want* more.

Jay had moved to Colorado to attend college three and a half years before right around the time I had finally decided I could afford to hire a part-time assistant. He'd been a godsend, working two



mornings a week, and one afternoon between his classes so I could not only keep my business running, but manage work on the building as well. But he'd graduate in June with a degree in graphic design, and not only could I not afford to offer him a full-time position—at least not if things were the same for me financially in six months—but he should pursue a job in his field of study. I could hire another part-time assistant, I supposed, but probably no one capable of creating splashy brochures, postcards, and all the graphics for my website. No one I felt so comfortable with. I hardly wanted to think about it. Not only was I going to miss him on a professional and personal level, but I hated change. Change always unsettled me. No wonder my mind was drifting all over the place recently.

Jay came in with a travel mug, and I took my jacket from the back of my chair and started to put it on.

“Oh,” Jay said, grabbing a pile of what looked like mail on the edge of his desk, “this is from Friday. It was delivered while we were putting together the Spellman pieces and I forgot to give it to you before I left.”

“Thanks. I’ll look through it when I get back.” I took it from him and turned to toss it on my desk when the return address on the top caught my eye. I frowned. *Rutherford, Dunning, and Ross, Attorneys at Law*. My heart leapt and my blood chilled in my veins. I knew that law firm. I was personally acquainted with those lawyers. *Unfortunately.*

With shaking hands, I tossed the rest of the

mail on my desk and tore open the envelope. What in the world could this be?

“You okay, Audra?” I heard Jay’s voice, but didn’t respond. Couldn’t. I unfolded the single page and began reading.

The air whooshed from my lungs and my skin broke out in a cold sweat. *What?* My eyes began scanning the lines more quickly, reading the legal jargon as fast as possible while trying to grasp how in the hell this could be happening.

“Audra?” Jay’s voice, closer now. “You’re as white as a sheet. What’s wrong?”

I finally glanced at him, opening my mouth once and then closing it, shaking my head as if I might be in a dream—a nightmare—and a good head shake would wake me up. “They say they’re taking the building from me.”

“They? Who’s they?”

I shook my head again, grabbing hold of the side of my desk and leaning against it, the paper floating out of my hands to land on the floor. My legs felt weak. *No, no, there was a mistake.* Of course there was. This was impossible. I turned to Jay, my butt still resting on the solid wood, but forcing a deep breath through my body. Jay had picked up the piece of paper and was reading through it. He paused, frowning as he glanced at me. “Who’s Luella Townsend?”

“She’s an old bitch with too much money and a cold, black heart.”

“Well damn. That’s the first time I’ve heard you swear in all the time I’ve known you.”

“She deserves it.”

He looked back at the letter for a moment.

“I’d say so.” He paused, reading through a few more lines. “And who’s Dane Townsend?”

An exhale left my lungs, causing my shoulders to droop. My heart clenched and I paused, biting at my lip before finally answering, “He’s my ex-husband.”

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Audra

Crosswinds Golf and Country Club was the oldest and most prestigious club in all of Colorado. Of course, Luella Townsend wouldn't have frequented it if it wasn't. I couldn't be certain she'd be there for lunch, but it was Monday, and if she was still the creature of habit she'd been seven years ago, I'd find her sitting with the other snobby, old biddies at the table by the window, their noses in the air as they ate finger sandwiches and petit fours and gossiped about all the people unworthy of their company. *Like me.*

“May I help you, miss?” An older gentleman

in a pale gray suit stopped me by stepping slightly into my path as if he'd appeared out of thin air.

“No, thank you, I'm headed to the dining room.”

His eyes made a quick sweep of my outfit—dark jeans and a turquoise sweater—and he somehow managed to look displeased without altering his expression one iota. I wondered how one went about mastering that talent. You must have to spend quite a few hours with a pole shoved up your ass. His had obviously been lodged there for decades. I cringed internally at the mean-spirited thought. I felt nervous and out of sorts, but I didn't need to let Luella Townsend bring out the worst in me. The man made a soft sniffing sound. “I'm sorry, miss, there's a dress code in the dining room.”

I managed a smile, but it was forced and I hoped it didn't look as tight as it felt. "I know, I'm sorry, but it's an emergency."

"What sort of emergency?"

"I'm really not at liberty to give the details. It's of a personal nature."

He sniffed softly. "I see—"

"Details Mrs. Townsend wouldn't want discussed. I'm sure you know what a private woman she is."

The man stood straighter, and I didn't think I missed the flash of nervousness in his eyes. Ah yes, he knew Luella too. The quick glance backward toward the dining room gave me even more reason to believe she was right where I thought she'd be.

"Mrs. Townsend."

I nodded. "Luella Townsend. She'll be very



displeased if she finds out I was here to tell her about the . . . emergency and was turned away,” I lied.

His lips stretched into the semblance of a smile, but his eyes remained aloof. “Of course.” He hesitated. “I’ll advise Mrs. Townsend that you’re here.”

*Damn.* But it seemed that was as far as I was going to get. I just prayed she wouldn’t send me away. She’d know why I was here. “Thank you.”

“Your name?”

“Audra Kelley.” He paused as if my name might be familiar. I had been to this club, many years before, but had never met this man. If he knew who I was, I had no idea how. He inclined his head once and turned toward the dining room.

My heart thumped heavily in my chest as I

waited in the empty entranceway for the host to return. I could hear the distant hum of conversation and the soft pings and clatters of silverware and dishes. Classical music drifted from unseen speakers, and I breathed in the scent of this place: wood polish and dried flowers. The large display of blooms on the table to my right appeared fresh, so I wasn't sure why they smelled as if they'd been pressed, but they did. Maybe that's what this place did to all living things—sucked out their life essence and left them brittle and hollow.

“Stop being so dramatic, Audra,” I muttered, but the feeling lingered. *I* felt brittle and hollow, the same way this place had always made me feel.

Soft footsteps on the carpet made my breath catch. Luella was walking toward me, looking older than I remembered, though she was still a striking

woman. She was wearing something beige and drapey, designer no doubt, though my brain was buzzing and I couldn't lower my eyes from her face to focus on any details. Her white-blond hair was swept back in a chignon, and the expression on her meticulously made-up face looked just as icy as I remembered it. "Audra," she said, making my name sound like a contagious disease. I couldn't help it, I shrunk under her frosty gaze, feeling like a seventeen-year-old girl in a secondhand dress.

*But you're not that girl anymore.* You're a woman with your own life and your own business. The thought of my business gave me a small surge of strength, and I took a deep breath, straightening my spine. "Mrs. Townsend, thank you for interrupting your lunch to see me."

She glanced around and then began walking

toward a door a few steps down the hall. I followed, as I assumed was expected. She led me through the doorway into a sitting area, elegant in shades of cream and plum, featuring lots of dark wood and shiny fabrics.

Luella cleared her throat as she turned toward me. She didn't sit and so neither did I. She played idly with the rings on her fingers. "I assume there's no emergency."

"Actually, the letter I received this morning *has* caused an emergency. There's obviously some sort of mistake and I'm here to clear it up."

Luella put her hand idly on the love seat next to her, running it over the rich upholstery. "The only mistake is that you've been occupying that building as long as you have. The company has need of it now, so you'll have to vacate the

premises.”

“Vacate the premises? I run my business from that building. I rent out space in that building. And what’s more, I *own* that building.”

“You signed a prenuptial agreement, dear. An *iron-clad* prenuptial agreement. I made sure of it myself. That building was purchased by Dane and Dane alone. You weren’t entitled to anything when you left him—not a single penny.”

My chest hollowed out and my heart beat loudly in my ears. *When you left him.* “Yes, I know I signed a prenuptial agreement. I remember well. But Dane bought that building specifically for my use and gifted it to me. We put it in my name, and he let me keep it when we . . . separated.”

She waved her hand in the air. “He did no such thing. If you made assumptions, it’s your own

fault.”

I felt sick, shaky, but there was nothing for me to lean against. “You can’t just *take* my building from me.”

She sighed. “It was never yours to begin with.”

“And Dane agrees with this? He’s okay with what you’re trying to do?” My voice sounded small, faraway, as if it were coming from under water. I wanted to deny the trickle of grief churning in my chest, but I couldn’t. Oh God, I could handle anger, sadness, but what was I supposed to do when the mention of his name still felt like a kind of drowning?

This couldn’t be happening. It wasn’t possible.

She waved her hand again. “Of course. He leaves the management of the estate to me.

Someday he'll have children, and he likes to know their legacy will be well established. Dane never was much for finances, despite his other good qualities . . .”

*Someday he'll have children.* The words pummeled me, causing me to drift away in my own mind as she babbled on about Dane. So he hadn't had children. I hated the fact that a breeze of relief blew over my skin at the news. The truth was, I'd made a concerted effort to avoid learning anything about Dane's life. I figured he was still running his family's business at the headquarters in California, but other than that, I had no information whatsoever. I'd made it a point not to.

*Dane.* No, he couldn't possibly know what Luella was doing to me. Could he? Was it possible he hated me that much? Or . . . that he was so

indifferent he couldn't even be bothered lifting a finger to exercise some human decency? To tell Luella this was wrong? It didn't sound like the Dane I'd once known. My chest constricted even further. I struggled to draw in air. The truth was, I had no idea who Dane Townsend was now. I couldn't even begin to guess what his role in this might be.

“Why do you want the building?” I choked.  
“Why now?”

Luella had been saying something and I'd cut her off. She paused as if she was wondering if she should even tell me, but then seemed to decide it didn't matter. She glanced briefly at her nails before saying, “Townsend Robotics is building an industrial park on the acreage across from the building Dane bought. We've purchased the



properties along that road and are planning major expansions.”

I shook my head in heart-wrenching bewilderment. “So that’s all it comes down to? You need that space to expand your . . . industrial park?”

“Well no, the building you now occupy will be just outside the park, but the surrounding properties will be updated and expanded too.” She glanced at the slim gold watch on her bony wrist as if I had already taken up too much of her time. “Will that be all?”

*Will that be all?*

“My God, do you really still hate me so much?”

Luella sighed. “Oh dear, I don’t hate you. Truthfully, I haven’t given you a second thought in

seven years. This is business, plain and simple. Business isn't always . . . comfortable, but my family hasn't gotten where we are by shying away from some discomfort, now have we?"

*"I was your family."*

Her eyes glittered coldly as if denying it with her expression. No, she'd never considered me family, even when we'd shared a last name. "But you're not now, are you? And it was your choice, not mine."

Her words cut through me.

I couldn't deny the truth of them.

"You're not even going to offer to purchase it from me so I can buy another space somewhere else? It's not as if you need the money." I swallowed down the sob trying to make its way up my throat.

She looked at me as if I was the biggest fool she'd ever seen. "Why would I buy my own building from you? I already own it. I will give you thirty days to vacate and find a new place, though. And I think that's more than generous."

*Thirty days? More than generous?* For the love of God, she was *taking* everything I'd worked over seven years to build—taking it without offering me a single form of payment. Walking away from that building would cripple me financially. I still had an outstanding loan, and my bank balance was pitifully small. What could I do? Start operating from my living room? That would make me look *so* legitimate. Any customers I'd accumulated would drop off like flies. I would once again have nothing.

Luella glanced at her watch again. "I really

must get back to my luncheon. You still know the way out, I assume?” I continued to stare at her. *Numbly*. I wanted to scream and cry, fall to my knees, but Luella had never responded to shows of emotion and I doubted she would now. No, I needed to leave and figure this out. I needed to call a lawyer. This wasn’t over—not by a long shot.

The door clicked shut softly behind her, and I wrapped my arms around myself to stop the shaking I could no longer control. What Luella was doing both infuriated and terrified me, but it was Dane’s possible involvement—even his mere knowledge—that brought the profound sense of pain.

## CHAPTER FIVE

**Then . . .**

*Audra emerged from the building where her art class was held, surprised to see a sky full of gray clouds overhead. The weather forecast hadn't called for rain.*

*"Hey there."*

*She halted, smiling before she'd even looked up. Dane Townsend was leaning casually against a telephone pole, his hands in his pockets, waiting for her just as he'd been doing for the past several weeks. Her heart drummed in her chest. She kept expecting that he wouldn't be there on Tuesday or Thursday, and though it would pierce her heart,*

*she tried to prepare herself for that inevitability. She still wasn't exactly sure why twice a week after class he'd pick up Dalila, take her home, and then come back an hour later to drive Audra home as well.*

*She was still a little embarrassed that he'd seen the drawings she'd done of him. The art teacher—Mr. Woodrow—had walked in the room a minute after those sketch pads had fallen to the floor, saving her from any further humiliation. But the next class, he'd been outside waiting for her, asking if he could take her home.*

*He'd ask her questions about her life, and though she was unused to talking about herself, she found it was surprisingly easy to open up to him. And even more surprising, he seemed genuinely interested, almost . . . fascinated. She*

*still didn't comprehend why. He was the most beautiful boy in the entire world, strong and striking, and for some unknown reason, he wanted to get to know her.*

*Audra smiled brightly. "Hi."*

*He pushed off the pole, walking toward her.*

*"How was class?"*

*Before she could answer, a raindrop hit his nose and he looked up just as another one splattered across his cheek. "Damn. I didn't bring an umbrella."*

*The rain suddenly picked up, pitter-pattering on the sidewalk and Dane laughed, swearing again. He grabbed Audra's hand, pulling her to the cover of a service entry on the side of the building.*

*She laughed too, pressing her back against the door. He stepped up close to her so she was*

*covered by the very small overhang, though half of him was still exposed to the rain. Behind him the water drummed on the pavement as he continued chuckling, leaning his head closer so at least that part of him was saved from being drenched. She tilted her head, looking up at him, her breath catching in her chest at his masculine beauty, his brown hair slicked back, his green eyes filled with humor, his wide shoulders shielding her from the weather. And, God, he smelled so good. She closed her eyes, inhaling the scent of him. When she opened her eyes, he was watching her, his expression serious now, filled with something she didn't have enough experience to name. But she knew on a primal level that he was thinking about kissing her.*

*Her breath hitched, her lips parting as his*



*gaze shot to her mouth and back to her eyes. The tension between them grew palpable, and Audra's heart slammed beneath her ribs. She pressed her back against the metal of the door, flattening her palms against it as Dane leaned in even closer.*

*He reached up and used both hands to smooth the pieces of hair that had fallen from her braid. Her breathing became uneven as her heart beat in time with the rain, and she felt like part of her was falling too. Spinning, swirling, at the mercy of a force beyond her control, beyond her understanding.*

*He moved in slowly, as if giving her time to realize what he was doing, perhaps a chance to push him away—though that was the furthest thing from her mind. She was scared, but she welcomed him, reaching up to wrap her arms around his*

*neck, feeling the rain on the back of her hands as it saturated his hair and slid down his neck. He bent to her, their mouths coming together on a moan she wasn't sure had come from her or him, possibly both.*

*His tongue swept into her mouth, and for a moment she froze, unsure of what to do. She'd never been kissed before. But he seemed to sense her hesitation, and he withdrew his tongue, nibbling at her lips, using his tongue to brush across her mouth until she became accustomed to the taste of him, the feel of his lips on hers. God, it was incredible. She pressed against him, loving the feel of her breasts crushed against his chest, the solid warmth of his body.*

*Seeming to sense the very moment she realized she wanted more, he dipped his tongue*

*slowly between her lips and this time, she met his tongue tentatively with her own. He moaned, a sound filled with need, with encouragement. The sound excited her and she opened her mouth and tilted her head, inviting him more deeply inside her body. He accepted joyfully, deepening the kiss and pressing his body more firmly to hers. She was aware of a distant ache full of longing, something that felt as if it were sparkling inside her, demanding release. The kiss went deeper as he slid his hands down her body and for a moment Audra's mind went fuzzy. She was only sensation and desire. There was only him, his taste, his hands, the pounding sound of the rain all around them, and a similar pounding in her veins.*

*After a lifetime, and only a moment, he broke away on a tortured moan, leaning his forehead on*

*hers, sucking in a lungful of air as his heart thrummed against her own. She opened her eyes slowly, still dazed with the torrent of sensations flooding her system.*

*Her lips, still wet from his kiss, tipped up and she stared into his eyes, amazed when she saw his gaze was filled with the same wonder she felt inside. And suddenly, the entire world burst into vivid, glorious color.*

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*Dane pulled up in front of Audra's house and she smiled. The look of awe on her face was the same as what had been there after he'd kissed her. He imagined his expression was the same. He'd never*

*experienced a kiss like that one. It'd felt almost as if . . . she was familiar in some way he didn't know how to explain to himself. Kissing her had felt like . . . coming downstairs on Christmas morning: thrilling and calming all at once. Joyful. He wanted to do it again. And he wanted to keep doing it. He was getting hard just thinking about it.*

*He turned his car off and pulled her to him, kissing her slowly and deeply again, their breath mingling and his excitement spiraling until he felt half out of his head. He pulled away, groaning and leaning back in his seat, trying to catch his breath and get hold of his body. He was eighteen years old, had had plenty of girlfriends, lost his virginity at sixteen, but he'd never experienced this level of out-of-control lust for a girl. She inspired something in him—not just sexual attraction, but a*

*protectiveness that seemed to tap into some vital part of him. And he liked her. He liked to hear her thoughts on anything and everything, the way she seemed to consider each answer so carefully before she gave it. She was serious and thoughtful, kind and shy, but she also laughed easily, and seemed to notice the world around her in ways other girls their age did not. And Audra's talent, God, she was talented beyond words and he loved to watch her talk about her dream of becoming an artist. He was completely and utterly fascinated by her. And when she looked at him with that same spark of interest in her eyes, it filled him with happiness and pride that she—this girl—would look at him that way.*

*“I should get inside,” Audra said. “My dad will need dinner . . .” He didn't like that when she*

*looked at her house, shadows moved across her face, dimming the light in her beautiful eyes.*

*He frowned. “Does anyone help you out? You must have a family member—”*

*She shook her head and smiled, but it didn't quite meet her eyes. “No. It's okay, though. We manage.” She tilted her head. “I've told you enough about myself these past weeks. Tell me something about you. About your family.” She looked unsure suddenly, as if she was overstepping her bounds by inquiring about his life, even though they'd shared the most intense kiss he'd ever experienced—and her very first one if he wasn't mistaken—just twenty minutes before. His ass was still drenched, and it'd been completely worth it.*

*She shook her head. “I mean, I know who your family is of course.” She glanced out the*

window. *“They’re very important in Laurelton.”*

*He regarded her, the way her eyes skittered away when she mentioned his family.*

*He sighed, rubbing his finger along his bottom lip. Important? Well, they were rich anyway. And though he’d never talked about the difference between having money and using it to do something meaningful with anyone except his father, he wanted her to know he trusted her with his deepest thoughts because he wanted to hear more of hers.*

*“My dad passed away from a heart attack when I was fifteen. We were really close. He was a good man who died way too early.” Audra reached over and took his hand in hers and the simple comfort of laced fingers made him smile. He turned toward her. “My great-great something*



*grandfather”—he let out a soft chuckle—“made a fortune in the railroad industry like a lot of the other wealthy men of the nineteen hundreds. But so many of their descendants did nothing more than live off the fortunes of their fathers. They didn’t build the business, or create something new, they just . . . reaped the rewards of those who came before them. And as a result, their fortunes dwindled and dried up completely over the course of a hundred years.” He shook his head. “My father taught me the value of hard work, just like his father before him. He taught me that having money in your family doesn’t give you an excuse to live the high life, contributing nothing to the world. In fact, there’s no excuse for someone born into so much privilege to live that way. If anyone should strive to do something good, it’s the person*

*who can step right into the job rather than having to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.” Audra listened to him intently, her eyes trained on his face. “My father never got to . . .” Dane shook his head, searching for the right words.*

*“Make his contribution?” Audra supplied softly.*

*He nodded, relieved she understood perfectly what he was saying. “Yes. My father never had the chance to make his contribution. So I’m going to do it for the both of us. I’m going to step into the family business, and I’m going to do something that would have made him proud.”*

*She squeezed his hand. Her gaze held so much respect that for a moment, he felt he could do anything on earth—anything at all—if she kept looking at him that way. Believing in him. “Be*

*mine, Audra,” he whispered, moving closer, taking her face in his hands again and kissing her lips softly.*

*He felt her smile against his mouth as she breathed, “Yes.”*

# CHAPTER SIX

**Audra**

**Now . . .**

The rain beat against my windows and for a moment I didn't realize there was a separate banging sound coming from the front door. I got up from the couch, throwing the blanket I'd been under aside and walking quickly to answer the door. Who the hell would be visiting me?

I pulled the door open to see Jay, standing on the porch, his blond hair slicked back as if he'd pushed his hand through the rain-drenched strands. For a moment my brain couldn't compute the sight

of him here, as if it wasn't possible for him to belong anywhere other than my studio.

*My studio.* My gut clenched.

“What are you doing here?”

“I was worried about you.”

“Because I called in sick?”

“Well, that—you've never called in sick once in three years. But also because you sounded dead inside, even over voicemail. I figured either things didn't go well with the evil grandmother you ran out to confront yesterday, or someone might have a knife to your throat. “

My shoulders slumped. That felt accurate, figuratively anyway. And I did feel dead inside. I felt desperate and miserable and without hope. I held the door open wider indicating he should come in. He did, wiping his feet on the mat, and then

taking off his coat and hanging it on the coat tree.

He followed me into my living room, and I noticed the small, confused frown on his face. “Not what you pictured?” I asked.

“No, not even close. I didn’t realize you had this . . . uh, side to you.”

I sat on the worn couch, not able to help the small laugh that bubbled up my throat. “There are lots of sides to me, Jay.”

“Hmm,” he said, giving what I knew was an ugly, mostly depressing room one more glance.

I brought my legs under me. “I grew up here. It was my grandparents’ home, and when my mom left, my dad and I moved in with them. My grandfather died when I was nine, and my grandmother passed away when I was twelve. After that, it was just me and my dad. The place hasn’t

been redecorated since the nineties, but my dad was disabled and there wasn't a lot of money, and recently, I've been putting every dime I have into the business. So"—I waved my hand around—"this is where I live. Home sweet home."

Jay regarded me, a slight look of surprise on his face. "Do you mind me asking how your dad was disabled?" He posed the question softly, the look on his face hesitant, as if he wasn't sure if he was overstepping a boundary.

I sighed, feeling a brief stab of guilt that I'd been such a standoffish friend in many ways, while Jay had always been an open book. "My mom and dad married young and had me right before my dad shipped off to the Gulf War. He suffered a traumatic brain injury and lost one of his legs. I don't remember him before, but according to my

grandmother, when he came back he was . . . very different, a shell of himself, really.” I sighed again. “My mom couldn’t handle it and just . . . left. Left us here. After my grandparents died, I was all he had.” I lapsed into silence and Jay stared at me for several beats.

“That’s the most information you’ve given me about your background since we met.”

I breathed out a humorless laugh. “I know I’m not the most forthcoming person. My past is . . . difficult for me to talk about.” Difficult for me to think about.

He nodded. “And it’s your past that’s back to haunt you.”

“Yes,” I sighed. “It seems my past has collided with what I hoped was my future,” I said in a whispery rush of words, misery overcoming me



once again. Jay tilted his head, waiting for me to continue. “As you read in the letter from her attorneys, my ex-husband’s grandmother is trying to take the building from me, and it looks like she might succeed.”

Jay’s brows furrowed as he sat back, bringing one ankle up on his opposite knee. “How long have you been divorced?”

I shook my head, glancing away for a moment. “Seven years. I was eighteen when we married, and barely twenty when we divorced. It was practically over before it began. I was a stupid kid who didn’t understand how life really worked.”

“Okay. So how exactly is your ex-grandmother trying to take the building?”

“My ex-husband comes from an extremely wealthy family. Old money, but new money too.

Each generation has figured out how to contribute in some meaningful way and expand the family fortune. Before we married, his grandmother talked me into signing a prenup. I was young, naïve. I thought we'd last forever so what did it matter what I signed?" I took a deep breath, attempting to push back the emotions that talking of that time brought up for me. "Dane purchased the building on Providence Parkway right before we were married, with the intention of gifting it to me so I could start the business I'd always dreamed of running. It was his wedding gift to me, and we put my name on it, but not until after we were married."

I glanced at Jay, and he had put his foot on the floor and was leaning forward, his elbows on his knees as he listened attentively.

"When we were in the process of divorcing,

Dane offered to put some money aside for me despite the agreement. I refused, telling him I only wanted the building, nothing more. He agreed, and as far as I was concerned, that was that.” I cringed, shaking my head at my own naïveté. “It was a painful time. I wasn’t thinking clearly, I suppose, but what in the world could his family want with a rundown building on the edge of town anyway?”

“What *do* they want with it?”

“Apparently, a big industrial park is going in and they’ve already bought up the surrounding businesses.”

“For what? To sell them for profit?”

I shrugged. “I guess.”

“So, what were previously rundown buildings on the edge of town have become premium real estate.”

I sighed. “I suppose. Only the Townsend family is already richer than God. I don’t get it.”

Jay shook his head. “Rich people are never rich enough. According to them.”

I bit at my lip. “I guess. Only . . . Luella Townsend has always hated me. I never imagined she’d still feel that after all this time.”

His expression was somber. “She’s a powerful enemy to have. I looked her up. From what I could find online, she’s practically royalty here in Colorado. Why does she hate you?”

“She always has. I thought it had to do with the fact that we didn’t have much money and she viewed me as some little gold digger trying to steal her grandson and his fortune. Even after I signed the prenup, though, she never thawed. And apparently, her disdain for me is alive and well. I

went to see her at her country club and she was as heartless as ever.”

“You told her the business is your life, right?”

I stared at him for a moment, his words taking me off guard. The business *was* my life, though. He was right. God, it was all I had. I was twenty-seven years old and it was all I had. Maybe that was pitiful, but it was true. I nodded.

“She’s giving me thirty days to vacate the premises.”

Jay pressed his lips together, his face taking on the expression it did when he was problem solving. After a minute, he asked, “Have you thought about calling your ex?”

A hot rush of anxiety coursed through me. “No,” I breathed, shaking my head. “No, I don’t want to talk to Dane.”

“Not even to save Thistles and Thatch? Not to save the whole wedding mall?”

“What can he do? I have to call a lawyer, but I did a search on Google, and my situation doesn’t look good. I *signed* that prenup. I knew exactly what it said.”

“So, you think Dane knows about this?”

I shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“Audra, court cases have been won because of verbal contracts. What you and Dane had was a verbal contract. If he agrees to that, you could have a good chance against his grandmother.”

I blinked. A tiny trickle of hope ran down my spine, but so, too, did a bolt of fear. I couldn’t talk to Dane. I didn’t ever want to talk to Dane again. I . . . *couldn’t*. And more so, he wouldn’t want to speak to me either. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

“Call him, Audra. At least to find out if he knows about this. Best-case scenario, he doesn’t, disagrees with this awful thing his grandmother is doing to you, and can do something to stop her. Even if your legal case doesn’t look good, maybe she’ll listen to him and you can avoid court altogether.”

“If he’s not in on it.”

“Right. But you won’t know unless you talk to him.”

I bit at my lip again, feeling uncertain, but also slightly better than I had before. I’d considered calling Dane earlier, but dismissed it when just the thought gave me stomach cramps, opting instead to do a Google search on the topic of prenuptial agreements and property ownership. When that yielded bad news, I’d left Jay a voicemail and

curled up on the couch. But hearing Jay's insistence that I needed to be proactive and call Dane, and with the possibility that I did have some actual ammunition—a verbal contract—I felt a little invigorated.

Call Dane? Call Dane. I took a deep breath. It'd been seven years. I could do this. If it meant saving my business—the one thing in the world I lived for—then I could do this.

I smiled softly. “Thank you, Jay. I don't know what I'd do without you.” I could only hope my newfound confidence wouldn't lead to more heartbreak. How much could one person survive?  
*How much could I survive?*



# CHAPTER SEVEN

## Audra

The bastard wasn't taking my calls. I paced in front of my kitchen table, dialing the now familiar number, hitting the speaker button and holding it in front of me as it rang.

“Townsend Robotics.”

I halted in my pacing. “Dane Townsend, please.”

There was a pause and what I thought was an impatient sigh. His secretary obviously recognized my voice. “Mr. Townsend isn't available.”

“You don't say.”

A small harrumph sounded from the other line

before her sugary voice said with false sweetness,  
“May I take a message?”

“I’m sure you know this is Audra Kelley.  
*Again.* Have you given him my other messages?”

“Oh, good morning, Ms. Kelley. Yes, every  
one. Mr. Townsend is a very busy man. I’m sure  
he’ll call you back as soon as he has a moment.”

“Did you tell him it’s an emergency?” I kept  
my voice calm though I wanted to shout.

“I made sure it was on the message.”

The asshole. Pinpricks of rage climbed my  
spine, causing me to pick up my pacing. “Please tell  
Mr. Townsend I called again,” I said stiffly, my jaw  
rigid with frustration. “Tell him it’s of the utmost  
importance that he calls me back. *Again.* Please.  
And tell him that time is of the essence. *Again.*  
Thank you.”

“Will do, Ms. Kelley,” she sang in my ear before hanging up. I let out an angry growl, tossing my phone onto the table. Hot tears threatened, but I refused to allow them to flow. No, I would not cry. Tears solved nothing.

He *knew*. He knew what his grandmother was doing and that’s why he was avoiding me. It was the only explanation. No one was so busy they couldn’t return a quick phone call after ten calls over the course of a week. Damn him. *Why?* I was angry, but I also couldn’t deny the deep stab of hurt. We hadn’t ended well. We’d gone down in a fiery blaze of agonizing pain. Did he still resent me so much? It’d been so long . . . surely he’d . . . moved on.

I sighed, plopping down into a kitchen chair and putting my head in my hands. I had moved on.

Moved . . . forward. I'd thought so anyway, at least as much as one could move on from utter devastation. But before this mess, I still would have said I was okay. I had been excited about the successes of my company. I went entire weeks without suffering one of *those* days where I just felt inexplicably crushed and wanted to spend the day in bed. When I did have those days, I pulled myself out of bed anyway. Yes, I would have said I was doing just fine.

And now suddenly, I felt alone, drifting aimlessly into murky waters I didn't understand and couldn't navigate. I hated feeling lost, hopeless, and so scared I woke up each day with the hairs standing up on the nape of my neck.

The way I used to . . . then.

*No, don't go there. Don't.*

And yet, almost without thought, I found myself wandering down the hall, into the spare room with the half-door that led to the attic. I hesitated outside it, before I reached down and turned the handle, the familiar squeak bringing a rush of memories. I inhaled a quick gulp of air. *Why am I doing this?* And yet, as if I were in a dream, I felt strangely disconnected like I was both in it and watching from somewhere far away.

Bending my back, I ducked through the small opening and pulled on the light within, climbing the creaky stairs. It smelled of dust and mothballs, and I sneezed once, moving a cobweb out of the way as I made it to the last step. The overhead beams were low enough that I had to walk hunched over, moving toward the subdued light of the round, grimy window. When I'd made it to where the

sunlight created a patch of shadowy light on the old wood, I knelt and glanced around.

Dusty boxes littered the space and dust motes spun lazily in the low light adding to the dream-like feeling. My eyes lingered for a moment on the gray rubber bin to the right of the window, and a slow-moving swell of agony rose within me before I tore my eyes away. Away . . . away, up to the wall above where a single blue butterfly had been painted in a childish hand. It was the lone one on that portion of the wall and it fluttered there in strange solitude as if once upon a time I'd known what would remain beneath it.

My eyes moved away from the singular butterfly to where there were several more in varying shades of color. They climbed the upper wall and spilled onto the peaked ceiling—the only

portion that was finished in planks of wood and not just open beams. Butterflies fluttered and flew on almost every available space above me and my lips tipped into a small smile.

I'd drawn them, each and every one. When I'd gotten in trouble as a girl and been sent to my room, I'd snuck out into the bedroom next to my own with my art supplies, and tiptoed up to this attic. My father's disability didn't allow him to climb stairs and so even if he came looking for me, he could only call my name from the bottom floor. Here I'd draw butterfly after butterfly, delicate-winged creatures that were not only beautiful, but could fly away on the slightest of breezes. Maybe I'd wanted to as well.

I stayed kneeling in the tiny pool of muted sunlight, closing my eyes and tilting my face

upward as if in prayer. Although I'd prayed once and those prayers hadn't been answered. I didn't expect any answers now. Still, this had once been my secret place, my sanctuary of sorts, and that long-ago feeling of peace fell over me despite the painful memories that lived here too.

I wasn't a child anymore, though, and I couldn't stay here forever, finding solace in pretend games and painted butterflies. My eyes lingered on that bin, too scared to move closer, fear and yearning spiraling inside me like a howling wind. I tore my eyes away, taking another deep breath—clenching my eyes shut momentarily—and then turning in the shaft of sunlight, making my way toward the stairs.

As I shuffled in my hunched-over position, my foot caught on the uneven edge of a floorboard and



I tripped sideways, catching myself on a stack of dusty boxes. I swore under my breath. The boxes teetered backward as I righted myself and I tried to stop them from toppling over but wasn't quite quick enough. The old box on top broke apart when it hit the floor and papers and files slid out, landing in a messy pile. "Damn it," I muttered again. I didn't have time to clean this up now. I'd have to get a new box and throw all these old papers inside it later. Not that they were probably anything of importance, because from what I could tell by the ones on top, they were old tax documents.

I started to move again, when I noticed what looked like a letter among the other papers. I bent lower, picking it up. I frowned when I saw the name "Bea" scrawled on the front. *Who was Bea?*

The letter was sealed, but the glue was old

enough that when I picked at the seal, it opened easily. I unfolded the paper inside, my eyes moving over the script:

My beloved Bea,

My heart aches as I write this and yet I know what I'm doing is for the best. If I were a selfish man, I'd show up today. I'd run away with you as we planned, and I'd spend my life loving you. It would be the easiest thing in the world for me to do, Bea. The easiest. But it would also be the most selfish, because I could never give you the life you deserve. I have so little, not even enough to begin a small life for us. Eventually, the realities of everyday survival would be bigger than the wild love we feel now, and you'd grow to resent me for all you were forced to give up. I couldn't live with

that. I couldn't live watching the fire in your eyes slowly fade to ash. I couldn't know that I was responsible for it.

I won't be there today, Bea. I won't even send this letter, because I know you and you'll try to convince me otherwise, and I'll be unable to resist you. Instead, I write this for me, to confirm that I'm doing what I know to be right. To remind myself that the tree protects the flower, but in doing so, is frozen for all time.

I won't take you in my arms as I long to do with every breath. But you will be in my heart, every day for the rest of my life.

Yours always,

Wallace

I read the letter one more time, sadness racing

through me as I noted the date at the top. How tragic! My grandfather loved another woman before he met my grandmother and he deserted her without ever telling her why? A woman named Bea? I folded the letter back up, wishing my grandfather were still alive to ask him about it. I pictured my grandfather—a stoic but kind man who'd always seemed to have sadness in his eyes. He'd told me our family had Cheyenne Indian in us, and I'd inherited his bone structure and dark hair. He died when I was so young, and I'd always attributed the sorrow in his eyes to my father's state, never even considering that he'd experienced things beyond our own family as I supposed all children were apt to do. My grandmother had been a kind woman, but I'd always sensed more of a friendship between her and my grandfather than a

great, romantic love. I looked at the letter. Well, now I'd never know who the woman named Bea was. He'd taken the memory to his grave.

I put the letter on top of the pile of loose papers and shuffled forward to the stairs. With the small reminder that sad things happened to people all the time and life went on, I headed to my room, took a quick shower, and got ready for work. If I was going to continue to hold on to hope, I had to operate as if something would work out. If I allowed my business to crumble then it was as good as admitting that Luella Townsend had already won.

When I walked into my studio an hour later, Jay was already there, a cup of coffee in hand. "Morning, sunshine."

I smiled weakly as I began taking off my

jacket.

“Still no call back?” he asked. I appreciated the sympathy in his voice, but it also embarrassed me. He obviously felt sorry for me.

“No,” I answered flatly. “I called again this morning and his secretary keeps telling me she’s given him the messages.” I sighed, hanging up my coat and tossing my purse onto the table.

Jay came around his desk and leaned his butt on the edge. “If the bastard won’t call you back, go to him and demand he talk to you.”

“I can’t. He’s in California.”

“They do make these things called airplanes now.”

I expelled a breathy laugh. “Fly to California? I . . . that seems kind of drastic.”

“A woman is trying to steal your place of

business and leave you penniless. I'd say that calls for drastic action."

I worried my lip. "Fly to California and confront him?"

He shrugged. "It seems like that's the only option he's leaving you with."

My chest tightened. Calling had been one thing . . . The anger of him not returning my call had even spurred me forward and made it easier to *keep* calling. But to see Dane in person? My stomach squeezed uncomfortably and without a thought, I placed a hand on it. I simply didn't know if I could muster the strength to go to Dane—to see him in person.

"What really happened between you two?" Jay asked. "I mean, you said you were young but . . ."

My eyes snapped to his and he left the thought hanging. *What really happened between you two?* “We just . . .” I shook my head. “I , we . . . I mean, we got married because I was pregnant,” I said hesitantly. “Our baby”—I cleared my throat —“didn’t . . . live. And after that we . . . just fell apart. Our marriage didn’t survive it.” *I nearly didn’t survive it.*

“Damn, Audra, I’m so sorry.”

I shook my head, grimacing. “It’s okay. It was a long time ago and I . . . I’m past it as much as you can, you know, move past something like that. I don’t think about it anymore.” *About him.* A jolt of guilt moved through me at my own words, feeling the wrongness of my statement, but it was true. I made sure it was true because it was how I survived.



Jay was watching me closely, a small frown mixed with the still-sympathetic look in his eyes. “It’s common that couples who lose a child don’t make it.”

I nodded and the movement felt jerky. “I know, yes. We, um, didn’t beat the odds. Not to mention we had other things working against us. Anyway.” I turned, began rifling through some papers on my desk, not wanting to talk about this anymore because talking about it forced me to *think* about it.

“Well, take today to consider going to see Dane, okay?” Jay asked gently.

I nodded. I didn’t even really have the money for airline fare. The McMaster deposit should arrive in a day or two, so I supposed I could use some of that for a plane ticket and hotel room for a couple

of days.

But then I'd have to hope I had the money to purchase all the flowers and supplies for the wedding in two months.

However, if I didn't do *something*, I wouldn't have a business at all by that point.

I told Jay I was going to get a cup of coffee and left the studio to head to the kitchen. On the way, I stood at the railing staring at the first floor and foyer I'd admired—thinking *it's really mine*—just the week before. Life could change in an instant, a heart-shattering moment. Who knew that better than I did?

Only, some things couldn't ever be fixed. Maybe, maybe this *could* be fixed if I took the chance and fought.

The videographer, who rented a space

downstairs, came in the front door and waved at me with a smile as she headed to her office. I gave her a small smile and a wave in return. The thing was, what was happening wouldn't only affect me, and that thought had kept me awake at night too. I had a building that housed other businesses, some of whom had paid the rent for the year. Money I'd already allocated into the remodeling. I'd have to go into debt to pay that back. They'd lose their business base too, and though it'd be easier for them simply to move and begin somewhere new, it would still be a disappointment and hardship.

Coffee made, I went to my studio, sat at my desk and logged in to my computer. Pulling out my cell phone, I double-checked to see if I'd missed a call from Dane while I'd been out of the office for five minutes. A fresh wave of indignation washed

over me and I set my phone down, logging on to the Internet.

“Jay, how do I book a flight online?”

“What airline do you usually fly?”

“I never have.”

He looked confused. “You’ve never *flown* before?”

I shook my head.

“Didn’t you go on a honeymoon?”

“No . . . circumstances didn’t allow for a honeymoon. I know it’s pitiful, but I’ve never been out of Colorado.”

Jay stood and walked to my desk. “Well then, it’s about time. I just wish this was under better circumstances.” He typed in a website and showed me where to put in the dates of travel. I chose Wednesday, because I figured Dane would be at his

office. I couldn't go on a weekend as he'd probably be at home and I had no clue where he lived—*or with whom*—or how to find out. At the thought of Dane living with another woman, my stomach cramped, but I pushed the feeling aside as best as I could, determined not to think about that. *Why shouldn't he? The boy I'd loved so desperately all those years ago deserved to have happiness.* The options for flights came up, and I cringed.

“Yikes,” Jay said. “Booking short notice is going to cost you. I still think it's worth it.”

“What if he's out of town or something?” I murmured, thinking aloud. I couldn't really afford to spend the money on this ticket in general, but what if I got there and it was all for nothing?

“Get travel insurance,” Jay said. “That way, if there's any sort of issue, you can rearrange your

flight.”

I nodded, and before I could talk myself out of it, I took a deep breath and hit purchase.

I was going to California. I was going to see Dane Townsend after seven long, and at times, desolate years. And despite how long it had been, I still didn't think I was anywhere near ready.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

**Then . . .**

*Audra laughed, pulling the blanket around her more tightly. “God, it’s freezing. This is sorta crazy.”*

*She and Dane were sitting on an old quilt under a tree on the side of a frozen pond on Dane’s family estate. There was a small, rickety-looking dock and an old wooden oar boat trapped in the frozen water next to it. It was mid-winter and though the temperatures were in the forties, the air was fresh and crisp and there was virtually no wind.*

*Dane grinned, sliding closer, opening the*

*blanket he had wrapped around his own shoulders to envelop her so they were pressed together, sharing the warmth. She inhaled his clean masculine scent, feeling the same buzz of electricity his smell always elicited. "Perfect for cuddling with my girl," he said, and her heart leapt with joy at his words. His. Dane Townsend's. She still felt a thrill of disbelief every time she thought of it, even though it'd been a couple of months since that day in his car when he'd asked her to be his. "Winter's always been my favorite season."*

*She smiled softly, staring at the frozen pond. "Does anyone use that boat in the summer?"*

*"No, not anymore. My grandfather used to fish, and he came out here when he was alive. My grandmother never liked it. Said he came home*



*smelling like mackerel and she couldn't stand it. She'd go to her room and slam the door." He chuckled. "But it hadn't been used in years when Dustin, Dalila, and I discovered it. We used to sneak away and come here to swim when we were kids. We'd race each other to the other side."*

*The pond wasn't huge, but Audra had to practically squint to see the other side from where they were. She pictured a small boy moving through the water, no one to save him if he needed help, and she couldn't help the shiver of fear that moved down her spine. "What if you had gotten a cramp or tired somewhere in the middle?" she asked on a frown.*

*Dane shook his head. "One of us would row the boat containing life preservers next to the two racing. We had a signal. If we were ever in trouble,*

*we'd hold up two fingers in the air like this"—he brought one hand out of the blanket and held his arm in the air, two fingers forming a V—"which meant we needed help, but couldn't form the words to ask for it."*

*"Hmm," she hummed. She felt irrationally upset. What if something had happened to him all those years ago? What if he hadn't walked into her art classroom that day? What if she'd never met him at all? "Well, at least you were prepared, I guess." Even she could hear the note of displeasure in her voice.*

*He chuckled softly and pulled her closer. "It's sweet that you're worried about me for something that happened years and years ago."*

*She glanced at him, his eyes twinkling with laughter and she let out a small breathy laugh.*

*“You’re impossible.” But her heart warmed and she nuzzled into him, soaking up his warmth. He was here now. She had met him. No act of fate had stolen him from her before she’d had a chance to love him. Before he’d filled her life with color.*

*“What about you? What sneaky things did you do as a kid?”*

*She gave a small shake of her head. “Nothing very exciting. I used to draw butterflies in the attic and then dance and twirl beneath them. Silly.” A small, self-conscious laugh ghosted from her mouth but he didn’t smile back, simply tilted his head, his eyes filled with some sort of gravity she didn’t know how to read.*

*“Butterflies?”*

*She nodded and told him about sneaking up there when she was in trouble and creating*

*kaleidoscopes of butterflies on the walls and ceiling. Audra spoke slowly and somewhat haltingly, still feeling shy and unused to sharing her secrets—even simple, childish ones.*

*“Why butterflies?” he asked softly, as a snowflake landed on his nose.*

*She glanced at the sky and squinted, noticing a few more fluffy flakes swirling in the air. “I don’t know,” she murmured. The air was cold around them, but she felt cozy and safe, safe enough to be honest. She didn’t just want to share information with him, to disclose the facts of her life, she wanted to tell him who she was on the inside, to answer the questions no one else had ever asked. Because she trusted him. “I guess it was a way to express the things inside of me. I’ve always felt like my life was sort of . . . colorless.” She*

*expelled a breath, and it plumed in the frosty air. “It’s like I have a whole world of thoughts and feelings and . . . dreams on the inside, but everything around me has always been in black and white. Muted somehow.” She gathered her strength, her heartbeat thrumming against her ribs. “Until you.”*

\*\*\*\*\*

*Dane’s heart gave one joyous jump and then slowed with calm happiness. Until you. The words rang in his head, bringing a smile to his lips. “God, Audra, you’re all I think about,” he murmured before leaning in and kissing her. Audra tilted her head so he had more access to her mouth*

*and let out a breathy sigh of pleasure, trusting him with her body and her heart. He'd never get enough of kissing her, of feeling the slow slide of her tongue against his own, of exploring her so thoroughly as she made breathy moans that made his body throb and harden. She was pleasure and pain, so small and delicate, and yet powerful enough to possess him with a lingering look, a secret smile shot in his direction so that he felt like his knees might buckle with wanting her.*

*Her hand moved under the hem of his shirt, her palm flattening on his lower stomach, causing his muscles to bunch as he let out a groan. Seeming to be spurred on by his sound of tortured pleasure, she unbuttoned his jeans and slid her hand inside, wrapping her hand around his erection. "Oh God, Audra, honey, stop. I'm so . . .*

*I'll . . .” The thought ended on another groan of pleasure as she stroked him, exploring his body.*

*“I want you,” she whispered. He opened his eyes dazedly, seeing the same desire on her face that must be on his.*

*“Are you sure?”*

*She nodded, lying back on the quilt as he brought the other blanket over them, and continued to kiss her. Her mouth was sweet and wet, hot in the midst of the freezing weather outside their intimate cocoon. After what felt like hours of intimate exploration, Dane put on a condom, his hands shaking with the intensity of his arousal. He pushed into her tight body, Audra’s face constricting in pain for only a moment before she relaxed, then gazed at him with that trusting look that made him feel like a superhero. He began*

*moving inside her, so intensely turned on he knew he wouldn't last long. He brought his hand to the place they were joined and she arched her back on a gasp as he used his finger to pleasure her. He gritted his teeth, trying desperately to hold himself back until she'd come. God, it felt so different being inside her when she came. He could . . . feel her come and it was the most wonderful, exciting thing he'd ever experienced. She cried out his name, her fingers raking down his skin as he, too, shuddered in bliss.*

*Afterward, lying together in the lazy aftermath, Dane kissed down her neck as she smiled happily at the winter sky, snow still falling softly around them. And, to him, the whole world felt new, sweeter somehow. She turned her head as he nuzzled her ear, her hand reaching toward the*



*delicate, pale green flowers blooming in the snow. She gasped out a breath and Dane raised his head, his expression lazy, his eyes filled with contentment. “What?”*

*Audra nodded toward the flowers and then to the tree protecting them from the weather. “My grandfather told me a legend about these flowers. Do you know it?”*

# CHAPTER NINE

**Audra**

**Now . . .**

I stared out the airplane window, ice crystals gathered at the corners of the double-plated Plexiglas. The plane gave a sudden jolt and I turned my head forward, clenching my eyes shut. New discovery: I didn't love flying. The nerves that fluttered inside me, due to being thirty thousand feet above the earth, joined forces with the apprehension over the reason I was flying to form a roiling cauldron of anxiety.

The air smoothed out and I took a deep

calming breath, keeping my eyes closed. Maybe if I could fall asleep, I'd wake and this part of my journey would be over. I'd been so nervous about today, I'd slept terribly the night before. It might be difficult to sleep, but then again, I was exhausted. The roar of the engines became a distant background noise, the edges of my worried brain seemed to smooth, the particles floating away and . . .

I was standing in a field of flowers, every color so vibrant and vivid that all I could do was turn slowly, staring in delighted awe. I knew all their names: snapdragons, tulips, poppies, alstroemeria, and I had the strangest sense that this place had been created with me in mind. My fingers grazed a bright purple orchid, its petals velvety and

smooth, and a cool breeze blew across my face.

I turned completely and gasped when I saw a man walking toward me. I blinked and he smiled warmly at me. “Audra.”

“Grandpa,” I breathed. My eyes widened when over his shoulder, I saw my grandmother standing on one side of a tall tree, and my father standing on the other. *Standing*. In my father’s arms was a small wrapped bundle that he cradled carefully, gently. My heart leapt, my throat constricting as longing welled inside me so suddenly and so intensely that I felt weak. A small moan of yearning rose in my throat.

“You must bloom, Audra,” my grandfather said. Slowly, my eyes moved to him and then to that small, cradled bundle.

“I want . . .” I croaked, reaching toward my

father, reaching toward that beloved bundle I wanted so badly in my arms. “I want . . .” I repeated.

My grandfather smiled again. “Soon. But first you must bloom.” My grandfather looked over his shoulder at my father, and my father, looking more peaceful than I’d ever known him to be, smiled at him and then at me. “The war stole his spirit, and I gave up my own. You must not give up yours. Bloom, Audra.”

Bloom? I didn’t understand. I—

The loud ding woke me and I blinked my eyes open, groggy and discombobulated, unbalanced from the dream I’d had. *Bloom, Audra*. What the heck had that been about? I sat up straight, trying to shake off the strange dream and get my bearings.

I was on an airplane, flying to California to see a man who had once looked at me with love, and then with pain, and finally a blank nothingness.

I took a deep breath, letting it move through my body. *God, that dream.* It'd left me with the weirdest feeling. I needed to shake it off.

I looked out the window and saw gray sky and billowy white clouds, and when I leaned farther, my forehead pressing against the glass, I could see the ground, and even make out individual buildings below. We were landing. My heart thundered in my chest, seemingly louder than the roar of the engine. *You can still change your mind, Audra. Just get back on an airplane and fly home.*

And what? Let Luella Townsend ruin my business? Stay curled up on my couch—in the home where time had stood still—and crumble to

dust? I'd been tempted to do that another time as well, but I hadn't. I'd gathered myself together and kept going. Maybe not in all aspects of my life, but at least in one. Thistles and Thatch. It had kept me alive—both literally and figuratively—by feeding my body and soul. I would *not* simply hand it over without a fight.

Feeling bolstered, I smoothed my hair back, worked out the kinks in my neck from sleeping in an upright seat for several hours, and prepared for landing.

The San Francisco International Airport was crowded and confusing, but I managed to find my way to the front where I stepped onto a curb filled with taxis and other vehicles. I hadn't checked a bag, because I'd only be here for a couple of days, and I'd been able to fit what I needed in a carry-on.

Wheeling it behind me, I asked a man in an airport uniform for directions to the BART—rapid rail transit—and twenty minutes later, I was on a train, moving rapidly underground toward downtown San Francisco. Thank goodness Jay had been able to help me plan all this in advance or I'd have been completely lost.

I almost missed my stop because of people watching, but managed to squeeze through the doors as they were closing, bursting out onto the train platform, my bag barely making it as the doors slammed and the train pulled out of the station.

I climbed the stairs to the street and pulled out my phone, following the directions to the hotel I'd booked. When I arrived in front of it, I groaned. God, it looked like a flea trap. Sighing, I pulled my suitcase inside. It was important that I be frugal, so



I'd booked one of the less expensive hotels I found online. I just hoped it had clean sheets.

Check-in was quick and easy enough—the older woman at the front counter barely giving me a glance as she took my information and handed me a key card. I took the elevator to the third floor, let myself in the room, and considered my *home* for the next two nights.

The only other hotel I'd stayed in was on my wedding night at the Four Seasons in Denver. Dane and I had driven there after our ceremony at the courthouse. It had been the first time we'd slept in a bed together, and so filled with lust and love, we didn't do much actual sleeping. My mind might have lingered on the sadness that memory evoked, on how desperately in love I'd been—on how hopeful happiness had filled me—but the strange

smell in this room distracted me from those thoughts. I wrinkled my nose at the odor that hung in the air—something that brought to mind . . . hot dogs?

Stepping forward, I leaned my head into the open door to my right and clicked the light switch. It was a small bathroom, old but clean enough it seemed. I wasn't used to anything much better as far as bathrooms went—not at this point in my life anyway—so I wouldn't complain. It would do. Much like my house. Much like the meager food that was my diet. Much like my life outside work.

*It would do.*

The bed appeared to be clean as well, though I pulled up the sheet and checked the mattress as Jay had instructed. No bedbugs. I dropped the sheet and sat on the bed, sighing. California was an hour

behind Colorado and so it was relatively early. I'd mapped out the commute, and I could make it from downtown San Francisco to where Dane worked in Silicon Valley in an hour and a half. If I hurried, maybe I'd catch him returning from lunch.

I'd worn jeans and a sweater on the plane, but maybe I should dress in something a little nicer to show up at his company. Did it matter? It wasn't really like I was there to impress him. It was a personal matter. Still, I got up and took a few minutes to freshen up, bringing my toiletry bag into the bathroom and brushing my hair and reapplying some of the makeup that had worn off during the flight.

My nerves were back, but I'd come this far. I could go a little farther. For a moment I simply stared at myself in the mirror, assessing what Dane

might find different about me now. Last time he saw me I was twenty. I looked older, though my skin was still clear and smooth, and I wore my dark hair in a similar style—the straight strands just brushing my shoulder blades. I was pretty, not beautiful, and time hadn't changed that. No, I didn't think I'd changed that much at all really, though I saw myself every day and probably wasn't the best judge.

What would *he* look like? That thought caused a shiver of trepidation to move down my spine. He'd been such a beautiful boy and I doubted even *seventy* years would take that from him. I pictured him as he'd been when I first met him—his eyes filled with laughter and a smile that played constantly across his beautifully shaped lips. He was a golden boy and he was very aware of that

fact, but it was the humility in his eyes, the ability to laugh at himself, and his deep well of kindness that I'd fallen in love with. It was those things I'd seen in him before we'd ever spoken a word to one another. And as I remembered that first day I met him, the picture of his vibrant smile morphed into how he'd looked the last day I'd seen him in the lawyer's office. His expression had been cold and hardened, his eyes moving away when our gazes clashed. I had deserved that hostile glare, but it had still burned like a blade slicing at the tender places inside of me.

Turning from the mirror, I sucked in a small breath. I could do this.

I didn't have a choice.

# CHAPTER TEN

## Audra

I took a seat in the same chair I'd occupied the day before—the same one I'd been glued to for four tense hours, before Dane's secretary had coldly broken the news that he wasn't going to be back to the office after the meeting he was attending off-site after all. I recognized her voice from the phone. The gold nameplate on the edge of the counter above her desk read Valentina Bellamy, and she looked like a Bond girl. "Sorry," she'd said with a condescending tilt of her red, glossy lips, her sleek, brunette ponytail sliding over one slim shoulder. "I'll make sure to let him know you stopped by,

hoping to meet with him.”

I wanted to scream.

I’d shown up again this morning, bright and early at nine, and though Valentina had looked startled at my repeat appearance, and I’d seen a flash of anger in her eyes, she smiled tightly and told me Dane was already in but was in a meeting and would likely be in meetings for the remainder of the day. I’d told her I would wait and had taken the same chair, ire blossoming in every cell in my body for every minute wasted. I’d spent money I didn’t have to be here and the asshole wouldn’t even take three minutes to see me?

I worked on stoking my anger because I knew just under that was an underground geyser of deep hurt, and if I didn’t stay in strict control, it would burst forth in an explosion of . . . well, I wasn’t sure

because I'd never been one to explode. But I could feel it churning and the anger kept it well below the surface.

Across the room, the fish tank built into the wall bubbled and hummed in a way that would have been soothing under other circumstances. I looked at Valentina's desk and saw her murmuring into the phone too low for me to make out what she was saying, darting a glance my way before turning her face to the side and lowering her voice even further. Was she talking to Dane?

I then heard male voices to my right where there was a hallway leading to the executive offices, I assumed. I froze as a deep laugh met my ears. *Dane's laugh*. I knew it. Remembered it like an old misplaced treasure that was both beautiful but sharp, and brought a sudden surge of joy while



simultaneously piercing me deeply.

I jumped to my feet at the same time Valentina rose to hers. Our eyes met—hers widened—and I rushed forward, easily able to reach the door to the hallway before she did since she had to round her desk.

Throwing the door open, I rushed into the hallway where three men were standing casually and chatting. Their conversation came to an abrupt halt and three pairs of eyes turned my way as I stopped in front of them, breathing harshly. But the only pair of eyes that I focused on were pale green and slowly filling with shock and recognition.

“Aud—”

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Townsend. She ran right past me,” Valentina said shrilly from directly behind me, shouldering me to the side as she stepped in

front. I was unsteady with the impact of Dane standing right before me, so her slight bump caused me to falter and trip sideways.

Dane seemed to come out of a trance as he blinked and stepped toward me, grabbing my arms to hold me upright. For several frozen moments we simply stared at each other, his eyes washing over my face, mouth opening once as if to say something and then closing.

“I’ll call security, Mr. Townsend,” Valentina said, her voice both somehow far away, and overly shrill.

Dane broke eye contact and it caused me to release the pent-up breath I’d been holding. “What?” he asked dazedly.

“She ran right past—”

“It’s fine.” Dane’s hands dropped from my

upper arms and I stepped back, looking at Valentina, whose cheeks were flushed with what I assumed was outrage. “You can go back to your desk, Tina.”

Her lips came together in a harsh line. The two men Dane had been talking to were both watching us curiously, but with Dane’s dismissal of *Tina*, they both muttered “see you later” and headed for the door.

“Dane . . . Mr. Townsend, are you sure you don’t—”

“Very sure, Tina. Thank you.” He looked at me. “Do you want to come to my office, or—”

“Yes, your office would be good. Thank you.”

He gave another small nod, his eyes lingering on my face before he broke eye contact again.

“This way.” Valentina give a small huff, before I

heard the click of her heels, and the door opening and closing behind me. I followed Dane, my heartbeat still thundering in my ears. I took a deep breath, attempting to collect myself as he turned his head to make sure I was following him. He turned into a doorway to his right and held the door for me as I entered the room.

His office was spacious with windows that overlooked a courtyard surrounded by palm trees, an elegant fountain in the center. There was a sleek black L-shaped desk in front of the windows with piles of papers littering every surface. Apparently, Dane Townsend was still as untidy as he'd been as a teenage boy.

Directly in front of me was a small seating area and to the right of that, I spotted a table that held what appeared to be a miniature version of . . .

I began walking toward it. “Is this the industrial park you’re building in Laurelton?” I asked.

He frowned but nodded. I looked back at it, walking along one side and then turning to walk along the other as I took in the details of the scale model. Truthfully, it was beautiful. There was even a miniature version of the mountain range I looked at every day from my office window. There were office buildings toward the middle, but they all looked to be no more than three levels, presumably so none of them obscured the view. Around that were shops and cobblestone streets, each corner with light posts where overflowing pots of flowers hung. It almost looked like an upscale Swiss village. Around the perimeter were restaurants including outdoor patios.

Thistle and Thatch had absolutely become

prime real estate. If I knew it was still mine, I'd consider the location of my warehouse in reference to the industrial park a wonderful stroke of luck. I could see brides coming to my shop and then walking to any number of excellent restaurants where they could lunch with their mother or bridal party. Just the thought of the business it might bring was a staggering blow.

I turned toward Dane to see that he was still watching me, an unreadable expression on his face. He moved away from the door and walked toward me, indicating the sitting area, which consisted of a modern set of gray upholstered couches with a shiny white table between them. I shook my head, too filled with nerves to relax, too antsy to sit. I laced my fingers in front of me as I really took him in. He was as gorgeous as ever, more so, actually.

*Damn him.* Time had been good to Dane Townsend. He had always been striking with his classic bone structure and those light eyes that contrasted beautifully with his dark hair. But age had brought a . . . rugged quality to his good looks that only added to his masculinity. His jaw seemed squarer, his cheekbones sharper, and he had dark scruff on his jaw—not a beard, but not as clean-shaven as I remembered him either. As if he'd followed my thoughts, he reached a hand up and stroked his chin.

“I’m”—he shook his head—“surprised to see you, Audra.”

“Are you?”

His brow furrowed and one side of his lips tilted. “Yes. Shocked actually. What are you doing here? And how did you know about the industrial

park?”

Anger raced through me. “Are you really going to pretend you haven’t received any of my messages?”

He blinked and then brought his head back slightly. “Messages?”

“Yes. I left you about a thousand phone messages over the last week, and when you couldn’t be bothered to respond to those, I flew here. I’ve been sitting in your waiting room for two days.”

He took a step to the edge of one of the couches and sat on the arm, his expression a study in confusion. “Wait, *what?*”

I watched him for a moment, a trickle of doubt moving through me. “You haven’t received my messages?” I asked incredulously.



He shook his head slowly. “Not one. I would have called you back.” He stood up suddenly and walked to his desk, where he moved some papers aside and picked up the receiver on his phone, hitting a button.

“Yes, Mr. Townsend,” came Valentina’s voice from the speaker.

“Come in here please, Tina.”

“Yes, sir.”

Dane replaced the receiver and looked up, his jaw ticking. When I heard the clicking of heels coming toward his office, I looked away from him to the door. A sharp knock sounded and Dane called, “Come in.”

Valentina entered, shooting me a glare before smiling sweetly at Dane. “What can I do for you, sir?”

“Aud—” He stopped and cleared his throat. “Ms. Kelley tells me she’s left several messages, messages that I never received. I’d like to know why.”

A shadow of what looked to be nervousness flashed in Valentina’s expression before she smiled again. “I left the messages on your desk, sir.”

Dane glanced at his desk and then back at Valentina. Without being asked, she sashayed over to his desk, moved a *large* pile of papers aside, and pulled out a small stack of what looked to be phone messages. *Seriously?* Had she placed them there this morning . . . *just in case* I came back. *But why?* “You really should let me tidy your office, Mr. Townsend. As I told you, I’d be happy to. Anytime. Even after hours.” I couldn’t see her face from where I stood, but her tone was flirtatious. *So that’s*

*why*. Dane looked annoyed—thankfully, at her—and took the messages from her outstretched hand, quickly looking at them and then placing them back on his desk.

“And why wasn’t I told she was here to see me? Yesterday or today?”

“You didn’t tell me you were expecting her, sir. After all the calls, I assumed you’d have left word if you were expecting her. When she arrived, well frankly”—she shot me a derisive look over her shoulder—“I thought she was stalking you.”

The tic in Dane’s jaw jumped again. “You overstepped by making any assumptions at all, Tina. I don’t pay you to *assume*. If you do anything like it again, you’ll find yourself out of a job. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir, of course.”

He nodded and when she didn't immediately move, he said, "You may go."

She hesitated but turned, the look of victory wiped from her expression, her eyes downcast as she exited the room. Dane came from around his desk and again, gestured to the couches. I took a deep breath and sat across from him. "I'm sorry about that, Audra. Tina's ah . . ."

He paused, seemingly not sure how to finish that thought. *Very proprietary of you*, I wanted to say but didn't. I wondered briefly if they were in a relationship that wasn't work related but pushed the thought aside. I didn't care about Dane's personal life. I was here on business. "It's fine," I said so he didn't have to explain Tina's *anything* to me. I was here now.

He nodded then sat back and looked at me

expectantly. I swore I saw a hint of anxiety in the way he watched me so closely, and it made me wonder if he did know what his grandmother intended to do to my business. “Your grandmother is trying to take the building on Providence Parkway from me.”

He frowned again, tilting his head. “Take the . . . *What?* She told me you sold the building to her and were planning to move your business elsewhere.”

“No, that’s not true. She told me I have to leave.”

“I’m confused. When she and I began talking about possible locations for the park, she suggested buying the surrounding businesses and I reminded her that your business was right on the border. Later, she told me she made you a generous offer

that you accepted.”

I gaped at him. “No,” I sputtered. “She’s forcing me out. She told me the building was never mine to begin with and because of the prenuptial agreement I signed, she’s simply reclaiming it. She gave me thirty days to move out with no financial compensation whatsoever.”

For a few frozen heartbeats, Dane simply stared at me. Then he swore softly under his breath, running his hand through his hair and leaving it slightly tousled in a way I remembered it looked first thing in the morning. Despite my nerves, despite my anger and what surely was an elevated blood pressure, I felt a spear of undeniable attraction for this man who, for such a short time, had been mine. But I also felt surprising shyness. Because he *wasn't* mine anymore. Mostly, he was a

stranger. A beautiful stranger.

I fidgeted slightly in my seat, and his eyes moved to my hands as I wrung them in my lap. His gaze stayed trained on them as I made a point to go still, and then his eyes lifted to mine. He released what sounded like an angry gust of breath.

“When did this happen?”

For a second I had to re-orient my brain back to the conversation. His grandmother. “Uh, about a week and a half ago. I spent a week trying to call you.” Despite my best efforts, there was still hurt in my voice and I cleared my throat, hoping he hadn’t detected it.

His eyes found mine again and something flashed between us, familiar, but something I didn’t want. Something that inspired a deep fear that even the thought of losing my business hadn’t brought

forth in me. “I’m glad you called me, Audra,” he said gently. “And I’m sorry my grandmother lied to you.” His finger stroked along his lower lip again and my eyes followed it. But when he began speaking once again, I blinked and met his eyes once more. “She’s . . .” He frowned, then glanced away as if trying to figure out a way to explain her. *As if he could.* “She’s protective of her family. There are a lot of negative things I know you’ll say about Luella Townsend, but that’s what it usually comes down to. A misguided desire to protect.”

I shook my head, his words breaking whatever spell I’d just been under. *Snap out of it, Audra.* “It doesn’t excuse what she’s doing.”

“Of course it doesn’t.” Dane stood, causing me to startle slightly. He came around the coffee table and took a seat next to me on the couch. My



breath hitched as I turned to him. My impulse was to back away, to stand, to create space between us once again. This was . . . this was . . . he was too close, and I didn't like it. The fresh smell of his cologne, of *him*, enveloped me and made my brain feel foggy, my nerve endings tingly and raw. "The building is yours, Audra. I gifted it to you, and I'll make this right. You don't have to worry. I'll talk to Luella and work this out."

And as I stared at his earnest expression, I knew he was telling the truth. Dane had been many things during our brief marriage, but he'd never been a liar. He'd held things back, things he shouldn't have, but he'd never told direct falsehoods. That had never been him, and I didn't believe it to be now. So many emotions were swirling through me, feelings I hadn't allowed

myself to think about—much less experience—in all the time we’d been apart. I looked away, chewing on my lip. “Thank you,” I finally murmured, leaning farther back on the couch to put some more room between us. Dane’s eyes narrowed very minutely, but with what I couldn’t be sure. “Will you, ah, call her or how should this . . .”

Whether because of my body language or for his own reasons, he stood. I let out a tiny relieved breath as he walked to his desk where he turned and leaned against the edge. “No. I’m going to talk to her in person.” He crossed his arms over his chest, his shirt pulling tight at his biceps. “I have a conference call with the developers on Monday. I’ll go and meet with them face to face instead. And, I’ll see Luella first and get this straightened out.”

“Do you really think it will be that easy? The way she acted when I went to see her . . .”

“I’ll get it straightened out,” he repeated, not remarking on whether it would be easy or not. Would she fight him on it? What if she refused to budge? Would our verbal agreement stand? I took a deep breath. Dane likely couldn’t answer those questions much better than I could right now. Yet, I felt markedly better, and though being in such close proximity to Dane after all these years had me edgy and unsure, relief provided the much-needed cool stream of calm.

I nodded. “Thank you.” I gave a slight shake of my head. “Before I came here, I wasn’t sure if you knew about this or not.”

That same muscle jumped in his jaw, but his eyes remained steady, focused on me. “You

couldn't have thought I'd look away as Luella took that building from you and tried to ruin your business."

"It's been a long time, Dane. We didn't exactly . . . end on good terms. I wasn't sure."

"Jesus, Audra," he said, and the hurt in his voice took me off guard. "You know me better than that."

"I *knew* you, Dane. It's been seven years. Neither of us know each other anymore."

He was silent as he regarded me. "Are you so sure?"

"No, I . . . I'm not sure of anything. I don't need to be sure of anything. I appreciate you helping me, and I'm sorry if my questioning of your role in this upsets you, but I'm sure you can understand after all the unanswered—"

“Have dinner with me tonight.”

“I . . .what?”

“Dinner, Audra. You have to eat, right? Let me buy you dinner and we can catch up a little. You can tell me about your business and what you’ve done with it so I have all the information I might need when I speak with Luella. And in turn, I can tell you about the plans for the industrial park that I’m sure will bring positive growth to your business.”

Dinner? With Dane? No, I didn’t want to go to dinner with Dane. That sounded dangerous in ways I didn’t even want to contemplate. And yet, he was making a special trip to Colorado to confront Luella on my behalf. He was being kind, and seemed honestly perplexed at his grandmother’s actions. What big deal would dinner be? He’d fly to

Colorado, hopefully get his grandmother to back off my business and me forever, then return to California. I wouldn't see him after that. There would literally be no reason for me to ever see Dane Townsend again.

“Just dinner,” he said softly.

“Okay, uh, that sounds good.”

His shoulders seemed to fall incrementally and he turned, grabbing the receiver off of his phone. “By the way, I got my pilot's license three years back. We'll take my plane to Colorado.”

Before I could answer, he brought the phone to his ear and punched in some numbers. He started giving orders to whomever was on the other line, presumably the people responsible for readying his plane for travel, from what my surprised mind grasped.

When he hung up and turned to me, I shook my head. “I already have a return ticket. That’s not necessary.”

“You can get a refund.”

I opened my mouth to speak but then shut it again. Getting a refund—even half—would be a relief. I bit at my lip for a second. A couple of hours at dinner, at the most, and a couple of hours on a plane with Dane where I could pretend to sleep, or read? I could handle that. *Couldn't I?* I met his eyes. “Okay.”

“Good,” he murmured, those green eyes studying me in a way that suddenly made me regret the consent I’d given only seconds before. My instincts told me I’d put some vital part of myself in terrible danger.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

**Then . . .**

*Audra had never been in a house as grand as the Townsend estate. Not even close. She barely noticed Dane slipping her coat from her shoulders as she gazed in awe at the grand curved stairway sweeping upward from the marble foyer they were standing in. She craned her neck, looking up at a gorgeous mural painted on the ceiling. It was the sky, dotted with fluffy white clouds, ringed in pale pink. There were birds and angels and if she could have, she would have stood gaping at it for hours, trying to take in all the details from where she stood, too far below. But she was nervous too. On*



*the one occasion she'd been in the same place as Dane's family—at his sister Dalila's seventeenth birthday party at their country club—Dane's grandmother had been cold toward her, shooting her disdainful glares. It had made her feel small and ugly, painfully aware of her simple dress and cheap Payless shoes. She hadn't mentioned it to Dane, and desperately hoped the older woman would warm to her once she had a chance to get to know her better.*

*“I thought you'd like that,” Dane whispered in her ear, his warm breath tickling her skin and causing her to shiver. Audra smiled, turning her head slightly so she could see him. “My little artist.”*

*She laughed softly, reaching up and placing her hand on his cheek then turning her neck a*

*little more so she could kiss him quickly. “Anything I’ve ever done is a far cry from this masterpiece.” She turned around, craning her head once again as Dane nuzzled her neck. But when the click of heels met her ears, she dropped her hand and stepped away from Dane.*

*Dane’s grandmother cleared her throat and Audra met her eyes meekly, shy that she’d caught their public display of affection, innocent though it was. Mrs. Townsend raised her chin as she stepped forward. “Audra Kelley. It’s nice to see you again. Welcome to my home.” She extended her hand toward Audra and Audra took it in hers. Mrs. Townsend’s grip was firm, though her hand felt cold and bony. Audra pulled away as quickly as she could while still appearing polite. She hoped.*

*Audra smiled, praying it looked more steady than it felt. “Mrs. Townsend. Your home is gorgeous. Thank you for having me to dinner.”*

*Mrs. Townsend nodded once and Dane stepped forward, kissing her on her cheek. “Grandmother,” he said.*

*Her eyes warmed ever so slightly as she took in her grandson. “Dane.”*

*She turned and waved her hand, indicating, Audra assumed, that they should follow her. She glanced at Dane and he shot her a wink, his eyes amused. “She’s not as stern as she comes across.”*

*“I heard that, Dane Michael,” his grandmother said as she walked away, but it made Audra relax slightly. Maybe she did have a softer side to her, despite initial impressions.*

*They followed her into the dining room and*

*Audra tried not to make it obvious that what she really wanted to do was stop every few steps and gaze at some architectural feature or design element in this luxurious house. If she could, she'd stop time and simply wander through it alone, exploring every nook and cranny, letting her eyes soak in all the impressive details. But she didn't want to appear too stunned by the surroundings. She didn't want to make it blatantly obvious that she lived in a house so small it could fit in one room of this mansion. The well-worn, mismatched furnishings probably didn't cost a fraction of one of the paintings on the wall. She stopped suddenly. Was that a . . . Rembrandt? She couldn't help it, she gaped.*

*“It is a Rembrandt.” Audra turned her head quickly from the painting to see Dalila Townsend*

*approaching her, a smile on her face. “If that’s what you were wondering.”*

*Audra let out a breath, smiling back. “I was. It’s magnificent.”*

*A moment later, Dane’s sister, Dalila, came to stand in front of the painting with her and gazed at it. “I know. It’s what inspired me to take art lessons. Which, much to my great sadness, are making it clear to me that I have no natural talent.” She glanced at Audra. “Not like you.”*

*Audra shook her head. “That’s not true. I loved that flower you did a couple of weeks ago.”*

*“That was a self-portrait.”*

*She felt her heart drop. “Oh, um, well . . .”*

*Dalila burst out laughing, taking Audra’s arm in hers and leading her to the other side of the room where Dane had already gone. Dalila*

*stopped. “I was kidding. It actually was a flower. But it was awful. It’s okay. I can admit my own shortcomings. No one can be amazing at everything.” She shot Audra a grin and she laughed. Audra had liked Dalila Townsend from the moment they met at the art class downtown. Despite her last name and social standing, she was down to earth and genuine, just like her brother.*

*Dane was talking to a boy who looked to be about fifteen, with the same brown hair and green eyes as he and Dalila. He must be their brother, Dustin. Dane grabbed Audra’s hand as she approached them. “Audra, this is my little brother, Dustin, the pain in the ass I told you about.” But he grabbed him with an arm around his neck and pulled him toward him in a mock wrestling move that made it obvious he was joking.*

*Audra laughed softly, shaking Dustin's hand when he'd shaken Dane off. "Don't listen to him. He's just jealous because his little brother's got more play with the ladies."*

*Dane rolled his eyes but then smiled at Audra. "There's only one lady I want any play with. You can take the rest."*

*Audra's heart squeezed with happiness and butterflies fluttered between her ribs. She still wondered at times how she'd found love in the arms of someone as handsome and wonderful as Dane.*

*"Gross," Dustin muttered, and they both laughed.*

*"I'm sorry my mom's not here tonight. She'll be back from Europe next week." Dane had talked well of his mother, saying she was a good mom, if a*

*little bit flighty, with a great love for shopping and lunching with her friends—and exclusive resorts in Europe. Audra had met her briefly at Dalila’s party, but, truthfully, she was glad she could spend time with his family in small doses. It was nerve-wracking enough being around his grandmother. But before she could even nod, a bell sounded, and the chatter stopped. Dane’s grandmother reappeared in the room from wherever she’d briefly gone. They all took their seats and Audra glanced around nervously, her hands balled in her lap as the formal dinner began, two maids in black and white uniforms emerging from what she assumed was the kitchen with steaming platters of food. My God. She’d never dined like this before—not even in a restaurant. And this was the norm for them?*



*For the first part of the meal, she mostly listened to the chatter around her, smiling when appropriate, and trying to be engaged while also watching what the others did as far as table manners so she'd know she was doing the appropriate thing as well. She and her father didn't exactly have five-course meals at their house—ever. Most often, Audra threw something in the microwave without even bothering to dish it onto an actual plate.*

*When the soup arrived, she watched Dane pick up the round spoon on the right of his plate and followed suit, tuning back into what Dalila was saying. Something about a winter formal at their country club.*

*“Dane,” his grandmother said, wiping the corner of her mouth with her napkin. “I told*

*Celeste Sinclair that you'd take Winnie to the formal. It's important that our whole family be there since we're being honored as Platinum members."*

*Winnie Sinclair?*

*Audra's heart stuttered and then resumed in a quickened beat. Dane was staring at his grandmother in confusion, his mouth working to finish the bite of food he'd just taken. "I'll be taking Audra to the formal, Grandmother, not Winnie."*

*The table had grown extremely quiet and Audra dared a glance around. Dalila's eyes were wide, and when she caught her gaze, they filled with sympathy. Dustin simply looked confused. "I'm sorry, Dane, but that would never do."*

*Dane's grandmother gave her a look that was both*

*cold and condescending.*

*Dane placed his napkin down slowly. “And why not?” He lowered his hand, taking hers in his. He squeezed her hand tighter. No doubt he could feel how much she was trembling.*

*Audra felt as if his grandmother was a spider who’d lured her in with a few simple niceties, and then once she’d relaxed and his grandmother had her in her web, she’d pounced. Audra felt stunned, attacked. Heat crawled up her neck and she wanted to bolt out of there, but Dane’s touch anchored her. She sat frozen, gripping his hand in hers, waiting for what would come next.*

*“I don’t want to embarrass you, Audra dear, but the Townsends are expected to keep company with a certain . . . quality of people. Especially in public.”*

*“Grandmother,” Dalila squeaked and her voice sounded pained, incredulous.*

*Luella Townsend looked briefly at Dalila and then back to Audra, smiling tightly. “We certainly don’t have to discuss this over dinner. But I thought it important that Audra understand exactly the way things work when your last name is Townsend. Dane may do as he please in private and behind closed doors, but in public, such . . . things will not be tolerated.”*

*Things? Audra thought. I’m a . . . thing?*

*Dane threw his napkin on the table and stood slowly. His muscles were clenched tightly and he seemed to be radiating rage. Audra’s heart thundered in her ears, and when he pulled on her hand, she stood jerkily, her chair falling backward with her sudden movement and landing sideways*

*on the plush white and pale blue oriental rug. She gasped in a strangled breath and let go of Dane's hand to bring her own to her chest, but she hit the bowl of soup still in front of her and it flipped off the table onto the floor. The bowl simply bounced, but tomato bisque splattered the rug in large, ugly splotches of red. "Oh God, I'm so—"*

*"It's okay, Audra." Dane pulled her to him. "It doesn't matter." But it did matter. It would always matter. He pulled her hand, and she turned into him, refusing to meet anyone else's eyes except his. His stride was quick, his long legs moving so swiftly that she had to run to keep up with him. And as they made their way toward the front door, tears spilled from her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Oh God, oh God, oh God.*

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*Dane was seeing red. How dare his grandmother make Audra feel that way? He gripped the steering wheel tightly, exhaling a long breath. She sat stiffly beside him, the look on her face bleak, slightly shell-shocked. His shoulders fell, and he pulled to the side of the road, shutting off the car and turning toward her. “Come here.” He opened his arms, and she fell into them immediately, laying her head on his shoulder as he kissed the side of her hair, making slow circles on her back. “I promise you that will never happen again.”*

*Audra shook her head against his coat. “You can’t promise that, Dane. She obviously doesn’t think I’m good enough for you.”*

*“She’s wrong. You’re too good for me.” She*

*let out a small, soggy-sounding laugh and lifted her head. But he wasn't smiling, and he hoped she could see the sincerity in his expression as he wiped the tears from her cheeks. He was leaving for Stanford in a couple of months, and it was killing him to know he'd be leaving her behind. But he also knew he wanted to make a good life for them, to graduate college, to step into the role at his family company, the one he'd been groomed for all his life. His friends all told him he was crazy to make a commitment to a girl right before he went off to college. They said he should be partying and dating as many college women as possible. But Audra was the only one he wanted, the only one who set his body and his soul on fire, who made him feel like the sun was rising inside him each time he looked at her. So he just laughed*



*and ignored them.*

*He kissed her softly. "I love you," he said. He'd never used the words with any other girl, because he'd never felt them. Not until now. "Forget everyone else, my sweet butterfly dancer. You were mine, even then. Before I ever met you."*

*She drew in a sharp breath, gazing at him with those wide, trusting eyes. "I love you too," she whispered.*

*He smiled, moving a piece of hair back from her face. "You and me," he said, and she nodded before he kissed her.*

## CHAPTER TWELVE

**Dane**

**Now . . .**

Audra Kelley. My ex-wife. *Holy fuck*. I tipped the shot back, and the alcohol left a trail of fire as it slid down my throat. I grimaced and poured another, but simply stood holding it as I gazed unseeing out my office window. For a while my eyes lingered on the fountain, the bubbling water almost restoring some calm.

I still thought of her as Audra Kelley, though the last time I'd seen her, she'd been Audra Townsend. Briefly though. That time was so filled

with pain despite the possessive joy I'd felt when I'd slipped my ring on her finger and knew she was mine forever. As it turned out, *forever* was a short thirteen months, seven days, and a handful of hours.

I knew she'd taken her name back because I'd checked in on her—without her knowing, of course—six years before when her father had died. It'd fucked me up for months afterward, so I hadn't done it again until last year. That had been different, though . . . and of course, I'd asked Luella about Audra's business when we began planning the industrial park. Luella had told me Audra was planning to move, and maybe I'd wanted to believe it. I certainly understood her wanting to. Why would she want to work every day in a building I'd given to her as a wedding gift? If

she felt the way I did, she'd want to put any reminders of me in the past. They were too painful.

Goddammit, she still did something to me with that stubborn little chin and those big dark eyes. I could still feel her smooth, supple skin beneath my palms. She was still so fucking desirable to me, and I hated it because she wasn't mine anymore. I didn't want to be affected by her when she'd stood in my office and accused me of being cold-hearted and unethical.

Attraction could be a ruthless bitch. Sometimes you couldn't get rid of her even if you wanted to.

The magnetism I felt toward Audra seemed rooted in my bones, threaded through the fabric of who I was. I *responded* to her on some primal level, and I had from the first moment I'd laid eyes on

her. She was still slim, maybe too slim even, and it made it more obvious how delicate-boned she was. I'd loved that about her, loved how small and slight she'd always felt in my arms, and how she'd wrap those slender legs around my hips.

*Why was I even thinking about that? Fuck.*

It had seemed like she was hurt by the idea that I could be conspiring against her, and yet I couldn't really tell what she'd been thinking. Then again, she'd only ever shared her secrets haltingly, secrets I'd cherished and held tightly to me like priceless treasures. Toward the end, she'd withheld her private thoughts completely, retreating inside herself. I'd had no earthly clue what she was thinking, cut off forever from that inner world of hers.

A light knock sounded at my door and I

turned, but before I could even answer, it opened and my brother stepped inside. I watched him as he took in the shot in my hand, his eyes moving to the mostly full bottle sitting on my desk. “A little early, isn’t it?”

I threw the second shot back, grimacing and setting the tumbler I was using as a shot glass on a pile of papers on my desk. “Want one?”

He walked toward me, his expression managing both amusement and concern. “What’s the occasion?”

“My ex-wife stopped by.”

He frowned. “Audra?”

“Do I have another ex-wife I’m unaware of?”

He rolled his eyes, walking to the bar cart near the corner where I kept a few bottles of alcohol so I could offer clients a drink if a meeting ran late. He

took a glass before strolling back, uncapping the bottle, and pouring himself a generous shot. He held it up to me and then threw it back, shaking his head with the burn. “What the hell is Audra doing in California?” He held the bottle to me in question but I shook my head, then walked to the couches and sank down onto one.

After he’d poured himself another drink, he joined me in the sitting area, taking a seat on the couch across from me where Audra had sat only an hour before. I leaned back and staring at the ceiling, told him the gist of why she’d traveled from Colorado to California.

Dustin whistled long and low and I sat up. The two shots had hit my system so I was feeling warm and calm, though still not completely back to normal emotionally speaking. “Luella really knows

how to hold a grudge, huh?”

“I don’t fucking know. She always had such a stick up her ass when it came to Audra, but why she’s doing this now, I really have no idea. Other than that the opportunity arose and she’s being a bitch because she can.”

Dustin frowned. “I know she never thought Audra was good enough for you. But I’d have thought after . . .” His eyes flew to mine and he blinked nervously.

“You can say his name, Dustin.”

He let out a whoosh of breath, looking a little guilty, a little sad. “After Theo, I’d have thought Gran would take it easy on Audra. Hasn’t she suffered enough?”

I shook my head slowly. “Apparently not, according to Gran. I’m flying to Colorado for the



meeting with the developers on Monday. I'll get to the bottom of this then."

Dustin studied me for a second. "You sure this is a good idea, Dane? I remember how you were seven years ago—"

"What choice do I have, Dustin? I'm not going to let Luella railroad Audra. It isn't right. You know it isn't. She's not my wife anymore, but hell if I can just stand by as her whole life is obliterated." *I did that once. And once was one time too many.* "Whatever problem Luella still has with Audra started with me. I'm going to end it."

Dustin pressed his lips together. "Yeah, I guess you're sort of between a rock and a hard place. Just . . . be careful, okay?"

"Think Luella will cut me out of the business again if I tell her to quit this bullshit?"

“No, you’re too damn good at your job. That’d just be stupid on her part and Luella’s many things, but stupid isn’t one of them. But in any case, it’s not Gran I was warning you about.”

One side of my mouth tilted upward, and I let out a humorless huff of breath. He was right—it was Audra alone who could twist my guts simply by standing in the room. *Why?* It’d been seven years and it was still the same. “Maybe I’m cursed. It’s the only explanation.”

“Maybe you have unfinished business.”

“What do you mean?”

Dustin sighed. “Did you ever work through losing Theo?”

I gave that a moment of thought. “I think so, Dustin, as much as anyone can.”

“What I mean is, did you ever work through it

with *her*?”

“How could I? We couldn’t work through it when we were living in the same house, much less from over a thousand miles away. She divorced me, Dustin. All I can do is hope she’s found some peace on her own somehow.” When he didn’t immediately respond, I said, “I’m taking her to dinner tonight.”

“Ah, hence drinking at lunchtime.” He paused. “Again, be careful, okay? I’d hate like hell to see you in the state you were in seven years ago.”

I shook my head. “That’d be impossible.”

Dustin pressed his lips together again but stood. “Okay, well I had some business, but it’s nothing that can’t wait. Why don’t you go home early for once in your life and get your head together before tonight.”

I sighed, but stood too. “Yeah, maybe I will.”

“Good. Say hi to her from me, man,” he said before he walked out, closing the door behind him.

I stood for a moment, considering, and then walked to my desk, pressing the intercom that went to Tina’s desk. “Yes, sir,” she purred.

Annoyance raced through me. The way she’d treated Audra was unacceptable. I suspected she’d hidden her messages on purpose. I couldn’t prove it—even I admitted my organizational skills were lacking—but it gave me the perfect reason to fire her. I was sick and tired of her constant flirtation. It was the last thing I needed or wanted in an assistant, and I’d deal with her as soon as I got back.

“Tina, cancel my meetings for the rest of the week. I’ll be in Colorado. Email me if you need

anything.”

“Okay. Do you need company—?”

“No. And cancel my appointments this afternoon too. I’m taking the rest of the day off.”

I hung up without waiting for her response.

I drove to Saratoga, and when I pulled through the gates of my driveway, I barely remembered the commute at all, so lost in thoughts of the girl who had once been my world.

I focused on the mountains behind my house, taking a deep calming breath. The mountainous backdrop had always been something I loved about my home state of Colorado, so when I’d moved to California, I’d chosen the small town of Saratoga, a beautiful residential community in the foothills of the Santa Cruz mountains.

Dropping my briefcase and keys on the table

by the door, I began unbuttoning my shirt as I walked toward my bedroom. I was going to go for a long run and then do some laps in the pool before leaving to pick Audra up. I'd need my mind as clear as possible to survive tonight. I already had a feeling just being in a room with her for half an hour had caused something inside me to break free and drift to the surface. My feelings for her were all twisted and tangled. I couldn't decide if I liked or hated the swirling excitement. But one thing was undeniable. It'd been almost eight years, but one damn look at her had thrown me into a fucking tailspin.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

**Then . . .**

*“Hey,” Dane said, throwing his backpack on the ground and taking Audra into his arms. She tried to relax in the warm safety of his embrace but didn’t manage it and he pulled back, his lips turning downward in worry. “Is everything okay?”*

*She shook her head, her heart pounding in her chest as she took her bottom lip between her teeth, her large dark eyes filling with tears.*

*“Baby, hey, what’s going on? Did someone—”*

*“Dane, I’m . . . I’m pregnant,” she said softly, her lips trembling. His head reared back and he took a step away from her. She flinched, his*

*reaction causing a spiral of hurt to whirl through her chest, stealing her breath.*

*Dane shook his head slowly. “What? No. We . . . used protection. Every time.”*

*Her eyes searched his face for a moment, looking for understanding, or tenderness, but only finding confusion and distress. “It didn’t work. I don’t know . . .” She shook her head so slightly, the movement was barely discernible and Dane blew out a breath, running his hand through his hair.*

*“Pregnant,” he murmured, his brows coming together as if he was having trouble accepting the meaning of the word . . . the meaning of the situation they were in.*

*Audra turned away from him and wrapped her arms around her middle—the place where their baby grew, that tiny person they’d*



*unknowingly created. She was scared . . . petrified. But she loved that little being already. Her body shook with both her own fear, and the panic she'd seen in his eyes.*

*She felt his warmth behind her, felt his arms slip around her waist to cover her own, and a small sob caught in her throat. He let go of her waist and turned her to face him. Her eyes filled with tears. "I didn't do this on purpose, Dane."*

*"Oh, Audra, baby." He pulled her to him and held her, rubbing her back and kissing her forehead. "I know that. Jesus, I never thought for a minute you got pregnant on purpose."*

*She pulled back slightly and looked up at him. "Your grandmother will."*

*"Then I'll tell her she's wrong." He took a deep breath. "We made this baby together, and*

*we're going to raise this baby together. I want you to marry me. We're eighteen, and this is our decision, no one else's—definitely not my grandmother's."*

*"What about Stanford?"*

*"Come with me. We'll get an apartment together. I'll go to classes during the day and be there to help with the baby at night."*

*She released a breath. "I . . . can't. My dad . . ."*

*He ran his hand through his hair, looking off into the distance for a moment. "Then I'll transfer to a college close by—"*

*"No, Dane. You worked so hard to get into Stanford. You—"*

*"It doesn't matter which college I go to. I'm going to run Townsend Robotics regardless. You're*

*more important to me than Stanford, Audra. Marry me,” he repeated, tipping her chin up so she was looking into his eyes.*

*“You don’t have to marry me just because I’m pregnant. I don’t . . . expect that of you.” Her voice was a choked whisper.*

*Dane stared at her for a second, his eyes moving over her features. “I don’t want to marry you because you’re pregnant. I want to marry you because I’m in love with you. I was going to ask you after I graduated. This baby just decided to alter our plans a little bit.” He smiled gently at her.*

*She gave a small half laugh, half snuffle. A tear spilled and fell down her cheek. Dane caught it with his thumb and then leaned in and kissed her. Her heart welled with love, overflowing, just as*

*her eyes had done. “Don’t cry,” he whispered.*

*“You and me, remember?”*

*He took her in his arms again. “You and me,” she whispered.*

*“So that’s settled then. You’ll be my wife?”*

*She nodded against his neck, smiling before she said, “Yes.” And though he held her, kissing her, soothing her, and whispering words of love, she could feel that his muscles were still tensed. And it made her feel that though she carried his child inside her, she’d lost a part of him.*

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

**Dane**

**Now . . .**

Audra had given me the address of the hotel where she was staying and I pulled up slowly in front of it, cursing when I saw the rattrap. Christ. No wonder she'd agreed to fly to Colorado with me. She probably needed the refund money she'd get for her plane ticket. Probably needed a meal too. Was business so bad that she had to stay somewhere she was likely to be raped and murdered? And why did I feel so fucking irrationally angry over it anyway? Her welfare was really none of my business

anymore. And it still wouldn't be after I'd straightened things out with my grandmother. What the hell was wrong with Luella anyway? Audra was obviously barely making ends meet and Luella was trying to take her livelihood—meager though it obviously was—away from her? What a cold bitch she could be. I wish I understood why she'd always been particularly cold with Audra.

I'd tried to insist that she take some money when we divorced despite that damn prenuptial agreement Audra had signed without so much as whispering a word about it to me. But she wouldn't have any of it, and it wasn't like I could force her to take my money. Maybe if I'd been in my right mind at the time, I would have found a way to do it.

As my mind wandered, I questioned if my actions last year—and what Luella knew of them—

had unintentionally put this into motion. Even though I'd been shocked to see Audra today, something about it also felt . . . inevitable.

*Wanted.*

I swerved into an empty spot and a car blared its horn behind me, annoyed at my sudden maneuver. The guy flipped me off as he drove by, but I ignored him, hopping out and heading into the hotel.

It was just as dark and seedy-looking on the inside as I'd assumed it would be. I strolled past the clerk sleeping at the front desk and punched the up button for the single elevator. Minutes later I was rapping on Audra's door. When it swung open, she took an immediate step back as if she hadn't expected me to be quite so close. Her eyes swung to mine and she opened her mouth, then closed it

again, took a deep breath and gave me a wobbly smile. “Hey.”

“Hey yourself. This place is a hellhole.”

That little indignant chin came up and I almost smiled, then almost frowned, blowing out a breath and running my fingers through my hair.

“It wasn’t exactly in the budget to make a last-minute trip to San Francisco. I was trying to save a few dollars. And it’s not that bad.”

I raised a brow, looking past her into the room that appeared to be decent, though there was a strange scent in the air. I scrunched my nose. Was that . . . roasting meat? She took a few steps backward and reached into the closet, removing a sweater. “Ready?” she mumbled.

“Yeah.” Jesus, I was acting like an ass. I stepped back. “Sorry. You look nice.” And she did.



She was wearing a pair of tight jeans that showed off her slim, shapely legs, a black silky shirt with some sort of ruffling on the sleeves, and a pair of black heels. I wanted to let my eyes roam her curves, but I didn't allow myself to, knowing it would be a bad idea. I could already sense the longing I'd always felt to touch her, feel her softness, welling up inside me.

“Thanks.” She looked over at my dark gray slacks and white button-up shirt as we began to walk toward the elevator. “So do you. I would have dressed up a little more, but I didn't really pack anything—”

“What you're wearing is perfect. I had this little Italian place in mind. It's casual.” We made it to the elevator and I hit the down button. “If I recall correctly, you used to be able to put away

your body weight in pasta.”

“Some things never change, I guess.” She laughed softly.

“No, I guess they don’t.” Our eyes met and lingered for a moment before Audra broke eye contact.

We entered the elevator and stood silently and somewhat awkwardly as it descended. I led her outside, past the still-sleeping desk clerk, cringing as I noticed the thin trail of saliva dribbling from the side of her open mouth. I took a deep breath of the outside air when we stepped through the door. It held the vague hint of trash and car exhaust, but it was still better than the musty odor of the hotel lobby.

I clicked the key fob on my car and opened the passenger door for Audra and stood waiting as

she got inside. There was a group of young guys hanging in a doorway near where I was parked. As I watched them check her out, something hot and possessive ran through me. *Ah, fuck. Habit, just old habit. That's it.*

I felt off balance, not fully in control, and I took the first five minutes of the car ride trying to reclaim my inner equilibrium. When I finally looked at Audra, she looked a little tense as she stared straight ahead out the windshield. “So tell me a little bit about your business,” I asked, feeling a twinge of something uncomfortable in my chest. I’d bought the warehouse as my wedding gift to her, and it pained me that I knew virtually nothing about what she’d done with it, other than that she ran a flower shop.

Her shoulders seemed to relax and she smiled,

the first genuine one I'd seen since she walked into my office earlier that day. "I think you'd like what I've done with it. A lot of the improvements are things we talked about . . ." She cleared her throat. "It's taken me longer than I hoped it would, and I've had to scrimp and save to do it, but I'm really proud of what it's becoming." She told me about creating vendor spaces and her vision of a one-stop vendor "mall" for brides.

"That's an amazing idea, Audra." And I meant it.

"Thanks. It's finally starting to take shape, and I'm just beginning to see the payoff of all my work \_\_\_"

"And then in walked Luella Townsend."

She took her lip under her top teeth in that familiar way and nodded. "Yeah."

I reached over and took her hand where it lay on her left thigh, squeezing it lightly. She startled and looked at me. I let go. I hadn't meant to touch her, and the gesture had just come naturally. "It's going to be okay. Your business is going to be fine."

Her eyes moved quickly over my face and she nodded, then looked away. She took the hand I'd held in mine only moments before and linked it with her other one, rubbing the skin slowly as if I'd caused some physical sensation she was attempting to rub away.

I pulled up in front of the restaurant and five minutes later, we were seated by the window in the intimate, family-run restaurant.

"Wine?" I asked Audra. The last time I saw her we hadn't even been of drinking age, so I really had no idea if she even drank alcohol. Truth was,

despite my earlier office indulgence, I wasn't much of a drinker myself.

“Sure, that sounds good. The last time I saw you, we weren't even twenty-one yet,” she said, voicing exactly what I'd just thought.

“I know. We couldn't even toast at our wedding. Well that, and you couldn't drink anyway,” I said quietly.

With my words, she froze, her face draining of color, an expression of stunned pain moving through her eyes before she looked down at her menu. “What's good here?” she asked, her voice a whisper that still managed to be slightly choked. *Oh, Audra.* My heart dropped to my feet. She still couldn't even discuss being pregnant. I wondered if she'd talked about our son once in the seven years we'd been apart. Surely she did . . . sometimes.

“Audra—”

“The pasta al forno sounds amazing.” She looked up at me and smiled, an overly bright one that didn’t meet her eyes. She looked back at her menu, the message crystal clear: that topic is off the table.

I sighed. “It is. It’s delicious.”

The waitress came to our table and a few minutes after that, we each had a glass of merlot in hand. “To catching up,” I said, clinking my glass with hers.

As I watched her take a sip and heard her sound of pleasure, I said, “I’ve wondered about you over the years.”

“I’ve thought about you too, Dane,” she said quietly, playing with the stem of the glass. “I’m actually surprised to know you haven’t re-married.”

“You figured I was married?”

She shrugged one shoulder, glancing around the restaurant before looking back at me. “I didn’t give it a whole lot of thought, but, yeah.” She smiled. “I figured a man like you’d be snatched off the market pretty quickly.”

I regarded her for a moment. *A man like you.* Who was that to her? Eligible? Loveable? *Divorceable?* “I came close last year,” I admitted.

Her eyes snapped to mine and she blinked. “Oh . . . well, I’m sorry. I mean, that it didn’t work out.”

“Not everything works out.”

“No, no it doesn’t. What, ah, happened? I mean”—she took a sip of her wine—“you don’t have to tell me. It’s really none of my business.”

That was true, but for some inexplicable



reason, I wanted her to know. “She was the daughter of a family friend and happened to move to San Francisco a couple of years ago. We got together as old friends and things progressed from there. It seemed . . . easy, I guess, that we were already acquainted.” Audra’s body seemed stiff, though her finger was moving casually around the bottom of her wine glass. “After a year, it seemed like the next logical step was to get engaged. I went home to—“ I stopped suddenly, realizing what I’d been about to say.

“You went home to get the ring your grandmother promised to the first grandchild to get married. Unless, of course, they were marrying *me*.”

A hiss of breath came through my lips. I leaned closer. “Shit, Audra, you know how I felt

about that. You didn't want that ring so I didn't fight for it. You made me promise I wouldn't."

"Of course I didn't want that ring. Do you blame—" She took a deep breath and seemed to gather herself, taking another sip of wine and waving her hand in the air. "Anyway, it doesn't matter now. You went home to get your grandmother's engagement ring and what happened?"

"I don't know." I grimaced with the slight amount of guilt I still felt. "It was like the second that ring was in my hand, I knew without a doubt I didn't want to marry Winnie."

Audra had just taken a sip of her wine and she sputtered slightly, bringing her hand to her mouth. "*Winnie?*" She wiped at her lip. "You almost married Winnie Sinclair?" Her eyes flared with

what looked like outrage. I had so rarely seen Audra angry that I couldn't be sure. She tended to hide emotions like anger behind a wall so thick, a bulldozer couldn't knock it down. Or she had. Dammit, why did it suddenly feel as if no time had passed? Maybe it hadn't. Maybe in some ways we were both still stuck in the same place we'd been in seven years before.

“Well, your grandmother must have been thrilled about the possibility,” she tossed at me. “And devastated when it didn't work out.”

“It wasn't Winnie's fault my grandmother was so fond of her.”

Audra let out a small laugh. “No, of course not. I'm sure she's perfect.”

“She's not perfect, but she's a nice person. I was sorry to hurt her.”

Audra's shoulders drooped slightly, and she squeezed her eyes shut as she shook her head. "God, I'm sorry. I'm acting bitter and unkind." She took a deep breath, and I found that I was almost disappointed to watch her gather herself. It felt like she'd just showed some honesty, not just that detached politeness she'd hidden behind toward the end of our marriage. I'd hated it. I'd wanted *something*—some emotion, *any* emotion—yet she'd seemed completely unwilling to give me anything at all in that regard. "It's just . . . I guess everything that's going on with your grandmother has brought some things from the past to the surface." She offered me a small, slightly embarrassed smile. "Let's pretend I never said any of that. I really am sorry things didn't work out for you and . . . Winnie."

I wasn't. I wasn't sorry in the least. I'd been sure of my decision then, and time hadn't changed that.

But I simply nodded. Our waitress arrived with our food and set it before us, smiling as she asked if we needed anything else at the moment. When we said no, she left us to our food.

For a few minutes, we simply enjoyed the delicious pasta dishes we'd ordered.

“So, ah, I know you went into floral design, but do you still paint? Or sketch? Even as a hobby?”

“No, not much.”

“Why not? You loved it so much. I didn't think you could stop if you wanted to. It was such a part of you, Audra.”

She sighed as she played with her food, and as

I watched her, my mind drifted to the day I'd first shown the building to her, after we'd been married in a small ceremony at the courthouse. I recalled the dreamy expression on her face, the same one that always appeared when her creativity had been tapped. My heart had turned over in my nineteen-year-old chest. God, I'd loved her. I'd loved the unguarded look of joy that overcame her pretty face when she let herself dream. I knew her upbringing hadn't allowed for much of that, which meant she was cautious with it. That had made it precious to me. Made me want to put that look on her face as much as I possibly could. Sometimes I'd felt so in love with her, I thought I could happily devote my life only to that and always be satisfied. I'd come up behind her as she'd talked about her plans to turn the space into a gallery, and I'd laid

my hands on her growing belly. Initially, I'd been so scared when she'd told me she was pregnant, overwhelmed with images of how I'd pictured my future, and ways in which a baby was going to change . . . everything. College . . . a career, my relationship with Audra. But as the weeks had gone on, the fear had lessened, and I'd just felt this sense of rightness, of pride, of an even deeper love. Audra had turned in my arms that day in the empty building, and she'd kissed me . . . a beloved little life growing in the space between us. We'd had no idea . . . God, we'd had no idea about the storm brewing in the distance, heading straight toward us.

Finally, Audra shrugged, looking up from her plate. "Honestly, I don't have any time to draw. I thought about turning the building into a gallery like we talked about . . . originally. But"—she paused

—“I didn’t feel confident there’d be much immediate income with that plan. So, flowers it was.” She smiled in a way that met her eyes and softened them, bringing to mind melted chocolate—sweet and warm. My heart flipped in that old familiar way, so I looked away from her, both liking the sensation and hating it simultaneously. Audra didn’t seem to notice as she continued. “I love it though. It satisfies the artist in me and brings in enough money that I can feed myself.”

“And pay the rent.”

She shook her head. “I still live in my grandparents’ house.”

“You what?”

Audra must have heard the shock in my tone because her eyes snapped to mine and widened slightly.



“You never moved? *Why?*” She’d *hated* that house, hated the way it made her feel trapped, alone. Hated the dismal feel of it, the memories of longing for connection, familial closeness and never getting it. *The colorlessness.* “You told me you were moving back there temporarily until you sold it. Why didn’t you?”

“Because it’s *paid* for. I know it’s not easy for someone with the last name Townsend to take into consideration annoying things like mortgages, but unfortunately, I don’t have that privilege.”

“Don’t give me that, Audra. You talk about me like I was a snob, and you know I wasn’t.”

She looked down and color filled her cheeks, but when she looked back at me, her expression was regretful. “You’re right. I’m sorry. You were never a snob. That was unfair of me. Maybe we

should have spared each other this little reunion.”

“Maybe this little reunion has been long overdue.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, Audra, that maybe we’ve both needed to quiet some old ghosts.”

She shook her head, but something that might have been panic flitted over her expression. “I don’t need to quiet any old ghosts.”

“Are you sure about that? Why do you still live in that house? You could have sold it and bought a new one and still not had a mortgage. Why have you stayed there all these years?” *Are you torturing yourself in some way, Audra? Do you even realize it?*

She picked up her wine glass and took a last drink. I watched her throat as she swallowed, and

despite feeling irritated, unsettled, slightly sad, the movement caused a buzzing in my blood. “I don’t know, okay?” she finally said. “It just felt overwhelming to think of packing that place up, moving, when I was already working myself ragged trying to get my business off the ground.” She huffed out a small breath and I sat back in my chair, watching her. “I’m going to . . . I’m going to move once I have the occasional spare weekend. . . .”

*Working herself ragged.* I hated that. Hated it for her. Yes, that’s what it took to start a business, but it didn’t sit well with me. She should have been soaring by now. She was that talented. I sighed, picking up my fork and taking a bite of my now-cold food. “If you need help—”

“No, of course I don’t need help. But, thank

you. Thank you, I appreciate that. What you're doing, flying to Laurelton to talk to your grandmother in person, that's more than enough."

I nodded and some of the tension of the last few minutes seemed to dissipate as the hum of conversation around us made it back to my ears.

"So, you, um, like your job? Running Townsend Robotics makes you happy?" I appreciated her attempt to switch the topic back to me but hated that there was still sadness in her eyes.

"Yeah. I really do. It stimulates my mind, but more than that, I'm good at it. If I do say so myself."

"I'm sure you are. You've lived and breathed robotics since you were a boy. I remember the light in your eyes whenever you talked about Townsend

Robotics.” Melancholy moved across her expression, but as quickly as it was there, it was gone.

“Yeah. We’re designing and manufacturing prosthetic limbs now. It was something I spearheaded, and it’s brought the company to a whole new level. It’s amazing, Audra, especially when we fit a kid for a new leg or a hand when he’s never had one before. To see their whole world change . . .”

Her eyes filled with a sad tenderness and pride. “Your contribution,” she murmured.

I paused again, suddenly eighteen years old, sitting in my car, my backside wet from the rain as I confided in Audra about my dad. “Yeah,” I said, my voice hoarse. I cleared my throat, trying to shrug off the memory. We’d been so different then.

But I still had that burning desire to confide in her, to share things with her I didn't—couldn't—share with anyone else. “But even more,” I said softly, “it fulfills me because I couldn't do anything for my own son, but I can help *these* kids. I can be part of making them whole.”

Audra's eyes widened, pain flitting over her expressive face. I wanted to say more, and I was about to, but suddenly, several tables away, people started clapping softly and gasping when a man went down on his knees in front of a woman as she cried, bringing her hands up to her mouth. *Ah, Christ.* What spectacular luck that I'd chosen *this* restaurant to bring my ex-wife to so we could witness a marriage proposal. *Great.*

I looked at Audra, and she was watching the scene as well but turned her eyes back to me. For a

few seconds we just stared at each other, when suddenly her lip quirked up and she started laughing softly. Surprised, I chuckled too, rubbing at the back of my neck.

I poured her more wine then picked up my glass. “Cheers to them.”

She inclined her head. “May their marriage last longer than ours did.”

I made a sound in my throat that I wasn’t sure was a laugh or a groan, and clinked my glass on hers. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Uh oh. I guess.”

“You work in the wedding business. Does it ever bother you that you never got that? A real wedding, I mean?”

“No. All that stuff’s fun. But I never felt like I didn’t get a real wedding, Dane. To me”—she took

a breath, her eyes moving away and then back again—“to me, it was very real. Despite everything that happened later, I . . . I hope you know that.”

Our gazes lingered, the air filling with . . . something. That something I couldn't define then and still couldn't now. The difference was, *now* I knew the rarity of the unknown something that had always flowed between Audra and me. And apparently, not time, nor distance, nor a hundred unspoken hurts had diminished it. I nodded once, a quick, jerky movement, and smiled, a smile that I hoped acknowledged my appreciation for the honesty with which she'd spoken. *It had been so very real for me too.*

The waitress brought the check and Audra excused herself to go to the ladies' room while I paid. I gathered my coat and Audra's sweater and



waited at the front for her. Once she'd joined me, I asked, "There's this great gelato place a couple of blocks over. How about I tell you about the industrial park while we get one. We never really made it to that."

She glanced at me once we'd stepped onto the sidewalk and though she looked a bit uncertain, she nodded and said, "Okay, sure."

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## Audra

We started walking toward the shop, and I pulled my sweater around my shoulders. It was a cool night, but not overly cold, and the sidewalks were full of people sitting at outside cafes, wearing light jackets or sweaters like myself. “Is this the coldest it gets during the winter here in San Francisco?”

“It gets a little chillier than this, but nothing like Colorado.”

“Don’t you miss the snow, though? You always loved it.”

“Yeah, I do, which is why I do as many weekend trips to Tahoe in the winter as possible.

My brother and I went in on a ski lodge there.”

“Ah. Nice. How is Dustin?” The last time I’d seen his brother, he’d been a kid. He was a man now, though it was difficult to picture him any differently than the way I’d known him.

“He’s good.” Dane smiled. “Still the annoying little brother who likes to get on my case as often as possible.”

I laughed. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.” We walked for a couple of minutes in silence as I people-watched, smiling at an older couple who walked past us. I felt mostly relaxed at the moment, though dinner had been a roller coaster of emotions. I’d expected it, somewhat, though not to the degree reality had proven the experience to be. As much as spending time with Dane made me feel high-strung and off-balance, so did it offer this

surreal feeling. It was almost like I was in one of those dreams where you wake up crying very real tears or with your throat full of laughter. Like fantasy and reality colliding. This night would be over soon, though, and then we'd fly to Colorado and that would be it. I'd probably never see Dane again. That was good, of course, and yet the thought resulted in indescribable distress.

“What did you think of the miniature industrial park you saw in my office?”

“It looks like it's going to be beautiful. I was surprised. When I first heard ‘industrial park,’ I pictured something square and gray. It somehow manages to look quaint and upscale at the same time.”

He smiled, seeming pleased by my impression. “Thanks. That's exactly what we were going for.

We want it not only to bring in tech jobs, but to bring in new shops, restaurants. I think it's going to be a really great thing for your business, Audra.”

“I thought the same thing actually—if everything works out with your grandmother.”

“I told you. It will. She'll come around. I'll make sure of it.”

I nodded. He did seem sure, and I wanted so much to believe him, but when it came to me, Luella had never “come around.” Why would she now? I decided that worrying any more than I already had was pointless, though. I would trust Dane for now and hope to God he was right.

We talked a little more about the specifics of the park as we bought a gelato, stepping back outside where we took a seat at one of the outdoor tables, covered by an awning and warmed with heat

lamps. There were twinkle lights on the awning and though it was warm and charming, apparently the other customers either preferred to sit inside or had taken their treats to go, as we were the only people out there. Things felt easier than they had at dinner—maybe because I was getting used to his company, and maybe because we'd covered the topics we'd agreed to talk about. I was also more relaxed, because even though Dane had brought a few things up I hadn't wanted to discuss with him, he hadn't pushed me, and I felt relieved. There was no point resurrecting subjects that did nothing but bring hurt and cause us both to relive painful memories. No, some things were better left in the past.

I smiled around a cold bite of the lemon gelato that was both sweet and tart, as a white poodle

pranced by on the sidewalk, looking as if it was grinning. When I looked back at Dane, he was watching me with a small smile as he used his thumb to rub along his bottom lip. *Oh*. My belly clenched, and I blinked, the familiarity of that expression suddenly gripping me and making me feel warm but also slightly panicked. I swallowed but somehow couldn't find it in myself to look away. I felt caught in his gaze, the same way I had earlier in the restaurant. The world seemed to disappear around us and it was only him and those beautiful green eyes I'd gotten so lost in long ago. So lost in it'd taken me seven years to claw my way back to a place where I could finally catch my breath. With effort, I dragged my eyes away, knowing I had to. Knowing it was the only choice.

“It’s still there between us, isn’t it?” Dane

asked softly.

“W-what?” I asked, and my voice sounded too breathy, filled with the fear suddenly trickling through my veins.

He leaned forward, putting his forearms on the table so we were face to face, eye to eye. “That damn attraction that never went away even when we were drowning in grief, even now after so long of being apart. It’s still there as strong as it ever was, isn’t it, Audra?”

I stood, my chair scraping the cement. “We should go. I”—I shook my head—“I mean, you said we’re leaving early tomorrow morning—”

“Audra.” Dane stood, taking one step so he was in front of me. He took my upper arms in his hands and even as he steadied me, his touch also caused me to feel more off kilter.



“It doesn’t matter,” I said, pulling away. “Attraction doesn’t matter. It never solved anything. It didn’t help us when times got . . . hard. It’s just . . . it’s just chemistry and lots of people have it, Dane.” And the truth was, all it did was *hurt* now because it wasn’t enough. Not then and not now.

He stared at me for a few heartbeats then let go of my arms.

A couple came through the door from the shop, cups of gelato in hand, laughing. Their appearance broke the spell I was under, and the world around us burst forth in sudden movement and noise, along with a jolt of indignation. I turned and began making my way through the tables to the low gate with an opening to the sidewalk.

I heard Dane following, and then he caught up

with me as I turned, heading toward his car.

“Audra, slow down.”

“No. I want to get back to my room. I need to pack.”

“Okay, fine, we’ll change the subject.”

“Thank you.”

“Just slow down. I’m not wearing my running shoes.”

I took in a deep breath through my nose and slowed my pace. I came to a stop in the doorway of a closed shop and turned to Dane. He seemed surprised but stopped as well, looking at me expectantly. “Listen, Dane. This is hard enough as it is, seeing you again. I think it’s natural that some old feelings surface, but . . . we obviously both know that nothing can happen between us again, and so even to acknowledge some remnants of

chemistry just feels . . . pointless and uncomfortable.”

His eyes narrowed, and he stared at me for a few moments before finally breathing out and running a hand through his dark hair. “Fine. You make the rules, Audra. You always did.”

He turned to start walking toward the car again and I instinctively followed, joining him on the sidewalk. “What does *that* mean?”

“What we could talk about, what subjects were off limits, when to leave you alone, how hard to knock at the doors you locked yourself behind. Your rules, never negotiable.”

“I never spelled out any rules!”

“You didn’t have to spell them out in words. You didn’t have to make a list. Your actions spoke louder than words. *Stay away. I don’t need you.*”

What was he *talking* about? That's not how it had been at all. Of course I'd needed him, but there had been no point asking. We'd been on completely different pages. I had been drowning in an isolated sea of grief, and he'd been . . . fine. He'd *managed* and I could barely put one foot in front of the other. And, damn it to hell, I didn't want to think about that. I was past that—finally, blessedly—and I had no interest in going back. I felt filled with sudden and overwhelming anger.

We drove in heavy silence for the first ten minutes as my anger started to fade then fizzled entirely. I sighed, leaning back, turning toward Dane. When he met my gaze, his expression had softened. “We’re a hot mess together, aren’t we?” I murmured. “Another good reminder of why parting ways was the right choice.”

He smiled, though sort of sadly. “I suppose.” I wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but I was exhausted and ready to get off this roller coaster. None of this was worth rehashing, and I’d said as much earlier, and yet we couldn’t seem to stop doing it. If I’d needed a reminder about why I hadn’t wanted even a small update on Dane or what his life was like all these years, this was it. And thank God I hadn’t known about him and Winnie. Perfect Winnie Sinclair, whom his grandmother was always trying to set him up with. When Dane mentioned her name I thought I’d be sick. To think they almost made a perfect home together . . . slept together . . .

*No.*

I wanted my quiet, peaceful life back, free from information about Dane and Winnie Sinclair.

And I worried that even if Luella backed off my business, I'd lost something I'd never find again. The life I'd carved out for myself suddenly felt like a mirage whereas before all this, it'd felt real and right. Good God, seeing Dane again was messing with my head. Messing with my carefully held-together life.

Dane smoothly pulled into a spot across the street from my building, and as he was starting to open his door, I put my hand on his arm. He turned toward me questioningly. I felt shaky and unsure, filled with emotions I didn't want to feel, much less examine. "You don't need to walk me in. Tonight was . . . hard, but good. Um, I really am so glad to see you doing well. You obviously love what you're doing. Your life is good. You're good." I smiled at him. "Things turned out well for you. And I do

appreciate you helping me, so much.”

“Audra—”

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning? Eight?”

He paused, his eyes moving over my face. He looked tired, and if I wasn’t mistaken, disappointed, but I supposed he’d hoped things would be easier with us—breezier maybe—but *that* would never happen. We should have ended dinner and skipped the gelato. Quit while we were ahead. “Don’t go in there.”

I blinked. “What?”

Dane rubbed the back of his neck. “Please don’t go back in that place. It’s not safe. Come home with me.”

I brought my head back slightly. *What?* “I can’t stay with you,” I croaked.

“I meant, I have a guest room. There’s no

reason to put your safety at risk when you can stay with me.”

I managed a small smile. “That’s nice of you, but no. Thank you.” I glanced across the street at the ugly building. “It’s really not that bad.”

Dane appeared to be wrestling with something, whether to try to insist that I stay with him most likely. I put my hand on the door handle and he sighed. “Okay. Eight.”

I nodded, shooting him a small smile and hopping out, shutting my door behind me. I looked both ways and then jogged across the empty street and toward the relative safety of my hotel.

I felt hot and cold, shaken and saddened. And most of all, I felt the low buzz of panic I’d felt since our eyes had met earlier that day. I didn’t like it. It made me want to cry and scream, two things I



never did, and definitely not at the same time.

I pulled the door to the lobby open and ducked inside, breathing far too harshly for what had been a short jog across the street. The front desk stood empty, and I took a moment to catch my breath, leaning back on the wall next to the door, putting my palms flat against the cool stone behind me. Something inside me wanted to step back into the night, wave Dane's car down, and beg him not to leave.

*Stay. Please don't leave me, Dane.*

*But why? For what?*

I'd run from him because I didn't want to *feel* this way. I wanted *comfort* from this feeling, and the worst part about it was that I wanted *him* to provide the comfort, no one else. Oh God, I was turned inside out. A small whimper came up my

throat and the door next to me banged open, causing me to startle.

Dane stood in the doorway, looking toward the elevator, the unguarded expression on his face filled with both yearning and indecision. I blinked, pressing myself further into the unforgiving wall and the small movement must have caught his peripheral vision because he turned and saw me. A thousand partial words and statements seemed to pass between us, unfinished, unformed, and yet despite the confusion—the breathless tangling of thoughts and gazes—he moved toward me and I welcomed him.

He stepped right up to me, a wild look in his eyes, his breath as shallow as my own. “I . . . don’t want you here alone. Why don’t I want you here alone, Audra?” He gripped my upper arms, and

though he looked angry, I felt a sudden jolt of sympathy for him. For whatever was causing him to suffer, to put that look on his face, that tone in his voice.

“It’s not up to you,” I whispered.

He let out a hot gust of breath and I leaned into it. He smelled like tangy lemon gelato and red wine and something that was him and would only ever be him and was still—unbearably—part of me too.

“I know,” he gritted out and then softer, more controlled, “I know.” He pressed his forehead against mine, and for a second we just breathed together. He was beautiful. God, he’d always been so beautiful. I hadn’t been this close to Dane for so long, and despite my mind whirling with confusion, something about it also felt . . . right. I didn’t look

away. I didn't push him back. "So why does it feel like it is?" he asked. "Why does it feel like it always will?"

I opened my mouth to answer, with what I wasn't sure. But before I could utter a sound, he moved forward, pressing his body into mine and bringing our mouths together. We collided with a mingled groan, a sound quickly muffled as our lips fused, tongues seeking those warm, wet, still-familiar dips and crevices. I brought my arms up and around his neck, my hands seeking the softness of his hair, weaving into it, fingertips finding the curve of his skull, the small imperfection near his hairline. That tiny scar, the result of hitting the edge of a coffee table while wrestling with his brother when he was nine. A small secret that I sought out as if it were only mine, something precious that had

been lost and now was found.

Dane's tongue stroked mine, making me feel needy, dizzy, filled with aching want. And the noises he made. Oh God, the noises. Those small masculine sounds in the back of his throat that meant he was as lost as I was. I was hot everywhere, tingling, blossoming to life as if it'd been a long, long winter. That life's breath spilled through me like warm sunshine, touching every dark corner within, a burst of dazzling color. "Audra," he groaned, pulling me with him as he moved backward toward the elevators, his chest rising and falling.

I had a moment of reservation, but I couldn't work out why. Nothing felt important except the heat cascading through my veins, so I focused on his chest, got lost in the quickened rise and fall as

he pulled me in through the open door of the waiting elevator. The door closed and he kissed me again, even more frantically, more intimately, and I knew it was because we were moving closer to a bed. *A bed.* And all I could think was *yes, yes, yes.* Dane broke free of my mouth to kiss my chin, my ear, the side of my neck, and I panted, lifting my leg to wrap around his hip, to bring our cores closer together. He hissed in a breath as the door dinged open, taking my hand and dragging me down the hall to my room.

“The key,” he said, his voice a sharp command. I gave it to him, my hand trembling as I put the plastic card in his. Three seconds later and his mouth was on mine again, the hotel door clicking shut behind us, and I had the distant thought that he didn’t want to give me time to

think, to consider this, though in the moment, I didn't much care. I wanted him. *Needed* him. I tried to organize my thoughts. I had a notion I should stop this, wasn't even really sure how it'd started, but all I could focus on was an untethered elation—so bright it blotted out everything else. Still, I managed, “What are we doing, Dane?” his name ending in a moan as both hands came to my breasts, flicking my nipples through the material of my shirt.

“What I've wanted to do since I showed up at your door earlier tonight. Hell . . .” His words faded as if he'd gotten distracted or perhaps thought better of them. His hands were up my shirt now, his mouth on my throat and the sweet pleasure reverberated from my breasts to between my legs. He sank to his knees and I let out a small sound of loss that ended in another groan as he put his mouth

over my crotch. I was still wearing my jeans, the fabric a barrier between my body and his mouth, and yet the sensation was so strong I cried out, pressing toward him.

“Jesus, Audra,” he groaned. And then we were a tangle of clothes and limbs as we undressed ourselves, each other, I wasn’t sure. All I knew was that I needed to feel his skin on mine desperately. He kissed my body as each item fell away, his lips skimming my cleavage, licking between my breasts, taking a nipple in his mouth.

“Oh God, yes,” I breathed, pressing toward him, reaching down to take him in my hand, already knowing the shape and girth of his hard length before my hand wrapped around it. Stiff and smooth, both the hardest part of him and the softest. I’d always loved the beautiful dichotomy,



gloried in the way the two merged together to form him. We both moaned, and he pumped into my grasp, sucking harder at my nipple. I thought I might orgasm right then and there.

Naked, Dane lowered himself, his large palms taking hold of my hips as he opened me with his tongue, taking one long swipe that made me cry out deliriously and grip his head in my hands. His hair was slightly damp at the hairline and I pushed it back, looking at him through half-lidded eyes. A dark-haired god worshipped between my thighs, and for a moment our gazes held, clashed, sending a jolt of hot arousal to the place he was licking. My mind might be tangled, twisted, but my body, ah, my body . . . Everything inside me was coming undone beneath his mouth and hands. It was too much, too much, and with a gasping moan I came,

crying out his name, my knees buckling with the intensity of my orgasm.

Dane growled softly, the reverberation causing an aftershock to thrum through me as he caught me behind my knees, rising swiftly and lowering me to my back on the bed. He stood over me—naked, gorgeous—his eyes raking my skin, a look of such blatant triumph in them that it shocked me, caused some of the lust fog to clear minutely. But then he was on top of me and that feeling, skin on skin, felt so amazing that I dismissed whatever direction my mind had been trying to go. Nothing mattered except his weight pressing on me, knowing he'd fill the aching emptiness I felt. His skin was hot, his body hard, his torso as lean as I remembered, the ridges of his belly defined. The coarse hairs on his legs rasped over the smoothness of my own, and

the feel of his size, his strength, his utter masculinity, sent a thrill through me as I reached for him, leaning up to claim his mouth again. He kissed me back for a moment, his penis prodding my thigh—hard and insistent—before he pulled away, looking down as he took himself in his hand. I felt the rounded tip of him pressing at my opening and gasped, feeling the slight sting as I stretched to accommodate him. I closed my eyes, unable to process both the vision and the physical sensations as he pressed into me, slowly.

“Open for me, honey,” he said, his voice tight as if he was barely holding on to control. The term of endearment warmed me even more than the solid press of his body. “Ah, God,” he hissed. “You feel so good. You’re so damned tight.”

I whimpered, a small sound, as I stretched

even more. He stilled and when I blinked up at him, an expression of . . . knowing was on his face, and along with it, a tightening of his jaw and a softening of his eyes. With a sudden movement forward, he pressed all the way inside me. I released a harsh moan, borne of some discomfort, but mostly an arcing rainbow of pleasure that spiraled through me, traveling all the way to my fingertips and toes.

Dane pulled out and then pressed slowly back into me, then again, the look on his face filled with such blatant lust, such unbridled pleasure, that it aroused me all over again. I moaned, pressing upward, reaching for the next wave of pleasure.

“I love the way you light up beneath me,” he growled. “Love it so fucking much.”

I twisted my legs around his hips, pressing my head into the mattress, running my hands over his

biceps that bulged with the effort of holding himself above me as he sought his own orgasm. I ran my hands down his back, over the hard globes of his ass. We moved together, the glorious nature of this dance—the joy—causing my lips to tip upward. I felt *free*, bursting with life. With another soft cry of Dane’s name, I came again. I watched Dane’s face, drank in that beautiful grimace of pleasure that made my stomach tighten with a small blissful aftershock. But then his eyes opened and something passed through them, just under the pleasure. A small clearing, and it brought me from my dream-like state too. Yet still, I startled in surprise when he pulled out of me, the hot splash of his release across my lower belly bringing me up cold. Because . . . oh God, of all things to forget about . . . birth control. I hadn’t once considered a

condom or . . . *Oh Audra, what were you thinking?*  
*Audra, Audra, Audra.*

Dane gazed at me, his expression cautious, and somehow I felt . . . shattered. Brought back to sudden, undeniable reality. That one action summed up everything I'd pushed away, everything I'd chosen to disregard by having sex with Dane. "Audra," he said. His voice held a note of defeat as if all the thoughts in my head were clear on my face and they wounded him. Maybe they did. But I felt wounded too. Not by him, but by myself.

I scooted out from under him, sitting up on the bed, his release cooling on my belly.

"Audra, honey—"

I stood, practically running to the bathroom where I closed the door behind me, leaning back against it momentarily. I caught my reflection in the

mirror and stared. My cheeks were red, my lips swollen, my hair in complete disarray. But my eyes . . . my eyes looked stricken. Grabbing a piece of toilet paper, I rubbed the sticky wetness off my belly, right over the three stretch marks I'd gotten at the end of my pregnancy, now white and shiny, only noticeable in the harsh lighting of the dingy hotel bathroom.

I traced the scars, swallowing. "God, what did you do?" I whispered to my reflection.

I'd hurt and grieved for years and years after we'd separated and now . . . now what? It wasn't like we were going to get back together—that ship had sailed long ago. So, I'd willingly put myself back emotionally because I was so desperate for sex that as soon as he touched me, I lost all sense? All reason? *God*. I used the bathroom and then

washed my hands, wrapping a towel around myself.

When I stepped into the room, Dane had put his jeans on but was still shirtless, sitting on the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees. I bit my lip as I considered what to say. But before I'd figured it out, Dane sat up and held his hand out to me. I walked toward him tentatively and he took my hand in his, pulling me to the bed where I sat next to him. He tapped the side of his foot on mine and I let out a smile on a breath. "Please don't regret this, Audra. Because I don't."

My heart softened. "I don't . . . regret it." I took in a big breath, releasing it slowly. "It's been a long time." I laughed softly. "I guess I was sort of \_\_\_"

"Dammit, Audra, don't minimize it either. That was *more* than scratching an itch and you



damn well know it.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean? Talk to me.”

I sighed. “You were right, there is still that something between us . . . I . . . feel it too. Obviously.” I glanced at him, a small, embarrassed chuckle coming up my throat. He smiled gently, sweetly, his eyes watching me so closely, and my heart caught. I looked away.

“But?” he asked quietly.

“But”—I shook my head—“why are we even talking about this? You and I both know we can’t be more. We tried and failed. I don’t want to dredge all that up, and I don’t think you do either. I’m your ex-wife, Dane. Emphasis on *ex*.”

“So, you just want to have uncommitted sex with me?”

“What? No.” I laughed uncomfortably. “I mean, this was a one-time thing. Exes have sex sometimes. It happens. We live in different states so it’s not like it could become a regular thing anyway, which it couldn’t under any circumstances because I wouldn’t want that.”

“I know.” He rubbed the back of his neck, looking like he wanted to say something, but maybe not knowing what. I could relate.

Sorrow welled inside me, a desperate need for . . . something I didn’t want to think about. After a second, he reached for his shirt, where it lay crumpled on the floor. “I’m assuming you don’t want me to stay?”

“I mean . . . we both need a good night’s sleep. You have to fly tomorrow, and I want to be”—I cleared my throat—“well rested . . .” God, this was

terrible and awkward and despite the fact that I knew I was doing the right thing, it hurt. Even letting Dane in this much hurt. That on its own was clear proof that to let him in any more would destroy me . . . *again*. My very soul cowered at the thought. And I could see he was wrestling with his own thoughts about what we'd done. We could both use some space from each other to work things through.

*Did space help you work things through before?* But that was different, and I pushed the question from my mind.

Dane stood, buttoning his shirt as he stared at me. He leaned forward, took my chin in his hands and kissed me, his lips lingering on mine. "I'll see you in the morning," he said, and then he turned and walked out of the room, closing the door softly

behind him. I collapsed back on the bed, curling into a ball. Too much, too much, it was all just too much. I was too weak when it came to Dane Townsend. *Never again, Audra. After tonight, never again.*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

**Then . . .**

*Audra yawned as she walked sleepily down the hallway, thirst having woken her from a deep sleep. She put her hand on her belly, feeling the small curve and smiling to herself. She had just started feeling the tiny fluttery kicks of the baby moving inside her. Right now he or she was sleeping.*

*The low hum of voices caught her attention and she frowned, pausing and turning toward the office. Dane had stayed up to work on a paper for one of his classes, but she couldn't imagine who he was talking to. Turning, she headed in the*

*direction of the second bedroom they'd turned into an office, but paused when she heard her name in Dalila's voice. "Does Audra know?"*

*She paused, hesitant about eavesdropping, but too curious to stop herself. Did she know what?*

*"No."*

*"God, Dane, you can't begin a marriage on a lie. How's she going to feel when she finds out you kept this from her?"*

*Audra's skin prickled and alarm bells began to ring deep inside.*

*Dane groaned. "I know. I'm going to tell her. But she's pregnant and Audra . . . God, Audra's going to blame herself."*

*Oh God. Oh no. She sagged against the wall and let it hold her up. He'd lied to her?*

*"It was your dream to run the business,*

*though, Dane. If anyone is suited for it, it's you. And it's rightfully yours. What is wrong with Grandmother? I've never known her to despise anyone as much as she despises Audra. I don't get it. But to cut you off, take away your future, your dream . . ."*

*There was only silence from within the room for a moment and then Dane said, "It is . . . was my dream. But Audra is more important to me. I'll get a good job somewhere else once I graduate. We may not live in luxury like the rest of the Townsends, but I'll live knowing I made the honorable choice. I think Dad would agree."*

*Honorable? Tears welled in Audra's eyes, and she felt like she'd sag to the floor. He'd given up the family legacy that was rightfully his—the chance to make that contribution that was so*

*important to him—because of honor? Because he'd gotten her pregnant and done the right thing? His grandmother had cut him off for it, and he'd never told her. Bile rose in her throat, but she swallowed it down. She knew Dane loved her. She didn't doubt that. But she would have never let him make that sacrifice had she known, just as he said.*

*I heard Dalila sigh. "So, no California. Selfishly, I'll be happy to have you two close by so I can spoil my niece or nephew in person."*

*"I think Audra will be happier here too," Dane said after a short pause. "She can visit her dad as often as she wants. It was hard for her to put him in a facility. She's the only one who's cared for him her whole life."*

*"How are you paying for the care facility?"*

*"Mom gave me the money she was going to*



*spend on Stanford and said I could use it the way I wanted to. Colorado State is a fourth of the cost. I'm using the rest to pay for Audra's dad's care, and I spent some of it on a building Audra's going to turn into a gallery. I don't want her to give up her dreams too, just because of our baby."*

*Give up her dreams, too.*

*Like he had. Audra felt like a weight was pressing on her chest, and she brought her hand to it.*

*"Isn't there something Mom can do?"*

*Audra heard Dane sigh. "I love Mom, but her against Luella? Seriously?"*

*Dalila made a small sound in her throat that Audra barely heard. "Yeah, you're right." She paused. "Still, I know she'd give you more money now if you need it."*

*“No,” Dane’s voice sounded harsh. “No,” he repeated, more gently. “I’m a married man with a kid on the way. Taking what would have been my tuition to Stanford is one thing, but I’m not going to let Mom pay my bills. An old friend of Dad’s offered me a position in the mailroom of his company while I’m in school.”*

*“The mailroom?” Dalila asked. Audra could hear the note of disappointment in her voice and she winced. There was a pause and Dalila sighed. “At least you’ll still get your trust fund once you turn twenty-five.”*

*Audra heard Dane make a scoffing sound and she cringed, laying her cheek against the cool surface of the wall. “I’m sure Luella will find a way to rescind that as long as I’m still married to who she perceives as the wrong girl.”*

*Luella's words came back as sharp arrows to Audra's heart.*

“Townsend's are expected to keep company with a certain . . . quality of people.”

*The wrong girl.*

“Dane may do as he pleases in private and behind closed doors, but in public, such . . . things will not be tolerated.”

*The wrong girl.*

*I was the wrong girl for Dane and always would be.*

*Dane and Dalila were both quiet for a moment as Audra's heart silently broke outside the partially opened office door. Finally, she heard Dalila say, “I don't know, big bro, they say honesty is the best policy.”*

*Dane sighed. “Maybe. But, fuck, I needed*

*some time to come to terms with it myself first. When Audra told me she was pregnant, everything, my whole damn future went up in smoke. That's not something that's easy to swallow. I haven't worked out what to say."*

*"My whole damn future went up in smoke." Audra could barely breathe. She turned, stumbling toward their bedroom, her heart in her throat. Dane had let his entire future slip right through his fingers, and in that moment, she was angry that he hadn't told her what marrying her forced him to give up, but mostly, she hated herself for the sacrifice he'd had to make. It wasn't fair or right. He'd given up his whole life . . . for her. She placed her hand on her growing belly. For them.*

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

**Dane**

**Now . . .**

The next morning was cold and rainy, gray clouds filling the sky. As I drove to Audra's hotel to pick her up, my mind was still consumed with what happened the night before . . . the date, spending time with her, the roller coaster of emotions she inspired in me, and then the way I'd felt as she'd jogged across the street, back to her hotel room alone. Watching her walk away, into that shithole of a building, had done something to me. It had honestly felt like a punch in the gut. I'd felt angry,

rattled . . . possessive. Slightly crazed if I was being totally honest with myself. She'd been my *wife*. And I was well aware that was no longer the case, and still, my heart yearned to protect her. Letting her walk into that building alone had felt *wrong* and I'd lost a little control.

The way she'd been standing against the wall inside as if she'd had to take a moment to collect herself too. As if she had been as affected by our time together as I had been, despite her earlier words to the contrary. And the look on her face, the moment I saw the stark relief in her eyes, a moment of joy that I'd come after her . . . it had undone me completely. I'd been like a madman, so eager to get inside her body, to claim her in some way—any way—I hadn't stopped to consider how she'd react afterward. That it would only make her that much

more eager to part ways, to put more emotional and physical distance between us.

But didn't I want that too? She'd *divorced* me, walked away. Even when I'd asked her to give it more time, she'd been completely resistant, cold and seemingly emotionless.

So why had I felt a painful tightening in my chest watching her walk away a second time? Yesterday, I'd thought I'd never see Audra again. And now, one night with her and I was questioning everything. *Is that true, Dane?* Or had I been questioning things for a while now . . . ever since Winnie and that damn ring I'd had no desire at all to slip on her finger?

So different from the eager buzz of joy that had consumed me when Audra had worn my ring. But I'd been a kid then, and over the years, I'd

convinced myself that nothing would ever feel as strong, as all-consuming, as it had with Audra because she'd been my first love.

Ah God, but the way it'd felt to hold her again, to taste her soft lips, to feel the bliss of her tight inner muscles wrapped so snugly around me. I'd loved the sound of her small gasps and moans, my name falling from her lips, to see the way she blossomed—let go—when she was in the throes of passion. It was intense and beautiful and I fucking loved it.

*Still.*

*And no doubt . . . always.*

I let out a hiss through my teeth. It was too damned early for this.

I pulled up in front of Audra's hotel, where she was already waiting outside under the small,



torn awning. I jumped out, coming around the car and meeting her on the sidewalk. “Hey, I would have come inside to get you. You didn’t have to wait in the rain.”

She shook her head, glancing at me a little nervously, as if she hadn’t known what my mood would be when I arrived. “I wasn’t waiting long. And I preferred to get out of there into the fresh air.” She wrinkled her nose, obviously referring to the strange smell that hung in the air inside the hotel.

“I don’t blame you.” I smiled wryly as I picked up her suitcase and placed it in the trunk of my car next to my bag. I’d be staying in Colorado for a week where I knew it would be freezing, so I’d packed a suitcase full of my warmest clothes—thankfully I still had some. Northern California

didn't call for many winter items, but I had plenty of cold-weather gear for skiing.

I opened the passenger-side door for Audra who slid in, and then I went around the car and took the driver's seat. She was wearing jeans, short boots and a thick sweater but she rubbed her hands together as if she was cold, so I turned up the heat a bit. "There's coffee on the plane in case you haven't had any yet."

She nodded. "Great. Thank you."

"You're welcome." So this was how it was going to be. We were back to polite strangers despite making love the night before. I got on the freeway, headed toward the small airport where my plane was hangared.

After a minute, she glanced at me. "So, um, I didn't ask you how you earned your pilot's

license.”

“Actually, I’d thought about doing it for years. When I turned twenty-five, I decided to give myself a birthday present. Bought the plane and enrolled in pilot classes.”

“Your twenty-fifth birthday,” she murmured. “So, ah, you’ve been flying for almost three years now. You’re a trustworthy pilot, I’m hoping.”

I breathed out a small laugh. “Yes, you can trust me. I’ve flown to Colorado several times over the years, and in the winter, I fly to Lake Tahoe almost every weekend.”

She nodded, her hands clasped in her lap, knuckles white. Was she really scared to let me fly her home? I reached over, my own hand easily covering both of hers. “Hey, seriously, you’re safe with me. I won’t let anything happen to you. I can’t

promise there won't be a few spots of bumpy air, but that's expected." I tilted my head, glancing at her again as I pulled my hand away. "Had you flown before this?" The last time I'd seen her, she'd never been out of Colorado.

"No. A couple of days ago was the first time I'd ever been on an airplane. I didn't like it much. But I'm sure . . . I'm sure it will be better on a smaller plane—more room and all that."

"It is roomier, but you can feel the bumps more easily. How about a splash of Bailey's in your coffee?"

She laughed softly, looking at me a little shyly, and my heart tripped. Dammit. My hands clenched on the steering wheel.

I'd gone home the night before, tense and upset, even though I'd had one of the strongest

orgasms of my life, and hadn't fallen asleep until almost dawn as I'd tossed and turned and gone over and over our date and all that we'd talked about. And yet, despite my sleepless night, I wasn't upset with Audra. Other than the confirmation that we were still deeply attracted to each other, what our interaction the night before had told me was that Audra bristled every time I mentioned the past. She wouldn't talk about that time, because if she did, she'd have to talk about Theo too, and I had the feeling she still couldn't. And though I'd tried to resent her for that, to make it easier to watch her walk away again, the realization that she avoided the topic spoke to the fact that she was still hurting deeply. All these years, and her pain was still raw.

It was drizzling lightly again when we pulled into the airfield and after I'd parked, I grabbed my

umbrella from the backseat, walking quickly around the car as I opened it. I pulled Audra's door open and she stepped out and under the small covering. I retrieved her suitcase and my duffle bag and pulled up the handle on hers, pulling it along behind us.

My plane was on the field as I'd instructed, and I greeted Dean, the maintenance guy, as we approached. "All ready to go?"

"Yup. Looks great."

"Thanks, Dean. This is Audra Kelley. She'll be flying with me today." I handed her the umbrella so she could use it as she climbed the stairs.

Dean greeted her and then took her bag from my hand. "I'll get this. You hold on as you go up the stairs, Ms. Kelley. It's slippery this morning."

"Thank you," she said, as she began climbing

the steps to the plane, one hand holding the umbrella and the other on the rail. Dean followed her up and I waited as he descended. “Have a safe trip, Mr. Townsend.”

When I got inside, Audra turned around, obviously having been checking the plane out. “This is just a little nicer than the one I came here in.” She smiled, but with a little bit of awe that made me smile in return.

“Thanks. I’m glad you like it. I’m both your captain and your crew, and I’ll try to serve both roles well.” I winked at her and she laughed. “I’ll start by making some coffee.”

I brewed a pot at the small kitchen station at the back of the plane and Audra and I chatted a little about the aircraft as I completed the task. I poured two paper cups and then walked to the front

where there was a small bar, taking out the bottle of Baileys and adding a splash to Audra's coffee, placing lids on both. As I handed Audra her cup, I asked, "Do you want to sit up in the cockpit with me?"

She looked momentarily surprised, her eyes lighting. "Can I do that?"

"Yeah." I smiled. God, she was sweet. "I'd like your company."

Audra nodded, taking the olive branch I had offered, our eyes meeting for a moment as all the swirling thoughts whipped through my mind. "I'd like to sit in the cockpit with you."

Fifteen minutes later, I'd double-checked all the numbers and readings and Audra and I were buckled in, me in the pilot's seat, and Audra in the copilot's chair. I fired up the engines and put my



sunglasses on.

As we taxied down the runway, I looked over at Audra and noticed that she was gripping her armrests, her shoulders rigid. I gave her a reassuring smile. “Look, the rain’s cleared just for us. See those blue skies beyond the clouds?”

Her eyes snagged with mine, and for just the fraction of a moment, the world stopped. Her lips tipped up in a tremulous smile, all her sweetness and vulnerability right there in her expression, and my guts clenched with that old familiar need to protect her. Love her. *Oh Christ*. I managed a smile of my own before focusing back on the task at hand: getting this plane off the ground.

I increased the speed and lifted off smoothly, the plane rising swiftly into the winter sky. I heard Audra take in a small, surprised breath that held the

hint of a laugh. I grinned over at her and, though her hands were still gripping the arms of her chair, her shoulders were more relaxed. She laughed again, a bigger one, her teeth flashing.

I spent the next ten minutes or so climbing to flying altitude and explaining to Audra what I was doing, showing her which dials indicated what and the actual simplicity of flying.

We chatted easily for a little while, and then Audra took her lip into her mouth the way she did when she was thinking, tilting her head. “So, um, are you going to talk to your grandmother as soon as we get to Laurelton? Today? Or do you think tomorrow would be better?”

“I planned on today, yes. There’s no reason to put it off. I’ll drop you off at your house and come over to let you know what she said after I’ve

spoken to her.”

“Oh, you don’t have to come over. You can just call me. I mean, it’s incredibly generous what you’re doing, but I don’t want you to have to go out of your way.”

My jaw felt tight and I made a conscious effort to relax. “All right then. I’ll call you and give you an update. I’m also going to talk to my lawyer and find out what we need to do to make sure Luella can’t try something like this again.”

“Thank you, Dane. Seriously.”

I nodded. We were silent for a couple of minutes, the low hum of the plane soothing my frazzled nerves. I felt like some strange clock was ticking down—the time I had with Audra I supposed—and I had a narrow opportunity for . . . something. Only I couldn’t figure out what the fuck

that might be.

We hit a small bump and Audra sucked in a breath. “Just a little rough air. It’ll probably get slightly choppy as we fly over the mountains. Totally expected, okay?”

She nodded just as we hit another small bump and then turned her head, leaning toward the window on her right where the Rocky Mountains were just beginning.

The wind kicked up a bit and so did the turbulence, but we’d left the rain clouds behind and a cold but clear morning stretched before us. I’d looked at the weather report the day before and was glad I’d picked today to fly. The following day was supposed to bring a snowstorm to Colorado and I wouldn’t have flown in those conditions. Too unpredictable, especially when traveling over a

mountain range.

A few swirling snowflakes blew past the windshield and I took off my sunglasses as the sun dimmed, going behind the clouds. I lowered the altitude slightly to find some milder air and for a few minutes enjoyed a smooth ride, the sky a vivid blue, white fluffy clouds just covering the snowy mountain crests.

“It really is gorgeous up here,” Audra murmured.

I opened my mouth to respond when a huge flock of birds came from behind a cloud, my heart careening crazily and a yell falling from my lips as we collided. For a second I lost control of the plane as the awful sound of shrill bird screams on every side of us overwhelmed me. But as the birds that had been hit fell from the sky and the others

continued on their path, the sound diminished. I righted the plane and released a huge gust of breath. “Holy fuck,” I muttered, taking a moment to check the plane’s readings and making sure we were still on course before looking at Audra, who was as white as a ghost. “Jesus, that’s never happened before. You okay?”

She bobbed her head, but she didn’t look okay. She looked like she wanted to vomit.

“Hey, Audra, look at me.” She did, although her eyes were wide and full of panic. “I got you, all right?” She nodded, just as the plane went deadly quiet and we dropped so suddenly, my stomach went up into my throat.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

**Then . . .**

*Audra cradled the small bundle, her heart a vast pit of cold, hollow despair. Tears burned her eyes and yet somehow, refused to fall. She was numb, empty.*

*Empty.*

*Her child was gone and yet still in her arms. She hadn't known, not until now, that this kind of pain existed.*

*Outside the hospital room door, she heard Dane telling his family she didn't want to see anyone.*

*"Oh, darling, I'm so sorry. I thought you two*

would at least have him for a few hours after he was born.” His mother’s voice.

“We did too,” Dane answered, his voice hushed and yet echoing so she heard each word. “The doctor seemed so sure he’d survive a couple more weeks of pregnancy. But his heart wasn’t strong enough.”

There were clucks of sympathy and a wave of misery rolled slowly through her as she gazed into the face of her perfect baby. He looked like he was sleeping. Just sleeping. Only he was so cold, and nothing she could do would ever warm him. Her mother’s heart wailed in grief at the inability to care for her baby, and yet the tears remained locked inside.

*How did this happen?*

*She wanted to go back in time. To before that*



*twenty-two week ultrasound, before the silence that descended on the room, the look of alarmed sadness on her doctor's face, the explanation about his damaged heart that she'd barely taken in through the buzzing in her head. Still, they'd told them they'd be able to hold him after his birth, to look into his eyes for just a little while . . . It had sustained her—though in a grief-filled purgatory—all these long weeks as he'd grown and kicked inside of her, each movement a reminder that she would never get much more than this. And now . . . they hadn't even gotten the few precious moments she'd counted on so desperately. She had gone into labor weeks early, and by the time they'd made it to the hospital, their baby boy was gone. None of this should be real.*

*She must have done something to deserve this.*

*She ran her finger down Theo's cold, silken cheek. "I'm so sorry," she choked. "So sorry." She rested her hand on his small chest, the place where his damaged heart should have been beating.*

*"She's such a tiny thing, Dane," she heard his grandmother comment. "Perhaps her body wasn't strong enough to—"*

*"Shh," Dane hushed, a note of sharp annoyance in the sound. "She'll hear you. This is not her fault."*

*Only maybe it was.*

*Not strong enough to what? Grow a perfect baby? Go full term?*

*Was this gripping agony somehow her fault?*

*Dane came into the room and Audra's eyes moved slowly to his, red from sadness and lack of sleep. He gave her a small, tired smile, his gaze*

*moving to the body of their son in her arms. She saw the tiny flash of relief in his expression, and a spike of pain ripped through her heart. When his eyes rose to hers, she looked away, out the window to the mountains in the distance, solid, unmoving. She focused on breathing, clutching her baby boy more tightly to her chest. “Thank you for keeping them out,” she murmured. Her voice sounded flat, unemotional.*

*Dane came to sit on the side of the bed. “Hey, Audra honey, remember how I told you Dalila and Dustin and I used to swim across the pond?”*

*She looked back at him, giving a small nod.*

*“Remember the signal?” He raised his hand, putting two fingers in the air. “If you’re drowning, if you need help but can’t form the words to ask for it, I need you to make this sign.” His voice was*

*raspy, filled with emotion, but she couldn't conjure any of her own.*

*She simply stared at him, finally giving another small nod she didn't think she meant.*

*His eyes lingered on her for a moment, his expression sad and uncertain, before he nodded back. "Whatever you need, honey. I got you, all right?"*

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

**Audra**

**Now . . .**

*I got you, all right?* Those words. They rang through my head once, twice. He'd said them before . . . *then*. Only things *hadn't* been okay. He hadn't been able to protect me then and—

It sounded as if the plane just . . . shut off right before we dropped from the sky. I grabbed the armrests of my seat, a scream lodged in my throat. Dane looked panicked as he clicked switches and turned knobs.

*Oh God, oh God, oh God.* Those birds, all

those birds. Had they . . . disabled the plane somehow? Had they flown straight into the engine? Everything seemed overly bright and there was a high-pitched alarm ringing in my head. I wanted to scream. I wanted to cry, but I didn't seem capable of anything at all. I was completely frozen with horror.

Dane was saying something into the handheld radio, but I couldn't focus, the buzzing in my head so loud I thought my brain would explode. Dane grasped my shoulder and shook me. "Get in the back and strap yourself in," he commanded in a loud shout that brought me temporarily out of my frozen state. "Now, Audra!"

On shaking legs that seemed incapable of working yet somehow did, I jumped from the copilot seat and stepped out of the cockpit and

practically fell into one of the passenger seats. The plane was descending fast, but not smoothly now. It was jumping and jerking and as I buckled myself in, my gaze locked on Dane whose arms were gripped tightly to the steering wheel, sweat dripping down the side of his face. A sob tore from my throat and hot tears flowed down my cheeks. Dane was here, but I was alone. He was fighting a battle, trying to keep us alive, and I . . . all I could do was silently pray. He was talking into the radio about losing both engines—how was he speaking? How did he sound so calm now?—and I clenched my eyes shut against my terror, chanting in my head, *please, please, please.*

When I opened my eyes, the mountains rose up in front of the windshield, the face of a cliff so close I choked on a scream, putting my hands up in

front of my face instinctively. Oh God, we were going to crash straight into the side of a rock. *Oh please don't let it hurt. Let it be quick. Help us, Theo, help us.*

The muscles in Dane's arms were straining so hard it looked like they might rip right out of his shirt and sweat had soaked what I could see of his collar. He used one arm to swipe quickly over his eyes and then gripped the wheel again. Could you even steer a plane with no engine?

High cliffs rose on either side of us and through the windows, snow swirled around the plane so that I could barely make anything out. How could Dane see a thing?

“Brace for impact,” Dane said and his voice was so deathly calm that it made the fear ratchet up even higher. “Brace for impact,” he said again,



louder this time and with more authority.

I didn't know what that meant. What should I do? I wanted to ask, but I had no voice, no breath. And so I gripped the armrests, leaned my head back on the seat, closed my eyes and waited. For the space of three heartbeats, all was deathly silent, and in that quiet before impact, it suddenly occurred to me that I was going to see my baby. I choked back a small sob that, despite my terror, held within it the tiniest burst of joy. I was going to look into his eyes, I was going to know—

The plane suddenly wrenched to the side, jarring my head against the window, metal screamed as a blast of freezing air hit me from the back. We continued down, down, down. Something burned into my chest, my teeth rattled, and all went black.

\*\*\*\*\*

Something heavy was pressing on me and I struggled weakly to break free, crying out in pain when my small movements caused a searing ache across my chest and belly. My teeth were chattering. I was so cold. Freezing. My head cleared, reality rushed in, and I suddenly remembered. *Brace for impact.* Oh God. We'd been in a crash. There had been birds and then the engines stopped and we'd . . . oh, we'd fallen straight from the sky.

It was cold.

Oh, it was so cold.

“Dane,” I called weakly, my voice sounding

tiny and smothered, a croaky whisper. I pushed at whatever was on top of me. It was part of the ceiling—dark gray plastic. Once I was able to put a small amount of strength behind my push, the debris moved, thankfully lighter than I'd thought. Moving it to the side, I realized it wasn't even the entire ceiling, just several panels that had been above me. I could see sky and clouds and whirling snow. There was a hole in the roof of the plane and I was on my back on the floor, the seat still beneath me. It'd been torn free from the floor, and when I reached up tentatively to feel the place on my chest that still burned, I realized it must have been caused by my seatbelt as it cut into my skin.

The seatbelt was still wrapped around my chest and though I wasn't sure if it was actually holding me to the seat or not, I reached down and

pulled the metal clasp under my right hand and it fell open. The pain eased and I took a moment to bring my hand to my chest again, pressing gently. It ached and the skin underneath my sweater burned. I hoped it was only a surface wound and that nothing internal was damaged. I didn't seem to be having trouble drawing in a breath, despite my accelerated heart rate.

I called Dane's name again but was greeted only with silence. My heartbeat whooshed loudly in my ears. *Oh God, please don't let him be dead. Oh God, no. No, not that.*

The fear brought a surge of adrenalin and I grasped a large piece of debris next to me and leveraged myself up and out of my seat. *Okay, okay, you're okay.* I did a quick assessment of my body as I pulled myself into a crouch next to the

seat that had once been bolted to the floor. The ceiling of the plane seemed to be caved in in spots and torn away in others, so I wasn't able to stand. I walked, hunched over, a few steps, pushing the larger pieces of debris out of my way.

Looking behind me, I gaped when I saw that the entire back section of the plane was gone. Outside, a few snowflakes swirled in a sea of white. Looking forward again, I moved the larger portion of the ceiling panel to the side and that's when I saw his hand hanging limply in the doorway of the cockpit. With his body and head leaned in the opposite direction, I couldn't see him from where I was. I choked out his name, afraid to step forward. Afraid to know the extent of his injuries. But I had to. I had to. There was no one to call for help. Just me.

*Okay, okay, okay, you're okay.*

I halted suddenly when I felt the plane shift. It slid forward slightly and I realized I had no idea where we were positioned. The cockpit was a crumpled mess of twisted metal and exposed wires, but I eased forward slowly, terror gripping me with each step. The plane made a yawning screech as if it'd suddenly come alive and slid forward again, tipping downward. "Dane," I choked out a whisper, afraid to speak too loudly for fear that any noise would cause the plane to shift again. No response.

Inching forward once more, I finally made it to the doorway of the cockpit. I startled when an exposed wire suddenly sparked, hissing loudly. And oh, there was blood. So much blood. Dane was bleeding from somewhere and it was pooling on the floor of the cockpit. I swallowed heavily, horror

making me weak in the knees.

But I stepped forward anyway, touching his hair and whispering his name again. There was no reaction and I froze with another burst of dread when I looked out the small piece of front windshield that still offered a view of what was in front of us. We were positioned on a downward slope at the edge of a cliff that dropped off sharply, too far down for me to see. What had once been the nose of the plane seemed to be snagged between two trees, but even as I stood there, one of the trees made a loud snapping sound and the plane shifted again, coming to a shuddery rest. *Oh, dear God. Oh, dear God.* I swallowed, my heart beating out of my chest, my breath trapped in my lungs as I stood frozen with my hand on Dane's hair, his blood dripping onto the floor in small plinks of

sound. For several moments, it was the only sound on earth, the only sound in the entire universe. I forced myself to swallow my fear, to move, even though in some respects, I wanted to stay frozen forever. Just to give up and die right there. Or to be a coward and dive out of the opening at the back of the plane so I didn't have to experience another moment of dropping into the unknown. I couldn't do it twice.

No. I wouldn't leave Dane here alone. If he died, I would too. If either of us were getting out of here, it was up to me.

I placed my trembling fingers on his neck and though he was as cold as I was, I felt the low thrum of life under his skin. I let out another small sob of relief, just as a different wire sparked on what had been the dashboard. The spark, combined with the



knowledge that Dane was alive, gave me the courage to take the final step to him so I could crouch down and lean around him. He was out cold, but his face looked peaceful as if he were only taking a brief nap. “Not a good time, Dane. I sorta need you to help me out here,” I said. Talking to him—the sound of my own voice—helped me focus on what needed to be done. I wouldn’t look out the window. I would focus on getting Dane out of here.

I’d let myself break down later.

“Please, little trees,” I murmured, “hold us steady, okay?”

Then I sucked in my fear as best as I could. *Put it away, Audra. Put it all away.* I leaned around Dane just a bit more and grimaced when I saw where the blood was coming from. There was a

jagged-looking piece of metal sticking in the side of his left thigh, blood soaking his blue jeans, so they looked black. “We’re going to have to deal with that later, all right? The first order of business is getting us off this plane.” I was able to pull the seatbelt buckle and it clicked open, releasing the strap around him easily. *Thank God.*

Stepping backward and coming to a bent position again, I wedged my arms behind Dane and pulled him to the side and backward with all my might. He moved enough that I was able to turn him sideways and lower his butt to the floor between the doorway, but his legs were still under the tangled mess of dashboard. He was a big man, I was a small woman, and at the moment, he was dead weight. Despite the frigid weather and my chattering teeth, I broke out in a light sweat as I

pulled him again, grunting and gasping with the effort it took to pull him out of the pilot's seat. Despite my efforts, I only managed to move him about an inch.

There was another small snapping sound outside the plane and I froze, but let out a breath of relief when the plane made no movement forward. *Good little trees. Strong little trees*, I encouraged irrationally. The wires on the dashboard sizzled yet again and this time, a spark jumped, one of the wires catching fire and spreading to an already warped piece of plastic.

*Oh no. Oh God. Please, dear God, not fire.* Not fire. But despite my prayer, the fire grew, spreading along the dashboard where another wire sparked and caused the fire to grow. I pulled harder at Dane, moving him another inch. There was no

moving cautiously now. The fire was growing, spreading, and if I didn't get him out of there, it would jump to his clothes and . . . *oh God, oh God, oh God.* With all my strength, I heaved him backward, the floor under his butt helping as he slid along it, his legs coming out from under the destroyed dash and falling into the open space in front of us. "Okay, okay, that's good," I huffed, pulling him back again. He moaned slightly, his head lolling to the side. The pain of his injured leg being jostled must have penetrated even his unconscious state.

With a small cry, I fell backward, tripping over something in the path behind me, Dane's head landing in my lap. Hot tears of frustration and mind-numbing fear slid down my cheeks as I panted with exertion, my arms burning, and the

pain in my chest increasing with every movement. For a single moment, I allowed myself to sit and cry, looking into Dane's peaceful face. "I need you, I need you," I cried, but I knew he couldn't help me, and I knew it wasn't his fault. Even so, the feeling of being deserted was a hollow pit of crushing despair in my stomach. *There's no time for this, Audra. Get it together.*

The heat from the spreading fire snapped me from my mini breakdown, and with a swipe at my face, I laid Dane down as gently as possible and turned around to clear a path out of the plane. I moved carefully, but as quickly as I could, moving things out of the way so I could drag him through. Picking him up was impossible. As I moved a piece of debris aside, I saw my cell phone on the floor, so I snatched it. My hands were shaking. Where had I

last had it? Had it been in my hand when Dane told me to get to the back of the plane? I couldn't remember. I pushed the power button and it came to life, hesitating for a count of five, but there was no signal. *Of course. We were on a mountaintop in the middle of nowhere.* I shoved it in my pocket and moved toward Dane.

The plane hadn't budged since we'd inched away from the cockpit, and I had to hope that our weight shifting from the front to the back was helping keep the plane steady. For now. Then again, we were now in the center. When we moved to the back, would the plane slide forward even more? I had no way of knowing and the back was the only path out, so I grasped Dane under his arms again and moved backward another few inches, grunting with the effort.

His jeans were soaked in blood—deep red all the way to the cuff of his left leg—and, unbidden, the metallic smell, mixed with the sour tang of my perspiration, brought to mind *that* night, the night our son was born. Dane had taken care of me—helped me survive the long, grief-filled hours as I’d sweat and bled and suffered—hadn’t he? I saw his face in my mind’s eye now, the expression of fear and heartache. All these years, I hadn’t ever allowed myself to go back to that overly bright hospital room, but the vision, the *feel* of those horrific moments, came to me now when I was too terrified to put up defenses. And so, too, did the stark love that had been in my husband’s eyes. So much had happened *after* that, but that night, that night, he’d been my strength.

And right now, I would be his.

With a huge heave, I got him to the edge of the opening, setting him down gently again as I caught my breath. The edge where the metal had apparently twisted and broken off was sharp and jagged, in essence a barbed wire fence. Panic rose inside me again but I pushed it down, taking a deep, heaving breath. I would figure this out. I looked around for something to lay over it that was thick enough to shield Dane's back from being shredded as I dragged him out. *Could I just roll him out?* I pictured his belly being skewered by a razor-sharp edge and grimaced. No, I couldn't risk hurting him even worse than he already was.

The carpet had been ripped away with the tail end of the plane and apparently, the force had been enough to dislodge it from the floor of the short aisle because it was off center hanging loose. If I



could make a cut in the thick material, it could also serve as something to lay him on once we hit the snow to drag him to shelter until help arrived. But first, I would need to cut away a piece large enough to be of use.

Glancing at the cockpit, it looked like the fire was burning itself out, but I still didn't trust it not to re-ignite when another wire sparked. The smoke was causing my eyes to water. I also didn't know where the fuel tank was, though I couldn't imagine it would be up front? I had no clue. In any case, I knew I needed to *hurry*, but I also needed to move cautiously.

I surveyed the plane again quickly and thought I spotted the handle of my suitcase under the other passenger seat.

Moving as carefully as possible, I stepped over

Dane then crawled closer, looking under the seat where my suitcase was wedged against the wall. I reached in and wrenched it free, dragging it toward me, thankful for a small moment of victory. I opened it, my fingers fumbling as I brought out the small travel bag on top of my clothes. It was new. I'd bought it just a few days before when I realized I'd need something to put my shampoo and bathroom accessories in. It had come stocked with a few empty, trial-sized bottles, a toothbrush that folded into its own case, a package of tissues, and a sewing kit. I'd considered tossing the sewing kit—I absolutely did not sew and couldn't see having a need for it—and I couldn't remember now if I had or not. I dug around, letting out a small, relieved breath when I found the kit still there. I opened the latch and held the small pair of scissors. They

looked even flimsier than I'd remembered. They wouldn't work on the thick carpet.

“Goddammit!” I looked around wildly again. Maybe I could use the winter coat over the metal? But I didn't think the material would be strong enough and I'd need that jacket once we got outside. God, I needed it now. Though the fire had temporarily warmed what was left of the interior of the plane, as it smoldered, the frigid air was again noticeable.

I glanced at Dane. He was wearing jeans that were wet with his blood and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Since we were headed to Colorado where it was very cold this time of year, I assumed he had a winter jacket in his own bag, but that would have to wait. Getting us out of this unstable plane was the first priority. Getting Dane's bleeding under control

was the second. Then I'd focus on not freezing to death before a rescue team got here.

I needed something sharp. I looked around quickly, spotting the bar next to the cockpit where Dane had retrieved the Bailey's he'd put in my coffee that morning. I crawled over to it, aware of every sound around me, and unhooked the latch. There were several mini bottles of hard liquor, a couple of sodas, three water bottles, and a basket of what looked to be peanuts and pretzels. Everything was lying haphazardly, but nothing was broken. I picked up one of the mini bottles of liquor and found that it was plastic, not glass. *Damn!* The small top cabinet had a glass front though, and I hesitated only a moment before bringing my sweater over my hand and smashing it. It shattered immediately, the glass raining onto the floor at my

feet. I bent, picking up the piece that most closely resembled a knife. It wasn't thick glass which had aided me in easily smashing it, so I wasn't sure if it would work for cutting something thick like carpet.

My teeth had started to chatter again as I crawled carefully back to Dane, and put my hand on his cheek. He was cold and still very much unconscious, but his pulse continued to thump steadily. I moved my hand upward slightly and felt the large lump under his hair, letting my fingers roam gently over it, my heart stuttering. Oh no, he had a head injury. God, no wonder he was unconscious. I lifted his head very carefully and felt the back of his skull, but didn't feel any wetness or any other lumps. Just the large one on the side of his head. What if he never regained consciousness? What if there was brain swelling or . . . *No, no,*

*don't think that.*

“Just a minute longer. I have to get us out of here, but I can't injure you any more than you already are. I'll get you as warm as I can in a few minutes, okay?” Even though my voice sounded breathy and weak, filled with the tears I was barely holding back, the caretaker in me found calm in reassuring him, in speaking through my actions, even though I was well aware he couldn't hear a word I said. I remembered that when my father had been distressed or in pain from one of his migraines, he'd calmed simply from my soothing voice, and I used that same tone now.

Crawling to the front of the aisle, I pulled a shirt out of my suitcase and wrapped it around the end of my cutting tool and then moved the debris aside, giving me access to the floor. I began slicing

at the carpet. It didn't cut through easily, but it worked to cut it loose as I made swipe after swipe. "Thank you, thank you," I muttered. Hopefully, dragging it over the sharp metal with Dane on top of it would be enough to protect him. Although with the addition of his weight . . . I'd just have to drag him over it as quickly as possible and pray for the best. This was the best option I could come up with to get us off this plane.

When I'd finally gone from one side of the aisle to the other, I tested the rug and could—thankfully—peel the end off the floor. *Good, good. Okay.*

Making the short crawl to Dane, I pulled at the carpet under his body and found that it slid toward me, making it easier to move him than dragging his dead weight. This would serve two purposes.

“Okay, this is going to protect your back, but there’s a bit of a drop that I can’t do much about,” I muttered, looking behind me at the drop from the plane to the ground that I estimated to be about three feet. “I’m going to climb down and then pull you over the edge. I’ll try to cushion your fall as much as I can with my own body, all right?”

I knelt on the side of the short drop, careful not to snag myself on the row of mini knives at the edge, and stretched one leg behind me, pausing to determine whether the plane was making any movement. It didn’t seem to be, so I stretched my leg farther, touching ground with my boot. I balanced one leg on the ground and brought my other leg over, both feet sinking into the snow. I took a second to breathe, shivering with the intense cold, before I mustered all my strength, gripped the



edge of the carpet, and pulled. Half of Dane's body came out the gaping mouth of the plane, his legs still inside. I didn't allow myself to catch my breath, afraid that a pause would give the metal time to pierce the rug. Instead, I took one quick gulp of breath and pulled again, going down under him, protecting his head with my hands, as the entirety of his body dropped to the ground on top of me. A whoosh of breath released from my lungs at the impact, but the snow had protected us both. After a second, I removed my hands from above me where they were wedged under his head and scooted . . . rolled out from under him.

Getting slowly to my feet, I surveyed the wreckage in front of me. From out here, it was even more jaw-dropping and vomit inducing. Oh God, how had we survived at all? The rear of the plane

was completely torn off. From this vantage point, I could see all the jagged, twisted metal that looked as if it'd been peeled back. From what I could see of the side of the plane, it was battered and bent, blood and feathers frozen to the side.

I wanted to look at the front and determine how stable the plane appeared to be wedged between the trees, but it was on an incline, and I feared slipping in my ankle boots.

I needed Dane's suitcase, because I had to warm him up and get him out of those wet jeans.

*Quickly, quickly.*

Just this one last trip inside and then I'd tend to Dane.

I kicked at the back of the plane with all my weight and though it groaned slightly, it didn't budge. "Good enough." If the plane started sliding

while I was in it, I could always take a leaping jump out the back now that Dane was safely outside.

I climbed back over the jagged ledge, crawling inside once again and first dragging my own suitcase to the edge and then going back for Dane's, finally spotting his black, leather duffle under a piece of debris near where the damage to the back began. It was stuck on something, but I finally managed to free it, pulling it to where my own suitcase waited.

I stood up, taking a second to glance around the plane before making a quick decision to crawl slowly to the service bar. I carefully opened the cabinet with broken glass still sticking out of the inside frame and gathered the small bottles of liquor, the three waters, and handful of snacks. If a rescue crew didn't make it to us until tomorrow,

we'd need water at the very least. Opening the cabinet below it, there was a roll of garbage bags and nothing else. I took those, too, holding all the items haphazardly under my arms.

As I crouch-walked toward the exit, I spotted the cushion-covered bin behind the seat on the left of the plane and placed my items on the floor, opening it. *Yes!* Inside was a short stack of blankets and two small pillows. I tossed them toward the suitcases and then re-gathered the drinks and snacks.

I glanced around one final time to determine if there was anything else that might be helpful, but if there was, I didn't know where to find it. The fire had smoldered out in the cockpit, but the entire area appeared to be a blackened, melted shell.

*How did this happen? How in the world did*

*we end up here?* It felt surreal, like a terrible, horrible nightmare, and yet I knew very well it wasn't. The chill permeating my bones and the horror lodged in my chest left no doubt it was all too real.

I left the plane just as I had before, pulled Dane on the carpet a few feet uphill—my muscles burning—then returned for the bags, pulling them into the snow. I unzipped Dane's and placed the blankets and pillows inside as the snow seemed to be coming down harder and I didn't want them to get wet. He had a winter jacket folded inside and I grabbed that and a pair of socks.

I put the socks over his freezing-cold hands and then folded his arms over his chest, laying the waterproof jacket over his upper body and tucking it around him. Hopefully, using one of the blankets

under his head would prevent further injury. That would have to do for now. The way he was so deathly still, the way he gave no reaction as I maneuvered him, made me want to sob with fear. Even with the whack to the head, was it normal for someone to be unconscious for so long? It couldn't be, could it? Was there irreparable damage? Misery and fear rose inside me, threatening to burst forth. *Suck it back, suck it back.* You don't have time for that now.

*Do what you need to do. Just do what you need to do.*

I collected the drinks and snacks on the edge of the plane and put those in my suitcase, removing my jacket. God, I was freezing.

My breath came out in small bursts of white vapor as I looked for anything that might work as a

temporary shelter where I could tend to Dane's wound and get us both warmed up. I needed to get him out of the snow, but we needed to stay close to the wreckage so the rescuers could find us when they spotted the plane.

A huge cliff rose vertically to the left. Behind us—where the plane lay—and to the right, were steep drop-offs. But there was a grove of pine trees and what looked to be larger boulders about a hundred feet up a hill in front of us, that leveled out to solid ground. That looked to be as good a place as any—at least from where I was standing. Would I be able to drag him up the hill? It looked so far and I was half dead with fatigue already.

I hiccupped a quiet sob. I had no idea how I was going to manage all that I needed to do. And I was alone. *Terrified and alone.*





# CHAPTER TWENTY

## Dane

*Oh Jesus, someone had put my head in a vise. I moaned, but the small reverberation of sound caused a stab of pain, so I forced myself to remain quiet. It was dark, pitch black, and I was cold, so damn cold. But there was some sort of warmth in front of me and I pressed myself toward it, seeking any form of heat, comfort in whatever hell I had somehow ended up in. Something soft tickled my face and I inhaled a slow, careful breath, smelling Audra, her hair, the scent of her. I was dreaming, but I hurt. I couldn't make any sense of it. *Where am I?**

I floated in the strange sea of cold pain, images and memories drifting aimlessly through my disconnected brain: Audra in the snow, her eyes filled with love as I entered her body, the way she'd looked on our wedding day, so beautiful and so damned young, and then her shattered expression as she'd sat in a hospital bed, a small, cold bundle in her arms. My chest caught on the vision, and I came closer to the surface of whatever dark sea I was under. Closer, closer . . . the smell of pine and dirt mixing with the smell of Audra, the woman I'd know in any darkness—no matter how deep, no matter how thick and fathomless.

I was lying on something hard and cold, sort of prickly, and I could hear the howling of wind all around. Wind or water? I moved, just a slight stretching of limbs, and my left thigh throbbed with

pain, though not quite as badly as my head. Grimacing, I finally lifted my heavy lids all the way but was only met with more blackness. My heart careened in my chest and I sucked in a small breath. Was I blind? But no, as my eyes adjusted, shadows began to take shape. I wasn't blind, I was just somewhere really, really dark.

*Where was I?* Vague visions of a huge flock of birds flying right at me prodded at my mind . . . the plane . . . birds had taken out both engines. I'd tried to find a place to land, anywhere . . . anywhere. I flinched as my brain worked to pull forth the information. There had only been massive rocks, cliffs, and trees. And I'd . . . I'd finally spotted an open area ahead and used every muscle in my body to guide the piece of useless machinery toward it. But we'd careened off the side of a cliff and I'd

fought to stay conscious, just to put the plane down . . . the memories all blurred. I couldn't recall anything else.

I tested my body again, wiggling my toes and moving my fingers to assess any other injuries. Were we still on the plane, buried under the snow somewhere? Trapped inside a twisted piece of metal? We. *Audra*. With a sharp intake of breath, I tried to sit up and grunted, something splitting my head open with the movement. I collapsed back on the prickly ground.

“Dane?” came a whisper in the dark. *Thank God*. I felt Audra turn her body toward mine.

Relief hit me so strong I began shaking, not with cold, but with overwhelming thankfulness she was okay. She was right beside me. Wherever we were, she was here. “Audra?” I tried to croak but

only the *Au* sound made its way past my lips.

She let out a small sob and though it cost me, I moved my body toward her, reaching for her, gathering her body to mine. I felt her palm reach my cheek and for a moment she just ran her hand over my face, moving to the place on my head where the pain seemed to be centered. I groaned softly again, and this time, the reverberation didn't hurt quite as much.

“Shh,” she said. And then she moved away for just a moment and when she came back, she held what felt like a bottle of water to my lips. *Oh God, water. Water.* I drank greedily, recognizing the depth of my thirst. But she pulled the water away, and though I tried to follow it with my mouth, she put her fingers to my lips. “I don't have much left.” It sounded like she was crying and though a million

questions were half-formed in my head, I was still so tired, so damn tired. And the pain.

Her fingers were back a moment later and she was putting something in my mouth. “Chew,” she instructed, and so I did. Peanuts. She was feeding me peanuts.

After she’d fed me a small handful, she turned away again and when she put her fingers back to my lips, she said, “This is the last Tylenol. I’m going to give you another drink of water and you need to swallow this, okay?”

“Okay,” I croaked, taking the pill she offered. A second later, I lay back down, and Audra did too, moving against me, her hand on my face once more.

“I didn’t know if you’d wake up,” she said, her voice teary. “I was so scared.”

I worked to organize my thoughts. I only had a limited amount of energy and I wanted to ask the right questions. “How long?” I finally managed.

“Two days,” she said.

*Two days?* I’d been unconscious for two days?

“Where?” I asked.

She sniffled softly and when she spoke, her voice sounded bleak. “We crashed. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

I felt her nod in the dark. “I pulled you off the plane and built a shelter nearby. I thought . . . I thought the rescue crew would have found us by now but it’s been storming for two days . . .”

Reality slammed into me and for a minute, I wrestled with the knowledge that we were on a mountain in some sort of makeshift shelter. A cave?

No, something was flapping softly above us, as if the roof was made of something lighter than rock.

Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled, and then another. It made the hairs on the nape of my neck rise. There were monsters here, prowlers in the shadows.

My hands moved over her body. “You . . . are you injured?”

“No. I have a bruise from my seatbelt but that’s already better. It barely hurts.” She paused. “I ate a whole bag of pretzels the first morning,” she said, misery and what I thought might be guilt lacing her tone. I struggled to understand the change of topic, her point in telling me about pretzels, and finally grasped that she must have been rationing food once she realized our rescue wasn’t . . . Oh God. *Two days. We’d been in the*



*snowy wilderness alone for two days.*

“Black box?” I rasped.

“I don’t . . . I don’t know what that is.”

“Back of . . . plane,” I said, the words fading.

“Oh,” she breathed. “The back of the plane isn’t there.”

*“What?”*

“It . . . it was torn off or something. It’s gone.”

*Gone.* I noted some faraway sense of alarm, but I felt warmer with Audra pressed against me like this, her peanut-laced breath ghosting across my skin, and the Tylenol beginning to help my head a little. I drifted . . . “We’ll . . . be okay,” I said, wanting to promise more, wanting to reassure her, wanting to soothe the hopelessness I heard in her voice, but so tired . . . so tired.

All was silent for a moment before I heard her

say very softly, “I guess we’ve already survived worse than this, right?”

I swayed between reality and sleep, her words repeating in my mind. I knew what she meant. The grief of losing our son. With the last of my energy, I took her hand in mine under whatever was on top of us, keeping us somewhat warm. “I don’t . . . think we . . . survived that time, Audra. I don’t think we survived at all.” And then sleep pulled me under and I didn’t resist.

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Light hit me and I blinked my eyes open slowly, lying still as I took in the details around me. I was lying on the ground between two boulders and

there was something above me. *Is that carpet?* I frowned in confusion.

I stayed still for a few moments, allowing my mind to clear, the memory of what I thought was probably the night before coming back to me. My head still hurt, but not quite as badly as it had, and my leg seemed to feel a little bit better too. I had to take a piss so badly my bladder was aching. When I realized the space next to me was empty, I called Audra's name, the sound a soft croak. With effort, I pulled myself to a sitting position, grimacing at the onslaught of pain. *Christ. Help.*

I sat still for a minute as I got my bearings, squinting at what appeared to be garbage bags hung in front of an opening where light streamed in around gaps at both sides. Pushing it aside, I crawled out into the open space of a snowy forest,

my hands hitting the icy ground. Hissing in a breath, I gripped the side of one boulder and pulled myself slowly to my feet, being careful of the sharp ache in my leg. Once my head had stopped spinning, I took a deep breath, letting it out slowly, my breath pluming in the frigid air.

Shafts of sunlight streamed through gaps in the trees, bouncing off the snow, causing it to glitter and sparkle. Leaves rustled, I heard a few birdsongs high above, but mostly it was silent. Silent and still. “Audra?” I called out again, my voice clearing slightly.

I heard crunching footsteps to my right and a second later she appeared through a break in the trees, her arms wrapped around her body, a shirt tied over her hair in a makeshift hood. She had what looked like black plastic over her shoes and

tied around her lower legs. When I looked down, I saw that I did too. As Audra drew closer, I saw that her cheeks were rosy with cold and there were dark circles beneath her eyes as though she hadn't slept much recently. *Of course she hasn't.* When she spotted me, she made a beeline in my direction, approaching me quickly. "Are you okay? You shouldn't be up."

"Had to pee," I said, my bladder thrumming again and reminding me of my overwhelming need to relieve it.

"Oh." She pointed off behind me. "I'll wait here to make sure you're all right."

I nodded, heading deeper into the trees, then I lowered the waistband of my pants—and peed, almost groaning with the relief. When my bladder was empty, I lowered my pants further, needing to

see my leg. I pulled up whatever Audra had used to tie the material being fashioned as a bandage and then peeled back what I could now see was a pair of Audra's underpants. For a moment I just stared at my leg. Jesus, she'd . . . she'd stitched me up? I released a long, slow breath, my heart squeezing at the thought of her sitting in the deep snowy silence and stitching my leg while I lay unconscious. If not for her, I'd be . . . *Audra. My God.* My head was swimming, and not just with the concussion I surely had.

What had *she* endured?

The stitches were slightly crooked, but evenly placed, a large knot at both ends. My skin was pink at the edges of the wound and oozing a bare bit of blood, but mostly, it looked good—clean and uninfected. I replaced the bandage and pulled up

my pants, returning to where Audra still stood near the opening of the spot we'd apparently been sleeping in for the past few days. "You stitched me up," I said, my voice holding the awe I felt.

She nodded. "There was a piece of metal embedded in your thigh. You were bleeding . . ." She let out a shuddery breath. "You were bleeding so much. I washed it out with alcohol first and then used a sewing kit. I did the best I could. I was shaking and so . . . so cold."

I stared at her for a moment, horrified that she'd had to do what she'd done—and alone. But . . . *proud*. God, the feeling flowing through my body right now was pride . . . in her. "Thank you."

Our eyes held for a moment and then she nodded, whispering, "You're welcome."

"Tell me everything," I said.

She released a breath. “Okay, let’s go sit somewhere.”

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“Those fucking birds,” I murmured after she’d given me her account.

Audra made a sound in her throat. “I thought we were going to die.”

“But we didn’t.”

Her eyes met mine. “No. Not yet anyway.”

I released a breath. “We’re not going to die. They’re going to find us.”

“Can you remember where exactly the damage to the back end of the plane started?”

“The whole back end is torn off starting



behind the second row of seats.”

I swore softly and then groaned. “The black box, the part that can be tracked, was in the back of the plane. I imagine no one’s been able to get a plane in the air to search for us because of the storm. We just have to hope that black box isn’t too far from where we are because wherever it is, that’s where they’ll be searching.”

Audra’s chest rose and fell on a big intake of air. “How long do you think?”

I shook my head. “I wish I could say. We don’t have a way to look at the weather report.” I squinted at the sky. “The cloud cover today would make it damn hard to conduct a decent search.” *Shit.* “Let’s hope for tomorrow or the next day at the very latest. We have enough food and water. We’ll be okay. And you built a damn good shelter.

Today we can work on it a little bit more.”

Audra groaned. “Two more days? God.”

“I’m not thrilled about it either, but I’m glad to be alive.”

She nodded her head jerkily. “Me too.”

“All right then, let’s get that shelter of ours as airtight as possible and then we’ll have a delicious dinner of pretzels and watered-down soda.” At that, she smiled. It was gentle and soft, but what made it so incredible was the faith I saw in her expression.

*She trusted me.*

Something that had once been my greatest pride and joy.

Something I never thought I’d see in her eyes again.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## Audra

We spent the next few hours reinforcing our shelter.

I'd found two tall boulders next to each other in the forest area at the top of the hill and used the piece of carpet and some garbage bags on top of them to create a place to sleep. It was flimsy, but usable, and though I was immensely grateful that Dane was now conscious to help reinforce it, I was also proud that I'd managed to make one at all.

As we worked, I thought back to that night and a shiver ran down my spine, not from the cold, but from the terror and loneliness I'd experienced.

But I also remember thinking that Luella Townsend had been wrong. The words she'd uttered at the hospital all those years ago had never left me, and they came back to me then.

*She's such a tiny thing, Dane.*

My body might be small, but it was strong. *I was strong.* I had managed to get us both to shelter despite the odds, and something deep, deep inside where I stored the broken pieces of me, felt as if it was being knit back together.

Dane had the idea to break off branches and weave them together to create a thicker doorway than the one I'd managed to create, attaching the garbage bags to the backside using dental floss from my cosmetics bag since I'd used all the thread on his leg. I had to admit, the heavier, waterproof door not only did a better job of keeping out the wind

and cold, but now we wouldn't have to listen to the incessant flapping of the garbage bags.

I watched Dane work, watched as he stood back and assessed the shelter then broke more small branches from the tree and stuffed them between the small crack at the back where the two large rocks butted up to each other. He looked focused, intent, but I also noticed that his face was pale and his hands were shaking even though we'd both donned socks as mittens.

“I think we should take a break. You don't want to overdo it, Dane. You're suffering from a head injury and just had surgery.” I shot him a teasing smile and he chuckled.

“Speaking of my recent surgery, I need to clean the wound. You did an amazing job of closing it up, but I need to make sure it doesn't get infected

or I'll be in trouble.”

I nodded. “Let me do it. It’s easier for me to reach.”

I flushed his wound with more of the alcohol while he gritted his teeth, tipping his head back with the pain. “Jesus,” he hissed. “That hurts like a bitch.”

“I’m sure it does. Even when you were unconscious, you flinched.”

His expression was still pained, but I recognized a deeper distress in his eyes. It hurt him to think of what I’d gone through while he’d been unconscious, and something about that pulled at an old internal scar. I had a job to do, though, and so I focused my attention on Dane’s wound.

I poured a little bit of the cold water over it, catching the runoff with a sock. He looked woozy

and appeared to be shivering, whether from the cold or from the pain of his injury, I wasn't sure, but I covered him with the blankets, pulling them to his chin.

“Will you lay down with me?” His voice was soft, and he didn't open his eyes.

I hesitated for a moment. We'd slept side by side for the past two nights, me wrapping my body around his in an effort to share body heat, but now that he was awake, things felt . . . different. There was no choice, though. If we were going to survive this night—and please, God, let it be the last one—then we were going to have to snuggle. Snuggle sounded like the wrong word. It sounded comfortable and like a choice. This was forced snuggling, which seemed like a contradiction.

Dane squinted at me, only one eye open and

though his face was pale, his expression was somewhat amused. “It looks like your brain is working hard enough to spark fire. Please continue.”

I huffed out a breath. “Funny. Scoot over a little.”

When he did, I lay next to him. He turned so he was lying on his good thigh, spooning me and bringing the blankets around us to form a small cocoon.

His breath was warm on the back of my neck and his words brought more warmth to my chest. “Tell me that story again.”

“What story?” I whispered, even though I was pretty sure I knew the one he was referring to.

“The story about the Indian chief.”

I paused, a refusal rising from my throat, but I



swallowed it down. What could it hurt? It was just a story, and maybe it would help us both fall asleep.

And so I told him about the chief and his great sacrifice, a man who loved a woman so deeply that he chose to give his very life in protection of hers. After I finished we were both quiet for a few minutes, me drifting . . . drifting . . .

“This reminds me of our pond,” he whispered. “Under the blankets while it snowed.” His voice was sleepy. His words brought a faraway feeling of distress, but I was so tired I didn’t stop him, just let him ramble softly in my ear. Part of me was simply so happy he was awake and okay and that I wasn’t alone. He sighed behind me, pulling me even closer, sharing his heat. He’d always been so warm . . . like a human furnace. Big and warm and protective. “I loved you so much,” he said and the words jarred

me, piercing.

I whimpered, too tired and warm to pull away.

“Dane,” I whispered. A warning? A plea?

*You shouldn't. Please don't. It hurts to remember.*

Dane was quiet for a moment, but then he brought his sock-covered hand up and smoothed it over my hair as if he knew what that one word had carried. *Loved*. “And you loved me too.”

*Yes*, I thought, drifting toward sleep again. *Yes*.

“Was there anyone else after me?”

His voice came to me like a dream, slow and heavy, and I thought, *No, Dane, never. There's only ever been you*. He turned his face into my neck, but I didn't think my lips had formed the words.

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When I woke again, light was streaming through the tiny spaces in our shelter, creating a muted, dreamy glow. I was mostly warm, since Dane was sleeping pressed right against me, his arm around my waist. As the sleepiness lifted and reality flowed in, I felt something hard and probing at my lower back and I stilled completely, afraid to move a muscle.

“It’s an automatic response,” he said, his voice thick with sleep. “I’m in no condition to use it. Don’t worry.”

I paused, then pulled away. “I wasn’t worried,” I mumbled as I sat up, pushing my hair out of my face. I looked back over my shoulder and Dane had rolled onto his back and was wearing a

pained grimace.

“It can’t hurt that badly.”

His eyes moved to me and narrowed slightly.

“Oh, it can. But my headache is the worst of my painful conditions this morning.”

“Headache aside, you look better. Your color is good—from what I can tell in this light. Should we get up and see what delicacies we have for breakfast?”

He moved slowly into a sitting position, seeming to test his head further by tilting it one way and then the other. He didn’t grimace again so I took that as a sign that it felt okay with movement.

“I could really go for some peanuts and maybe a few pretzels.”

“Well then, buddy, it’s your lucky day.”

A few minutes later, we each ate a ration of

pretzels and peanuts, the small bit of food seeming to make my stomach angrier than before—growling in protest when I stopped eating. “Do you think this will be the day?” I asked, my breath pluming in the cold morning air. I glanced through the break in the trees above us to the gray sliver of sky, thick with clouds.

“Dear God, I hope so,” Dane said, but as he glanced upward, his expression didn’t look hopeful. He placed the last peanut in his mouth and chewed slowly. “Damn, it almost hurts worse to eat such a small amount.”

“I know.”

“How much battery do you have left in your cell phone?”

“Not much. Sixteen percent. Why? Do you think we could find service somewhere up here?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“Then why . . .”

“I want to hike down to the plane today and see how stable it is. I have an idea.”

“What?” I asked. *He had to be delirious.* “I told you what it was like getting out of there. It’s too dangerous, especially now that I can see it’s shifted without any weight in it at all.”

“I know. I’ll check it out first, I promise. There are a few things I want to try to get out, especially if we might be here another day. We can’t just sit around going crazy.”

I didn’t even want to contemplate being here another day, but he was right. It was better to do something than to sit and stare at the empty sky. And if that something helped us make it through another night with even a little more comfort, it was

worth a try.

I brushed my teeth with my trial-sized toothpaste and a handful of snow, wondering if we could eat Crest if things became desperate. I shut that thought down, refusing to ponder how dire our situation would have to be before we dined on toothpaste. Still . . . I was careful to only use a smidge of the paste to clean my teeth and I noticed that Dane did the same. Funny, though neither of us mentioned it.

This morning seemed colder than the one before, and I wrapped a shirt around my head, tying the sleeves around my nose and mouth, loosely enough that I could still breathe. Dane wrapped a shirt around his head as well but didn't cover his face.

“Okay then, let's do this,” he said.

We walked out of the clearing and to the top of the hill where we both stood for a moment looking at the plane. The wind howled, gusting past us in icy lashes, stronger than it'd been on any of the previous days, despite the snowstorm. "Follow behind me, okay? In my footsteps if you can. It'll be less work, and if there's a hole or something, I'll step in it first."

"You're already injured enough. Let me go first."

He shot me a look, his jaw hardening, and I could see I'd hurt his pride. *Men.* "No."

"If you tear your stitches, I'm not stitching you up again, I swear it, Dane Townsend."

"I won't tear my stitches."

"Fine."

He nodded once, the case settled, and then



started down the hill. I knew from the experience of hiking up this slope that each step was a challenge, the snow making it feel as if there were weights in your shoes. I could only imagine what that felt like with a large wound in your thigh, but I didn't say a word. I did however mutter, "Stubborn," under my breath. I swore I saw a small quirk of his lips when he turned his head to the side, but he didn't comment. *Wise man.*

There was about ten to twelve inches of icy snow covering the outside of the plane, and I could see that more snow had blown inside and covered the interior. Icicles hung from the bottom of the twisted metal, glittering in the thin streams of sunlight that broke through the clouds, a savage sort of beauty.

Dane leaned around the plane, pressing his lips

together, obviously contemplating the best way to check the stability. After a minute, he said, “I need something longish and sturdy.”

“For what?”

“I’m going to go down to the front of the plane, but I won’t be able to see if the cliff drops off under the snow so I need a stick or something to precede my steps.”

“No! Dane, that sounds too dangerous.” I shook my head, a tremor of fear moving through me. “It’s why I didn’t go to the front of the plane a couple of days ago.”

“I’ll be careful, I promise.” He reached inside the plane, brushing some snow from a piece of metal off to the side.

He pulled on it and though it took some obvious effort, it came loose after a minute, not a

jagged piece of metal, but a two-sided piece of edging—perhaps the piece that had run along the base where the seats had once been. He pulled it out and stamped it twice into the snow. “Feels sturdy enough,” he muttered, taking hold of it in the middle since it was so long.

Panic suddenly seized me as he moved away and I grabbed at his arm. *Don't leave me, not again*, I thought wildly. He turned and when he saw whatever was in my expression, he stopped, turning fully around.

“Hey,” he said, concern lacing his tone. “I wouldn't do this if it was overly risky.”

I nodded, a jerky movement. “Just . . . be careful. Please. It's icy.”

He put one plastic covered hand on my fabric-covered cheek, looking into my eyes. “I promise.”

“Okay,” I breathed, nodding again.

The wind whipped past me again as Dane began the slow trek to the nose of the plane. *It was so cold*, but my complete focus was on how he stuck the piece of thin metal in the snow, tapping at the ground before each step. The crunchy sound of the thin layer of ice breaking accompanied his movements, echoing through the small canyon and rising above the wailing wind.

“All good,” he called. “It looks like this tree is undamaged and sturdy. The one on the left is leaning because it must have taken the brunt of the plane’s weight. Half the trunk is gone, so only the remainder of it is holding the plane in place.” He paused for a minute, looking as if he was tapping at the damaged tree, but I couldn’t exactly tell from where I was standing.

Dane turned, making his way back to me. “I don’t trust that tree to hold the plane forever, but I think it’s sturdy enough for me to get in and out quickly.”

I shook my head. “No, Dane—”

“It’s important.” He took my plastic-covered hands in his. “Trust me. Listen, if that tree does start to give, I’m going to have plenty of warning. It’s going to crack and groan like the devil and all I’ll have to do is leap out. To go over the cliff, it will have to turn and slide to get around those trees. That will take a few minutes. I only need half a second to take a running leap.”

“Your leg’s not going to allow you to leap.”

“My leg is going to be just fine leaping if it has to. You stand out here and tell me if you hear anything at all.”

I released a breath, the warm air locked in the fabric of the shirt that was covering my mouth. “All right. But if there’s even the smallest snap, I’m calling your name and you better be out of the plane before I have time to take a breath.”

“Deal.” He gave me a small wink and a slight tilt of his lips, disarming me for a moment and making me forget my worry. *He’d always been able to do that.*

“Go. Hurry.”

He stepped up and over the sharp, twisted metal at the edge, though it was covered with snow. He obviously remembered my description well of getting him off the plane. He shuffled forward slowly, having to bend at the waist because of the sagging ceiling. He looked around, and pulled gently at a few things, but didn’t stop until he was

at the cockpit. I couldn't see what he was doing and I was almost afraid to breathe, listening intently for any small sound from the trees surrounding the plane. It looked like he was digging around in the cockpit, but I was grateful he didn't step inside.

After thirty seconds, he turned, making his way toward me. He stopped at the overturned chair I'd been sitting in when the plane crashed. For a second he just stared at it, and despite it being mostly covered in snow now, his lips formed a grim line. *Come on, Dane. Get out of there.* He brushed at the snow and then reached underneath it, his arm disappearing for a moment, his eyes slanted upward, his expression focused, and then exultant as he brought his arm out. A magazine? *Really?* He'd gone into that deathtrap for reading material? He put the magazine inside his jacket and then

finally, stepped to the edge of the plane and got off.

I let out a long exhale, realizing that my knees were shaking and I hadn't even dared speak for fear the vibration of my voice would alter the stability of the plane.

Dane took two steps toward me, and when I met his eyes, I blinked. The look on his face was so intense it alarmed me for a moment. He stepped closer and tipped my chin so I was staring into his eyes from only a few inches away. His breath was a ghost of white fog in the space between us. "You should have left me there, Audra. Jesus, from that cockpit, it looks like the plane's hanging right over the edge." His eyes moved over my face, and he wore an intense expression of something that resembled panic that I didn't understand. "You should have left me there. If I had been conscious,



it's what I would have insisted you do. But"—his gaze filled with both pain and tenderness—"thank God you didn't." His voice was gravelly. With one quick movement, he pulled the shirt down so my mouth was exposed and kissed me, hard and quick, returning the shirt to where it'd been and stepping back.

Despite the quickness of the kiss and the material being replaced over my mouth, I could still feel the pressure of his lips on mine like a tender bruise. I wanted to press on it with my fingers, to create the sensation again. I shook my head. "I couldn't leave you there," I whispered.

He stared at me for another moment, his eyes full of both warmth and softness, before he broke eye contact, reaching into his pocket. My gaze followed his movement and when he opened his

palm, there were five squares wrapped in gold foil. I looked at him in confusion, and he grinned.

“Is that . . . *chocolate?*”

“Sure is.” His grin grew and he reached into his other pocket, bringing out a piece of beef jerky, wrapped in clear plastic.

I gasped. “Oh God, meat.” I wanted to grab it from his hands and stuff it in my mouth, but then what he’d just done hit me. He’d potentially put his life in danger for . . . beef jerky and chocolate. I wanted it with a hungry desperation I’d never known before, but we did still have food. It wasn’t like we were going to die of starvation today. I felt a small spear of ire as I considered the fear I’d just experienced for the past thirty minutes. “As much as I’m thrilled that we have chocolate and beef, and . . . *reading material*, do you really think it was

worth the risk at this point?” I put my hands on my hips, letting him know I definitely did not.

He unwrapped a piece of the chocolate and handed it to me. Despite my irritation, I only looked at it for a moment before snatching it from his hand. I bit it in half and then offered him one of the pieces. He shook his head. “Eat the whole thing. I’m going to eat one too. We’ll ration the other three pieces if we have to.”

I hesitated, but decided he was right. We could use the sugar and, God, please, we’d been up here for three days. Surely now that the sky was a little clearer, rescue was imminent. I pulled the material down, placed the chocolate in my mouth and moaned, my eyes practically rolling back in my head, when the sweet richness hit my tongue. “Oh, dear God,” I said between small sucks, the

chocolate melting away far too quickly. Dane grinned again as he watched me, using his thumb to wipe what must have amounted to the most miniscule chocolate flake ever. But I wasn't wasting a single flake and I sucked at his thumb, causing his smile to fade and his eyes to darken. I paused, time slowing as we stared at each other, that ever-present physical awareness flowing between us.

Even here, on an icy mountain, where we might slowly starve to death.

*How is that possible?*

He unwrapped his own thick square of chocolate, smoothing out the wrapper and putting the candy in his mouth. As he chewed, his eyes glazed over like I was sure mine had done, and I laughed softly. He smiled as his mouth

simultaneously worked the chocolate until it had melted, reaching out to me and taking the wrapper in my hand. “I didn’t take the risk for chocolate, although holy fuck, nothing ever tasted so good.” He held up the two small squares of gold foil. “I took the risk for fire.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## Dane

We crested the hill, and though my head felt better, the ache in my leg had intensified with the strenuous use. I figured my stitches had probably torn a little—not enough that they’d opened up, but enough that I could feel a small trickle of blood under my loose pants. Walking through heavy snow felt like moving in quicksand.

Seeing the burned-out shell of the cockpit and knowing I’d been trapped in it, helpless and unconscious, had made me feel sick. If not for Audra . . . But I stayed focused on the purpose of the trip: chocolate and beef jerky.

Dustin had offered me some of his junk food stash the last time we'd flown to Tahoe, and I'd declined as he'd laughed and tossed it in the compartment on the door. The chocolate looked as if it'd melted in the heat of the fire, but the small space in the door panel had saved it from melting completely. It was only a bit misshapen. But it wasn't really the chocolate I'd been after, though that was certainly a bonus. It had been the wrappers I'd wanted, and if this worked . . . Fuck, I didn't want to hope too hard. But I was going to give it my best damn shot.

Audra came to a stop, her chest rising and falling as she caught her breath, and I did the same.

Now that we were out of the valley, the wind felt sharper. I looked at the jagged peaks of the mountain high above us, where I could hear the

brutal sound of the lashing wind and see the swirling gusts of frost. Thank God we hadn't crash-landed at a higher elevation, where the high-altitude wind would be deadly and unforgiving, where there were no patches of forest in which to find shelter, only vast deserts of snow and sheer, icy rock walls. Yeah, things were bad, but they definitely could have been worse.

"I wanted to try to get some more pieces of carpet from the interior of the plane—or maybe a section of ceiling, but it was still attached and trying to shake it free felt too dangerous," I said.

Audra nodded. "I thought the same thing. But I think we've done pretty well with what we have. It's kept us alive anyway. How in the world do you plan to make a fire?"

I began turning toward the crop of trees where



our shelter was, my mouth open to answer her question, when my eyes snagged on a small speck in the distance to our right. I halted, squinting as I turned back around. “What?” Audra asked, following my gaze. “Oh my God,” she breathed. “Is that a plane?”

My heart seized and I clomped as fast as I could to the edge of the cliff, waving my arms and shouting as loudly as possible. Audra joined me, waving her arms and yelling, too. The plane in the distance continued to circle the spot where it was, and even as loud as we were yelling, I knew that the wind was snatching our voices. The plane could have been right in front of us, and they wouldn't have been able to hear our cries for help, but we did it anyway. *Instinct?*

To preserve my energy, I stopped, but

continued waving my arms, and Audra, likely having come to the same conclusion about not being heard, did the same. I continued waving my arms while Audra ran back and forth behind me, as fast as she was able in the deep snow, extending the scope of our movement. But after only a couple of minutes, the plane turned and began flying in the opposite direction, disappearing out of sight. I came to a halt, breathing harshly, the frigid air like knives in my throat, hope withering and dying inside my chest.

“Fuck!” I yelled to the sky. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” I picked up a handful of snow and threw it into the vast nothingness in front of me, cursing again.

Turning abruptly, I saw Audra, standing still, a look of utter hopelessness on her face. It broke my

heart. I *recognized* that look, and for the sliver of a moment it took me back. That same look—utter desolation—day after day as she’d sat rocking in a chair in what was supposed to be our baby’s nursery. I’d walked past the door, not willing to take her pain on when I was barely managing my own. How many times had our eyes met, hers beseeching, as I’d turned away? I squeezed my eyes shut in regret, wishing I’d been stronger for her, wishing I’d been older and wiser, wishing I’d had any fucking clue how to handle the unthinkable.

I watched her now, and *this time*, I moved toward her rather than away, taking her in my arms and holding her. “It’s okay. We’re in this together,” I murmured. “Don’t lose hope.”

She trembled in my arms, but clutched me, her

head burrowed into my chest. She had always responded to physical affection, always melted into me when I'd comforted her that way. Sharp fingers of guilt clawed at my insides for what I hadn't done *then*, combining with the stark disappointment of seeing that plane disappearing into the clouds.

“*Fuck*,” I murmured again, the word holding a world of weight.

After a minute, she looked up at me, so much sorrow in her eyes. “They flew away. They didn't even get close to where we are. Why?”

I looked over my shoulder to the distant place the plane had circled, trying to recall the events leading up to the crash-landing, my eyes homing in on a lone cliff that I suddenly remembered had seemed to come out of nowhere. “Because that's where the black box is,” I whispered, my voice

deflated, knowing I was right. “That’s where the tail came off. And now it’s way back there, probably buried under ten feet of snow. And they think we are too.”

“Will they land and check it out? They will, right? And they’ll see it’s just a part of the plane and that they need to keep searching?”

I blew out a foggy breath. “I don’t know. There might not be any place to land safely. And if they don’t see signs of life, they might assume we’re dead.”

Audra let out a small, choked gasp. “So they’ll stop looking? Just assume we’re dead and wait for the snow to melt to confirm it?”

“I hope to God not, but that’s why we need to try to make fire. They can’t see us from far away, but they’ll see smoke. As long as the cloud cover

isn't too thick." I took her hand. "Come on. I'm not sure if this will work, but what do we have to lose?"

We trudged back to our shelter in the snowy woods and I directed Audra to look for as many dry sticks and leaves and pine needles as she could. There likely wouldn't be much with the amount of snow we were in, but we needed to collect all we could.

I had to walk a little deeper into the woods to find low, dry branches that were easy enough to snap off since we'd used so many of the ones near our shelter to create the door. Once I'd collected an armful, I dropped them on the ground near where we were sleeping, deciding on a spot about ten feet from the door of our shelter. If I was successful, the fire would be close enough to warm us, but not so close that we'd have to worry about jumping

sparks. Plus, there was a large rock—about knee high—and a couple of trees behind it, that would hopefully shield some of the wind. I cleared the snow from the ground and then gathered several rocks to form a circle—what I hoped would be a good firepit. If not, it'd just be a pit of failure and despair that we'd have to look at as we crawled out of our rock shelter each morning until we . . .

*Stop it, Dane. Jesus.*

If it didn't work, it didn't work. But fuck it all, it *was* still worth a try.

Audra returned with an armful of debris, which I told her to drop in the circle of rocks, then we both went back out for another load.

Once we'd both returned from a second trip, Audra went inside our shelter and gathered the pine needles on the ground. Then I reached inside my

jacket and took the People magazine out, ripping out several pages.

“Ah,” I heard Audra say as if she’d just realized why I’d grabbed the magazine.

I slanted a smile at her as I rolled the pieces and tied them in knots, the way my granddad had always done when he’d built a fire in the fireplace on one of the outdoor entertaining areas on our property. “Will you get your cell phone and take the battery out? And I’ll need those little scissors you mentioned using when you stitched me up.”

Audra looked slightly confused but did as I asked, then I took the remaining chocolate from my pocket, including the two wrappers, and started unwrapping the ones still in foil.

“The idea,” I said, as I handed Audra the three pieces of chocolate to put with the rest of our food



stash, “is to use the foil as a conductor on the battery to create a tiny fire, maybe only a spark, I’m not sure. But if it works, we’ll need to quickly transfer it to the paper and pine needles and stoke the hell out of that bitch until there’s enough fire to start adding branches.

She looked at me. “How do you know this will work?”

“I don’t. But working in robotics, I know at least a little bit about batteries. I’m not positive it will work, but in theory, it could.”

She nodded sharply and breathed out, “Okay,” as if she was trying not to hope too hard. But I saw the flash of excitement in her eyes and for a minute it scared me so much I wanted to give up before I’d started. The thought of failing her terrified me.

Taking a calming breath, I began cutting one

of the pieces of foil at the very edge, just coming up short at the end and then going in the other direction so that when I was done, it was one long, thin continuous piece. Making sure I had two ends, I then crumpled the middle section so the fire—if one ignited—would have something to hold on to for a desperate minute. Just long enough to transfer it to our firepit. I'd gone through the process in my head as I'd lain in the dark with Audra the night before, making a plan to warm her as she'd shivered in my arms.

*Please, please, please let this work.*

“Okay, get ready. If this ignites, I'm going to slowly move it over the pine needles and I need you to be leaning forward over it, ready to blow softly to get it going.”

She nodded quickly, leaning over slightly,

tightening the shirt over her head that was tied at the nape of her neck, holding her hair away from her face. Her eyes focused intently on the battery where I had it on the cell phone cover. Carefully, so carefully, I lined up the ends of the foil to the positive and negative terminals on the battery, casting one last breathless glance at Audra before touching them to the tiny copper pieces and using the scissors to hold each side steady.

For a moment nothing happened, and all was quiet except my own heart beating loudly in my ears. And then a tiny wisp of smoke rose, so suddenly, I almost startled. I held the scissors steady so the current passed through the foil, heating it until it finally burst into a small flame. My pulse skyrocketed, but my hands remained steady as I slowly brought the tiny piece of burning

foil to the top of the pine needles, just under one of the knotted pages of the magazine, holding my breath, half expecting it to extinguish before my hands had even made the short journey.

Audra was ready just as I placed it on the pile of debris and she blew on it softly, as the top pine needles began smoking as well, the tiny flame growing, my heart lurching with wild joy.

The small flame spread, gaining strength, growing, growing, until Audra looked up, her lips trembling ever so slightly, her eyes wide and shimmering with happy tears. I laughed out loud and though she kept blowing at the blossoming fire, her lips tipped into a tremulous smile between small puffs.

I reached for the smallest branches and when the fire seemed big enough, I added the first one,

waiting as the flame began devouring it, becoming bigger, hungrier. A beautiful, glowing beast.

Audra was laughing now as I added one branch after another. Then we both stood slowly, marveling at it. For a second we just looked at each other across the small miracle we'd just created together, grinning like fools, and then she threw herself into my arms. As I caught her, I laughed out loud, spinning her in a half circle and then placing her back on her feet.

Tears streaked down her face, but she was smiling. I caught one glistening drop on my thumb. “We make a pretty good team, don’t we, honey? You and me.”

The moment swelled, making the air feel full, and my chest feel tight. But Audra laughed again, sniffing and nodding, something seeming to break

gently in her expression, in contrast to the way she'd been holding herself so stiffly. For just a moment, she allowed herself to sag in my arms so I was holding her up.

“Yeah. Yeah we do,” she said. “You and me. I’m so glad you’re here, Dane.” She shook her head, her eyes a little wild, her hands gripping my biceps as if the small bit of hope she’d allowed herself had broken through something—some wall perhaps. And now her emotions were bleeding out of her.

“Those nights,” she gasped, her eyes shocked like she wasn’t completely in control of her own words, was taking them in just as I was. “Those nights I lay next to you in our shelter, when I didn’t know if you were going to wake up and . . . and . . .” She shook her head again. *She’d been so brave.*

*So incredibly brave.* “I just, I was so scared. And now you’re here, we’re together, and I’m”—she laughed, a startled sound—“I’m so grateful.”

I smiled gently at her, pulling her closer, hugging her tightly as she hugged me back. I understood that expressing herself to me that way had been difficult for her. There were bigger walls behind that one, I knew that as well. But joy raced through my heart, a feeling of victory expanding my chest that wasn’t *only* because of the blooming fire warming the air around us.

After a minute, Audra pulled away, turning to the fire and putting her bare hands up, as she tipped her head back. “God, that feels amazing.”

I put my hands up as well, feeling the wonderful heat as it warmed my skin, causing my muscles to relax and a final shivering tremor to

move through me as if the cold that had been wrapped around my bones for days was finally, blessedly, leaving my body. Even if it'd only been a little sliver, Audra sharing a piece of her heart with me felt so good.

The warmth felt like heaven, like joy, like life, and I turned back to Audra, taking her in my arms again as she laughed. I swayed with her next to the dancing flame, the air filled with the light, bitter scent of smoke. “Tonight, partner,” I said, “we dine on beef jerky, pretzels, and chocolate.”

Audra moaned, tipping her head back and grinning at me. “I never imagined the thought of a dried rope of beef could be so wonderful.”

“We have Dustin to thank for that. When we get back, we’ll buy him a real steak dinner.”

Her smile faltered slightly, and I wondered if it



was the mention of the word *we* that had caused her to react that way. I was in too good of a mood to let it bother me, though, so I twirled her around as she yelped out a laugh. I did too. “You know what else?” I whispered close to her ear, leaning back with a grin.

“What?” she asked breathlessly.

“We’re going to heat some water and clean ourselves up.”

“A bath?” Audra practically groaned. “Oh God, how? What do we have to heat water in?”

“We can use a plastic bottle. As long as we fill it completely so there’s no air in it, the plastic won’t melt.”

“How do you know that?”

I laughed. “Want to know the truth?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“I saw it on Naked and Afraid once. I swear, I’ve watched two episodes of that show, unintentionally, and somehow I remember that.”

Audra laughed, shaking her head. “Well, thank God, because I need to wash my hair like nobody’s business.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

## Audra

I'd waited for the water to cool enough that it wasn't scalding and then partially stripped in front of the fire, scrubbing my skin with a sock, my trial-sized bottle of body wash, and the deliciously hot water. Dane went back to gather a little more wood, leaving me to my makeshift bath.

Few things in my life had ever felt so good as that soapy water sluicing over my skin, taking the grime of several days of hard wilderness living with it. I dried myself very quickly with a nightshirt, re-dressed, and then laid the damp T-shirt and wet sock over a rock near the fire. The rock felt warm

to my touch and I laid my hands on it, reveling in the heat against my skin. *What a difference physical warmth made to my mood.* Hopefully this rock would help the T-shirt dry a little before Dane wanted to use it.

*Dane.* Warmth filled my chest when I remembered the way he'd taken me in his arms when I'd had a mini-breakdown after the intensity of our fire-lighting experiment. It wasn't only the joy of accomplishment I'd seen in his expression, it had been . . . pride. Pride that had encompassed both of us, not only him. He'd been proud of our teamwork, and I'd recognized it because I'd seen it before. He'd looked at me that same way when we moved into our house—looking at me from where we'd collapsed on opposite sides of the living room, piles of boxes between us on the floor. He'd had

that look in his eyes as I'd told him my plans for the building he'd bought as a wedding gift. And even though it had been coupled with terrible sadness, he'd looked at me that way after our son's funer—

I moaned aloud, grimacing and biting at my lip, the thought alone sending a sharp lancing pain straight through me. I took a deep breath, allowing a small piece of the memory in anyway, despite the way it hurt. *Yes*, I could see him now, standing in our kitchen, what seemed like hundreds of casseroles and baked goods sitting on the counters, never to be eaten. *What had happened to those casseroles? Had someone eventually thrown them away?* Dane had looked at me, and though his eyes were filled with sorrow, he'd smiled as if to say: *We made it through this day, didn't we? You and me.*

I bit harder at my lip, clenching my eyes shut.

Oh no, God, it hurt too much. I couldn't think about that anymore. Not now. Not here. On this desolate mountain where I already felt desperate and—

“Hey.”

I whirled around and whatever was on my face caused Dane to stop in his tracks, concern coming immediately to his expression. “Audra? What’s wrong?”

I forced a smile, shaking my head, willing this terrible feeling away. “Nothing. It just felt cold to step away from the fire.” I stepped back toward it, holding my hands out to the welcome heat. “Ah, that’s better.”

His frown remained, though he moved closer, coming to stand across from me. “How was the bath?”

I smiled at him again, a real one this time. “It was wonderful.” I pointed at the two bottles already sitting among the fire. “I just put those on. They need another four minutes or so.”

Dane nodded, beginning to remove his jacket. I pointed to my cosmetic bag. “There’s body wash in there, if you don’t have any.” Why did I feel so nervous as he began to undress?

“Bundle up. It’s getting colder. It’ll be freezing again by tonight.”

I nodded, zipping into my jacket and quickly tying my “headscarf” on. I grabbed the magazine still near the fire, hesitating and then turning to my suitcase where my small purse was at the top. I opened it and took out the pen, turned, gave Dane a tiny smile and began moving toward the break in the trees. “Enjoy.”

He gave me a head nod as I passed him, his expression still slightly confused. I released a pent-up breath when I stepped into the open area, closing my eyes against the wind, turning my head away as snowflakes stuck to my eyelashes. God, it was really coming down. I'd realized it was snowing, but the tree cover really protected the area where our shelter was. Tomorrow Dane and I would go back to the place where we'd spotted the plane and build a second fire, one we hoped would be more visible from the sky.

I sat down by a rock wall and looked thankfully at the lone tree that somehow grew out of the side of a mountain, protecting me from the worst of the snowfall. Almost immediately, I began shivering, but I brought the magazine from where I'd had it inside my jacket and gripped the pen in



my hand. Turning to a full-page ad with lots of white space, I poised the pen to write. I'd been intending on . . . what? I hadn't made an actual plan. A will? A note to Jay? A half-formed thought that if this didn't end well, I'd want someone to have my house, my business. At the present moment, the building my business was housed in belonged to Luella Townsend. If Dane and I never made it to Laurelton, Luella would have a funeral for Dane, or a memorial service if our bodies were never found, take over my building, dismantle everything I'd . . . Shaking my head, I leaned my head back, tapping it twice against the hard stone. This line of thought wasn't doing me any good. And if I was going to make a will, I was going to wait until death was imminent. Making one now felt . . . too hopeless. It felt as if I'd already given up.

So, no.

Still, I put the pen to the glossy paper and watched as it moved, almost of its own accord. My hand was in control, but my mind wandered, reliving the moment I'd seen that tiny spark of fire, the joy that had simultaneously flared inside me. Such terrible conditions and yet, when was the last time I'd felt a burst of jubilation like that?

Except for the flowers, the one bright thing I'd clung to, everything else in my life was . . . colorless. Sitting under a bent tree on the side of a cliff on a lonely mountain, I realized how joyless my existence had been. For *so* long. But not Dane. He'd been able to move on. Find happiness. Find another person to love. My chest tightened, constricting my lungs.

The wind howled, growing louder, and the

snow was coming down fast and furiously now, a blinding curtain of white. The sun was beginning to dip in the sky, casting the landscape in platinum shadows. Alarmed, I closed the magazine, returning it to the inside of my jacket.

I made my way to the copse of trees, fighting the wind, my arm shielding my face against the icy snow. Once I had stepped into the shelter of the trees, the wind felt less harsh, the snow a gentle flurry in the crisp pine-scented air. It was still cold as all hell, though, and I rushed toward the fire, the smoky tinge in the air, luring me forward.

Dane was kneeling at the side of the fire, rubbing the same shirt I'd used to dry myself off on his hair, obviously having just finished washing it. My breath hitched and I came up short.

He was like a shimmering fantasy in the light

of the flame, snowflakes fluttering down to melt on his skin, still warm from the heat of the fire and the water with which he'd bathed. On his knees that way, his head bent, his defined muscles glowing in the flickering shadows, he looked like a broken warrior and oh, I wanted to draw him this way. The thought brought with it a mild sense of surprise. I'd sketched just a few minutes ago, but I wasn't used to being inspired to sketch by visual input, the way I'd constantly been . . . before.

As I stepped toward him, coming to the edge of the fire, Dane lifted his head and smiled. "You're right, that was amazing."

I grinned, holding my hands up to the fire and allowing it to chase the cold from my blood. He twisted at the waist to grab his shirt lying behind him, and my eyes snagged on a tattoo on his right

bicep. My brow furrowed as I stepped toward him to investigate the art that had definitely not been on his skin when we'd been married.

When he turned back, he saw me attempting to look at his arm and frowned. "What?" I tilted my head, my eyes still on his bicep and he glanced at it, bringing it up in front of his chest so I could see it. It was a tree, next to a frozen pond, a banner of sorts twining up the trunk with the name Theodore John and our son's birth date written on it. My stomach seized and I made a small gasp, stepping back.

"Audra?" Dane asked in confusion.

"I . . . when did you get that?"

He lowered his arm, glancing at it again before meeting my eyes. "I thought you saw it the other night."

*The other night.* In my hotel room. We'd both been . . . naked. Very naked. I swallowed. Only, it'd been dim in the room and I'd been half out of my mind with desire for him. With the things he was making me feel. The colors bursting all around me. Inside me. I shook my head sharply. "No."

A gust of wind blew, causing the flames to dance and flicker. Dane shivered, pulling his shirt over his head and putting his coat on. "I got it right before I moved to San Francisco." He regarded me for a moment, something moving through his expression I wasn't sure I could read. Or perhaps didn't want to. "It was hard for me, Audra, to . . . leave him behind, not to be able to visit his grave whenever I wanted. This was a way for me to take him with me." *Oh.* I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, my throat tight. When I opened my eyes,

Dane was watching me, his eyes filled with sadness. “But I knew,” he said, clearing his throat. “I knew you’d take good care of him and that made it a little bit easier.”

*Oh God.*

*I knew you’d take good care of him and that made it a little bit easier.*

If I’d been able to take care of him, he’d be alive.

“It’s hard to believe we’d have an eight-year-old now, isn’t it?” Dane asked very gently, almost cautiously.

Pain shivered through me and I wrapped my arms around myself. It felt like the cold had invaded my veins, was sinking into my bones, though the fire’s heat was right in front of me. *An eight-year-old.* Yes, of course I knew.

*It's his heart. I'm so sorry.*

*There's no heartbeat. I'm so sorry.*

Oh God, life changed so quickly it could steal your breath—*your soul*. How was it that I tried so hard not to think about what *would* have been and yet could still say in a moment how old he'd be today? Tomorrow. All my life.

Dane watched me closely, and I didn't know what to do with the look of pure sympathy on his face. How was it that he had been expressing his *own* pain and his sympathy was for *me*? Why? But I couldn't. I couldn't come out from behind this wall of pain . . .

*You set all the rules. How hard to knock at the door you locked yourself behind, when to leave you alone. Your rules, never negotiable . . . you didn't have to spell them out in words. Your actions*



*spoke louder than words. Stay away. I don't need you.*

I did need him, I did. But I'd been so hurt, so angry. And most of all, I'd needed to set him free. And that was all in the past . . . *wasn't it?*

“Audra—”

“If I'm going to wash my hair, I guess I should do it before the sun gets any lower and before this storm kicks up any more than it is.” The snow was finding its way through the small breaks in the canopy of evergreen and swirling in the air.

Dane was quiet for a moment, looking as if he was considering something. But then he smiled and it was gentle. “Come on, let me help you. It'll be quicker.”

I nodded. Something about letting Dane wash my hair felt overly intimate, vaguely dangerous.

And yet the lure of clean hair was frankly too great. The lure of feeling halfway *human* again was too great. “Okay.” Dane took the water off the fire while I gathered my shampoo and comb.

“Sit in front of me and tip your head all the way back,” Dane instructed as I knelt on the garbage bag I’d used earlier and he came up behind me. He put a dry shirt around my shoulders to protect my jacket and the back of my neck, and then began pouring the water over my hair. The wet heat felt incredible against my scalp and I moaned very softly. “Feel good?” he asked.

“Ahh, yes.”

Dane made quick work of using the shampoo to work a lather through my hair, using his fingertips to massage my scalp. I almost moaned again, louder and more blissfully, but held it back,

instead closing my eyes and relishing in the sensations. I'd always loved my scalp being massaged. When we were first married, we'd taken baths together and Dane had washed my hair, just like this. I wondered if he remembered, wondered if this brought up memories of that time for him like it was doing for me. He'd been an unselfish lover, even as a young man, taking pleasure in pampering me as part of our foreplay. I didn't realize until then how much I'd missed being touched. Dane's touch had always melted me. Always. My stomach felt fluttery and my muscles felt languid, despite the frigid air. *And* despite that I'd been so tense only minutes before.

Dane rinsed the shampoo out of my hair and then rubbed a small amount of conditioner through, massaging my scalp again, finally rinsing that out as

well. He used the shirt on my shoulders to rub my hair dry, his hands gentle yet strong as I rotated my neck. I remembered back to the way my body had ached in agony after the crash and a wave of gratitude washed through me. I laughed softly, somewhat surprised that there was anything to feel grateful for in this situation. But there was. Oh, there was. Fire, loose muscles, clean hair . . . and *not* being alone.

“What?” Dane asked, dragging the comb through my hair.

“I was just thinking of the things I’m grateful for right now. I was being very optimistic—not like myself at all.”

Dane laughed. “It only took being stranded on the side of a mountain in winter to bring out the Pollyanna in you?”

I laughed, turning to him, momentarily surprised to see such softness in his eyes as he held and stroked a length of my hair. “I guess so. Who would believe it?” I angled my head so my hair was getting as much of the heat from the fire as possible, hoping it would dry quickly. It was too cold to leave it even partially wet when I stepped away from the fire.

“Me, actually. The small blessings are what get you through situations like this one.”

“Yes, I guess so.” I smiled.

We ate our measly dinner, sitting in front of the fire as my hair dried completely. The sun disappeared, bathing our mountain in darkness. But the fire danced and flickered, melting the falling snow and casting shadows on the rocks surrounding us.

We both began yawning at the same time and retired to our shelter with a bottle of cooling water to sip from during the night. We got under the blankets, shivering momentarily in the cold air. But soon enough, the warmth from the fire found us, our body heat combined under the blankets to form a comfortable cocoon, and Dane gathered me to him, holding me around the waist as had become our sleeping position. “We can take turns getting up to add branches to the fire to keep it going,” I murmured, snuggling in to him.

“No, I’ll do it. You sleep.”

I turned in his arms. “No, Dane—”

“Shh, let me take care of you tonight, Audra.”

I thought about arguing, but I could tell it meant something to him to care for me—perhaps after I’d cared for him for days as he healed, *or*

*simply because that was who Dane was*—so I nodded, turning back around.

“Thank you, stubborn woman,” he whispered teasingly in my ear, causing me to smile in the dark.

As I drifted toward sleep, I thought about what Dane had said about recognizing small blessings in the midst of challenge, wondering if I’d ever managed to do that until now, wondering if I’d even really tried. Questioning if, in the end, those things helped, or made everything that much more painful because they were *all* you had.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## Dane

The storm raged for two days as we hibernated in our tiny shelter, leaving to add wood to the fire, eat the fast-dwindling, miniscule meals of rationed food, and to use the bathroom when desperate. Occasionally, we left to sit outside near the cliff where we'd spotted the plane before, wrapped in blankets, but still assaulted by the whipping wind and sub-zero temperature for as long as we could stand. Our second fire pit would have to wait until the storm died down. In the meantime, Audra would hold the *People* magazine in her lap and sketch distractedly in the blank spots. I wanted to



look at what she was doing as we sat under a bleak winter sky, only each other and our roaming thoughts for company, but I didn't. Something told me that to mention it would cause her to stop, and it seemed to calm her. Plus, she'd told me she didn't sketch anymore but here she was doing just that. I hoped she'd tell me why she stopped. When we were so freezing, our teeth were chattering and our noses were bright red, we'd return to our cave-like space near the fire, snuggle together, our limbs still shaking, to sleep once more in an attempt to pass the time.

I was thankful we'd both had a chance to bathe before the storm arrived or the ridiculously close dwelling might have been even more unbearable. Another one of those small blessings, I guessed. As it was, I slept with my nose pressed to

Audra's clean, smoke-tinged hair, reacquainting myself with the feel of her in the dark. We whispered about random things, telling each other the details of our current lives, but I wanted more. I wanted to talk about the subjects that really mattered between us. I wanted to bring up all the old hurts and study them in this safe and intimate space where it was only us. Where I could hold her as we spoke and learn all the secrets of her heart. But she changed the subject whenever I started venturing there, and that, combined with two days of very bleak conditions, was wearing on me.

And realizations were rolling in, like the snow flurries surrounding us. I had thought my feelings for Audra were twisted and tangled—too messy to unravel. Too complicated to even try. But lying there with her, about as close as two people could

be, up on a mountain in the midst of a churning storm, nothing was complicated. Nothing. There was only clarity . . . and the simple truth that I loved her. That I always had. Probably always would. And I still didn't know what the hell to do about it.

On the third day, the storm passed. I woke alone and crawled outside, stretching my neck and looking around, breathing in the crisp, piney air and noting that the fire danced gently, and no wind lashed at my face.

The fire spit and crackled as I added the last of the branches we'd collected the night before. This would keep it going for another hour or two. We'd need to collect more if we wanted to stay warm, which I most certainly did. I'd actually slept surprisingly well the night before, with the now-

familiar warmth of the fire seeping into our shelter, the reduction of the wind, and the soft heat of Audra's body wrapped around my own.

I had the brief thought that I'd be hard-pressed to sleep without her after this and the realization scared me. I'd admitted I loved her, if only to myself. But God, she'd broken me once. Destroyed me. And in so many ways, she was still locked behind those walls that had once kept me out, unwilling to step outside. Especially when it came to Theo.

I stood, calling Audra's name softly. I was certain she'd left the shelter a few minutes before me to go to the bathroom.

The air this morning was bitter cold—it had to be close to freezing and I shivered, rubbing my hands together. I called Audra's name one more

time and then went to the break in the trees to call for her again in case she'd gone farther than normal. *Normal*. Jesus. How fucked up was it that anything about this situation was becoming normal?

Stepping through the trees, I noticed Audra standing near the edge of the cliff, looking out over the ridges and peaks below. I made my way to her, walking up next to her to stand at her side. "Hey," I said.

"Hey," she said softly, her lips tipping slightly but her eyes remaining on the landscape. I turned back, following her gaze, letting the beauty of the white wonderland in front of us wash through me. The sky was a pale, hazy blue, fluffy white clouds floating by. And below, the earth was covered in a blanket of clean, shimmery white. Everything sparkled and glowed, catching lazy shafts of

sunlight and reflecting them back in twinkling radiance. It was breathtaking and for a moment I stared in awe, understanding why Audra hadn't wanted to take her eyes off it for even a second.

“Do you believe in Heaven?” she murmured, her voice dreamy, soft.

I turned to her, studying her profile. That small, sloped nose, red from the cold, her stubborn elfin chin, and the sweep of her black lashes. Lashes that made those almond-shaped eyes of hers look even bigger, softer. “Yes.”

She turned to me then, tilting her head. “You do?”

I put my hands into my jacket pockets, breathing out, my breath rising quickly into the sky. “You sound surprised.”

Her delicate brows furrowed. “We just never

talked about that.”

“We never talked about a lot of things, Audra,” I said quietly.

For a second she froze, an ice crystal among ice crystals, but then her shoulders relaxed and she shot me a smile, though it didn’t quite meet those expressive eyes of hers. “No, I suppose not.” She began to turn back toward our camp and frustration mounted inside me, so strong I almost stumbled.

*Enough!*

“Goddammit, Audra, don’t wall me out.”

She stopped in her tracks and looked at me, stunned, with a bare trace of anger in her expression. “Wall you out? I’m hardly walling you out. I just wanted to admire the view for a minute. Aren’t you the one who talked about small blessings a couple of days ago?”

I ignored her attempt to redirect, suddenly unwilling to skate around the subject. Not for one more ungodly second. “Do *you* believe in Heaven, Audra?”

She laughed, a small, brief sound of pain that was snatched by the wind almost as soon as she’d made it. “I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it. I’ll get back to you when I do.”

“I think we should talk about it now.” I tried to say it gently, but she started to step away and frustration—resentment—raced through me. I reached for her arm, stopping her.

“Oh, Dane, not now. Not *here*. Our lives are on the line. Don’t we have enough to contend with? Do you really think this is the place or the time?”

“Maybe it’s exactly the place and the time.” I paused, as we stared at each other on this barren,



white stretch of mountainside. “He was *my* son too, Audra. I should be able to talk about him. Especially with you. Of all the people on earth, I should be able to say his name and not have you turn away.”

She sucked in a small breath, stepping back. I released her arm and she took another step back, creating more space between us, an ever-widening divide.

“It will help, Audra,” I said gently. “We can help each other let go of some of that pain.”

“It’s too late.”

“It’s not, goddammit. Not if we decide it’s not. I haven’t been close to anyone like I was close to you. I want that again. I want—”

“Bullshit. You haven’t been close to anyone? What about *Winnie*? What about your fiancée? Are

you telling me you weren't close to the woman you were going to marry?"

"She wasn't my fiancée. I never asked her to marry me. Do you want to know why?"

She shook her head rapidly, turning from me. "No! I don't care. I'm starving and . . . freezing and . . . I don't feel like talking about this. Not here. Not now."

I followed behind her as she turned toward our camp. Her shorter legs took twice the time to do the work of trudging through deep snow, so I easily kept up with her. "I flew to Laurelton with the intention to ask my grandmother for her ring. But I was having doubts, reservations, and inside, I knew my heart wasn't in it. I was only considering the possibility of marrying Winnie because it seemed like she expected it."

She tried to pick up her pace, her face rigid with panic. I didn't care. She was going to hear this.

“All I could think about was you. Fuck, Audra. I was considering asking a woman to spend her life with me, and the only woman I could think about was the one who'd let me go.”

Audra stumbled and I reached out, steadying her by gripping her forearm.

“And so I went to see you.”

She halted, her head turning as her eyes widened. “You what? When?”

I stopped in front of her. “I only wanted to see you in person—just to see you. I didn't want you to know I was there. I just . . .” I looked off into the distance, pursing my lips. “I don't know, I just needed to *see* you. To lay eyes on you after all those years.” I sighed, meeting her stricken gaze

again. “You came out of your building, and you were with a young, blond guy. You were laughing, and I watched as he walked you to your car and you got in and drove away.”

“That was . . . that was Jay. He works for me.”

“I didn’t know who he was. I didn’t know if he was a coworker or boyfriend, and it didn’t really matter anyway. The timing . . .” He shook his head. “Anyway, what I did know in that moment, was that I wouldn’t ask Winnie to marry me, that I would never ask Winnie to marry me, and I broke up with her that night.”

She stared at me, wide-eyed, but she wasn’t walking away so I rushed on. “I knew in that moment I would never love Winnie even half as much as I’d loved you. And she deserved more than that.”

“Dane,” she said, her voice a broken whisper.

“I went back to my grandmother’s and told her I’d changed my mind. She just looked at me for a minute and then said, ‘That’s all it took. One look at her is all it took.’ Somehow she’d known I’d gone to see you.” I sighed. “I don’t know, but she knew, and she was right. One glimpse of you, even from across the street, the sun already fading from the sky, and I knew.”

“Dane,” she breathed, “neither one of us can expect to feel that same . . . intensity of first love. It isn’t fair, not to anyone else and not to us. It wasn’t right to compare what we *once* had with”—she waved her hand through the air—“whatever you had with . . . her.”

“No. I made myself believe that for a while too, but that wasn’t it, Audra. I didn’t love you that

intensely because you were my first love. It wasn't that. I know that now. You weren't just my first love. You were my once-in-a-lifetime."

She shook her head, gripping her sides as if in pain. "Why. . . why are you telling me this?"

"Because you need to know. You need to know that I'm not trying to hurt you, Audra. I'm not trying to cause you pain. I want to be able to talk to you about what happened between us, because for me, those feelings aren't in the past."

"It's just this situation, Dane. It's just"—she shook her head—"sleeping together every night, the high emotions of our predicament. It's not, I mean, once we get back . . ."

I gritted my teeth in frustration. "You can't fucking tell me what I feel. I just thought it was too complicated to . . . hell"—I let out a harsh breath

—“I didn’t know what to do. But the situation has made it clear to me that we’re worth fighting for. Things between us can be worked out. If you’ll just talk to me, Audra. You need to, I know you do.”

She turned again and began walking. “God, Dane. You say you care about me, but you keep pushing me.”

I stepped to catch up. “Because I should have *then* and I didn’t.”

She laughed again, another garbled sound. “You should have pushed me? I didn’t need you to push me. I just needed you to . . . I needed you to be there.” She whirled toward me, stopping me suddenly as we almost collided. “You left me! All . . . all those days and I could h-hardly function but y-you just went about life—b-business as usual. And I *saw* it,” she spat. “I *saw* the l-look of relief

on your f-face and I don't think I can forgive you for it. You say you still have feelings for me, but you had feelings for me then too, and you were still r-relieved that he had . . . had . . . you were relieved. And every day that I looked at you, I s-saw that expression. I couldn't look at you without remembering and I . . . I couldn't stand it." Her teeth were chattering and she was trembling all over, practically gasping through each word, and my heart rose to my throat and lodged there, stunned and wracked with pain to hear her talk about this after so long. But I'd pushed for it, hadn't I? I'd pushed her, and as much as I wanted to walk away, to sift through the revelations of her confession, I didn't have time for that. We were on a mountaintop, stranded, starving, and I had nothing to lose.



I clenched my eyes shut for a moment, taking a sharp breath, and allowing my mind to go back there, to the first storm—*the one we hadn't survived*. I shook my head. “I didn't know what to do, Audra. I was trying to stay sane, to function, because you couldn't. I was trying to pick up the slack so you didn't have to think about any of that—so you could just grieve the way you needed to. And then I left you to do that.” Regret slammed into me, so strongly I almost sagged against the weight of the emotion.

*Yes, I left her.*

I'd left her alone because it was the easier thing to do.

*And then she left me.*

“But I wasn't relieved that Theo was dead. I was relieved that *you* weren't. When I saw you

holding him, honey, my heart broke. I kept thinking of those long hours you fought to bring his body into the world. And all I could keep repeating to myself to make it bearable was, thank God I didn't lose my wife too. Only, I did lose you, didn't I?" Looking into her tear-filled, devastated eyes now, I could recall so vividly what her face had looked like that horrible morning. She'd looked pale, forlorn, *destroyed*, but I'd held on to the only thing I could, the relief that I hadn't lost them both. That my girl was still there . . . fighting. *Fuck. How did I miss that?* What she saw in my expression . . . she hadn't understood. And then I'd distanced myself emotionally, leaving her to fight alone. No wonder she'd lost all trust in me.

Audra inhaled a big shaky breath, giving me another stunned look of stark pain. She opened her

mouth as if to say something and then closed it, shaking her head as if rejecting whatever she'd been considering. Then she turned again, heading the few feet to our clearing, walking slowly this time. I let out a deep sound of frustration, gripping my hair in my hands and staring at the sky for a moment. Finally, I followed along behind her, walking in her footsteps.

She was sitting on a rock near the fire—the fire that had died and was now nothing but smoldering ash.

“Ah, fuck!” I yelled, kicking at the snow and then picking up a handful and throwing it at the fire. The spray bounced off the cold wood and flew at Audra and she flinched back, drawing in a surprised breath.

My heart dropped. “Oh, God, Audra, I’m

sorry, I . . .”

*Fuck, fuck, fuck!*

But she didn't even glance at me, and the words died on my lips. *She was gone again. Back behind her wall.*

Fuck this.

We were never going to mend . . . us. I'd told her I still had feelings for her, bared my heart, and yet she sat there, unable to look at me, that stubborn chin set, her shoulders rigid. Maybe I'd never get through to her. Maybe, if there ever had been a chance, it had come and gone long ago. Was there too much resentment between us, too much time and too much pain? My anger faded and suddenly I just felt defeated. Defeated and fucking sad.

“I'm going to get some wood. We'll have to

try to light another fire.”

I turned, not waiting for her reply, if she even planned to give one. I wandered farther than I had before, past the trees we’d already stripped of lower branches, more deeply into the forest. As I walked, I was mindful of the fact that we were on the edge of a cliff. But I figured if I stayed where trees grew, I was probably safe.

A shot of brown fur surprised me, eliciting a yelp as I stumbled backward. But just as quickly as I’d seen it, it was gone, moving through the thick trees. *A wolf?* Hopefully it was scared to see a human in this remote forest, but even so, I decided to turn back. My arms were full of wood and I figured it’d be enough for now.

When I stepped through the clearing, Audra was sitting on the same rock she’d been on when I

left. She was shivering with cold and she looked utterly devastated. For a moment I just stared, uncertain what to do. She lifted her head and her eyes met mine and slowly, her face crumpling, she lifted her hand in the air, two fingers in a v.

For several beats, I was confused. And then my mind snagged on what that sign meant to me, of how it had been my siblings' code if we had become distressed when swimming across the pond. How we'd used the sign to indicate we were in trouble.

*It meant we needed help, but couldn't form the words to ask for it.*

Ah, Audra.

*Jesus.*

I dropped the branches in my arms and rushed to her, falling on my knees in front of her and

taking her into my arms as she let out one small cry, burrowing her face into my chest. “Audra, sweetheart, I’m here. I’m so sorry. I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t know what to do, how to—”

She shook her head, stopping my words, turning her face to mine, her expression one of such agony that it felt like a punch to my gut. “I do want to talk about it, Dane. I just . . . I just don’t know how. I’ve felt so alone, held on to so much pain. And I don’t know how to let it go.” She let out small sobbing gasps between her words and I pulled her closer, simply holding her for a moment, such profound relief pulsing through me that I felt weak with it.

“It’s okay. I’m here. You’re not alone anymore.” *Never again. I’ll never leave you alone again.*

She gripped my jacket in her fists and cried, tears that I suspected had been dammed up for far, far too long, all rushing forth in one torrent of agony. I held her closer as she sobbed, a wailing sound of profound devastation, an ancient cry of unthinkable pain that only mothers who've said goodbye to their child can know. It rose from her soul, from the mountain beneath us, from all things unchanging and immovable that you cannot fight against no matter how hard you try. It pierced my heart. It strangely filled me with an excruciating honor. This woman in my arms, who I knew I loved with all my heart and soul—was finally, *finally* trusting me with her deepest pain. And with God as my witness, I was going to be worthy of her faith.

I stroked her back, her hair, holding her tightly as her sobs turned to small gasps that eventually



became tiny intakes of breath, fading to silence, the steady beat of her heart right against my own. “I didn’t take care of him,” she whispered.

Confused, I tipped her chin up. She looked exhausted, and still sad, but the devastation had left her expression. “What?”

She shut her eyes for a moment. “You said when you moved to San Francisco, you felt comfort in knowing I’d take care of him. Of Theo.” A single tear spilled from her eye and rolled down her cheek. “But I didn’t. I haven’t even gone to visit his grave. All these years. I . . . couldn’t. All his things . . . they’re in a box in the attic. And I hate myself for that.”

I used my thumb to wipe the tear from her cheek. “Shh. You don’t have to go to his grave to visit him. I talk to him sometimes when I’m driving

in my car.”

“I talked to him when the plane was going down. It was the first time I had since we lost him.”

“He must have heard you.”

She sniffled, and then gave me another lip tilt.

“Then maybe we should be asking him to get us off this mountain.”

“Or maybe we’ll look back at this as the best thing that ever happened to us. Our second chance.”

She chuckled through another snuffle. “I don’t know that I’m quite that optimistic.”

“Then I’ll be optimistic for us both,” I said, moving her hair back from her face, kissing her forehead, wiping the last of the tears from her cheeks. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for turning away when I saw your pain. I convinced myself you

didn't need me, that you had closed yourself off, to justify not making more of an effort." I breathed in, long and deep. "The truth is, I was hurting so damned much, and I didn't think I could take on your pain as well as my own. And so I managed what I could—school, my job, the house, and I left you to your grief when we should have been grieving together."

She remained silent for a moment, sniffing quietly, digesting my words perhaps. "We lost each other," she murmured after a moment before tipping her head back again. When she did, there was something in her eyes, some clarity, a bit of relief perhaps. "You were right to say I walled myself off, Dane. I did close doors, but I desperately hoped you'd try to open them, hoped you'd bang them down if necessary. Because up

until then, you'd been my biggest supporter. You were my person, my only safe place, and then . . . and then you weren't. And I grew resentful. But that wasn't fair. I didn't know how to ask for your comfort, and so we grieved separately, the distance between us growing until there was no way to bridge it. That's what happened, isn't it?"

"I think so, honey, yes."

She bit at her lip, her eyes soft and thoughtful, and despite her tear-streaked face and her reddened nose, in that moment she looked so damn pretty. "When the darkness began clearing, we were already so . . . separate. And I knew how much you'd given up to marry me."

*What?*

She took a deep breath, averted her eyes briefly. "I heard you and Dalila in your office one

night discussing the fact that Luella had cut you off completely. And I felt so guilty. You said that when I told you I was pregnant, everything, your whole damn future went up in smoke.”

“Audra—”

“Let me finish, Dane. Please.”

I nodded, but felt sadness and shame. She’d carried so much weight—both hurt and false blame—on her slim shoulders. And she was finally expressing both.

“We never talked about it because we found out about Theo’s heart condition just days afterward.” She paused. “When we lost him, I guess I convinced myself that, since there was no baby, there was no reason for you to stay married to me.”

“Ah, Christ, Audra. I was planning to tell you

about that after Theo was born. And then . . . well, once we found out the situation with him, it didn't seem important. But . . . did you think I cared more about my family money than you?"

She shook her head slowly. "No. I didn't think that. But after we lost Theo, it seemed like an unnecessary sacrifice." She sighed. "Or maybe that's what I told myself. Maybe I was just so angry and hurt, and looking at you day after day kept me stuck there. So instead of trying to draw you closer, I pushed you further away."

I sighed. "I hold some blame there too. It was almost easier"—I grimaced, because it was the truth—"less painful, not to be around you at all. Your very presence brought up the pain of our loss and I, Christ . . ." I let out a sharp breath, but I owed her the truth. If we had any hope of working

through this, we had to be completely honest with each other, reveal every ugly secret. “When you asked for a divorce, I was angry and hurt, but I almost thought . . .”

“It would make things easier.”

I nodded. “Yeah. And so I didn’t fight you on it as hard as I should have. But I would have stayed, Audra. I swear to you. I vowed to love you for life, and I meant it with my whole damn heart. I’m just so fucking sorry that I didn’t love you enough when you needed it most.”

“I don’t know if it’s that you didn’t love me enough. Maybe we just didn’t know *how* to love each other through our tragedy. We were both just kids.” She paused. “We really fell apart under pressure, didn’t we?”

I smiled, pushing a strand of hair from her

face. “Not this time, though.”

She smiled back, a real one. “No, we seem to be doing a little bit better this time. So far.” She shivered gently and I realized I was freezing too, so I unwrapped her from my arms, standing on stiff legs.

“Want to work our fire magic again? And I need to change pants. These ones are soaking wet.”

She looked down at the snow where I’d been sitting this whole time with her curled in my lap and winced. “God, I didn’t even think about the fact that you were sitting on the ground. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. Not in the least.” I felt happy and hopeful and like a weight had been lifted I hadn’t even realized was there. I was also exhausted . . . emotionally. We’d needed to talk things out, and in our current state of utter fatigue and lack of



nutrition, we'd done well to keep talking. Particularly Audra, and how long she cried. *Although, I was learning that was nothing compared to how long she'd carried such grief.* We needed rest.

I used my forearm to wipe the layer of snow off my duffle bag and grabbed a pair of jeans. "Sorry about getting pant-less out here for a second, but I don't really have a choice." Our sleeping shelter wasn't tall enough to stand up in. But Audra shot me a smile, her cheeks tingeing slightly. She didn't look uncomfortable.

"Here," Audra said, walking over to me and handing me a garbage bag.

"Thanks, I guess I will need that, won't I?"

"Unless you want to get your socks wet."

"Definitely not. Thank you."

I took off my shoes, removed the sodden pants, holding them over my arm so I wouldn't get the other clothes in my bag wet, and began pulling on my jeans.

Audra eyed me over her shoulder, her eyes roaming downward and landing on my thigh. She turned, her expression concerned. "Let me look at that." She took the couple of steps to where I stood, wearing only boxers, my jeans pulled up to my knees, and bent to look at my stitches. Her brow furrowed. "It looks red around the edges and there are red streaks . . ." She traced one with her finger.

"Yeah, I noticed that. I think it's just part of the healing process. It might be a little bit irritated, but it doesn't hurt as much anymore."

She pressed her lips together. "Hmm. Well that's good." She bent a little close. "The bottom

stitch is torn, though.”

“I know. I ah, did that climbing the hill to the plane.”

“Days ago?” She stood, putting her hands on her hips. “Dane, you should have told me. I’d have fixed it.”

I pulled my jeans up the rest of the way and stuck my feet in my shoes. “Listen, Dr. Frankenstein, I appreciate that, but really, it’s fine.”

She snorted, turning away. “All right, then, get me warm, because I’m freezing.”

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She was crying, but she was still asleep. I’d woken

to stoke the fire and add wood to it, the sky between the breaks in the trees catching my attention as brief streaks of light illuminated the dark forest.

When I heard the tiny whimpers coming from our shelter, I ducked inside, whispering Audra's name, touching the wetness on her cheeks, my heart constricting painfully. She gasped out another sob, shuddering, and I put my arms beneath her, scooping her up and ducking back out through the door where I straightened.

Audra's eyes opened blearily and she blinked up at me, her gaze disoriented and teary. She wrapped her arms around my neck, pulling closer. "Dane?"

"Shh, I've got you," I said, adjusting my arms beneath her body so I had a better hold of her. "I

have plastic over my shoes and you don't. Let me hold you. There's something I want you to see."

She sniffled again but didn't ask any more questions, resting her head on my shoulder, her breath warm against my neck.

When I stepped into the clearing, it was just in time to see a blazing golden streak as a shooting star shot across the sky. "Oh," Audra breathed, tilting her head to the heavens as another star followed. She gasped, a sound that turned into a small sob as she pressed her face to my neck. "I want him back," she cried, the wetness of her pain sliding down my skin.

"I know," I whispered. "I do too, honey. I do too."

She shuddered as another sob tore from her chest. "I didn't get to hold him long enough."

I pulled her even closer, nuzzling the side of her head, kissing her temple. “Nothing but forever would have been long enough, sweetheart.”

She cried as I held her, releasing more of her pain as dazzling light fell from a black sky, the earth proving that there was no such thing as complete darkness.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

## Audra

Morning had broken. The new glow of dawn filtered into our shelter, and I blinked at the rock wall directly in front of me, light and shadows dancing together. A waltz of sorrow and joy.

I'd somehow grown used to waking here. We'd been on this mountain long enough that I no longer had to orient myself when morning came. The fire outside snapped and crackled, and the winter birds were waking in the trees, singing their greeting to the brand new day. Despite the fire, the air in our shelter was still cold, but my body was warm. I snuggled against the heat of Dane at my

back, recalling the day before and then the night. The shooting stars, the way my heart had swelled in a way I didn't completely understand at the sight of those brilliant flashes of falling light. The way Dane had cradled me in his arms as I'd cried. *The way he'd carried me.*

I thought about all we'd said to each other: the revelations, the confessions, and truths. And I suddenly saw the situation with Dane—our marriage and the demise of us—in a very different light. We'd both made mistakes, both withdrawn from the other in our own ways, but we'd been so young, struggling with something for which there was no guidebook. But there had never been a lack of love, despite it all. We just hadn't known how to access it. We hadn't known how to offer it.

*I loved him.* I'd never stopped. And that had



also been a small part of the reason I'd been so unwilling to venture back to the past in my mind. My heart had known that to do so would be to admit it still belonged to the man I'd once pledged my life to and meant it with every ounce of my being. The man I'd willingly given up, though never in the deepest part of my soul.

Dane sighed in his sleep and I smiled, scooting against him even more. He was so very warm, so solid and yet so soft to snuggle against. I was hungry, my bones sharper than they'd ever been, and uncomfortable to lie on, and yet for the moment, I felt relaxed, safe even. He let out another soft moan and I realized I was wiggling against another part of him that felt *decidedly* solid. For a moment, I froze, but then a warm flush rose from my toes to my cheeks.

*I loved him.*

I wanted him and that's all there was here in this small shelter from the brutal cold—love, desire, and yes . . . trust. I hoped desperately to be rescued, but until we were, I wouldn't want to be weathering this storm with anyone but him.

A peace fell over me, inexplicable considering our circumstances, and yet it felt so good, I held on to it tightly, unwilling to let it go just now. Later . . . later we could deal with the very real challenges we faced. But here, now, I needed him. I needed to love and be loved, to remind myself why giving up was not an option.

I turned in the intimate shelter of Dane's arms, his eyes just blinking open as he smiled sleepily at me. I put my hand on his bearded cheek, smoothing my thumb over his lips, and then his cheekbone,

more defined than it'd been when we'd boarded that plane. I didn't speak but he must have seen the desire in my eyes because he moved forward, pulling the blankets up to our necks.

I wrapped my leg around his, bringing our pelvises flush against each other. Dane gave a low growl of masculine pleasure and it shot straight between my legs like electricity. I answered Dane's moan with one of my own, bringing my mouth to his. The kiss was slow and deep, a gentle dance of lips and tongue. It felt almost leisurely, but for the coiled tension I sensed in his body, in the way he pressed himself against me, hot and hard, his breathing ragged when he pulled his mouth away to kiss and nip at my throat. I leaned my head back, a smile on my lips, allowing myself to enjoy the physical expression of this man's love for me.

“I’ve missed you,” I whispered. My voice caught, emotion pushing the words from my chest in a rush of joy, of gratitude, of so many feelings that had been trapped inside me for so long. In walling off the pain, I’d also walled off happiness and hope. I knew that now.

Dane paused, and I lowered my head, our eyes meeting as he gazed at me with adoration, the same look that had caught at my heart when I’d seen it in the groom’s eyes in Victor’s studio. Dane had looked at me like that on our wedding day, and he was looking at me like that now. I let out a sound that was part joy and part pain before Dane kissed me again, whispering, “I’ve missed you too, honey.”

For a time, we simply kissed and touched, delighting in the languorous joy of giving and

receiving pleasure, of re-learning each other's bodies, even though we hadn't removed any clothes. My hand roamed under Dane's shirt, his skin silky and warm, his heartbeat quickening beneath my palm. He pressed his erection between my legs, eliciting tingles of pleasure even through my jeans. *Oh.*

I closed my eyes, losing myself in the physical pleasure—the only one that hadn't been taken from us in this unforgiving wilderness. Dane thrust slowly against me as we kissed again and I gasped, wanting more, wanting him inside me so badly I ached. “More,” I moaned.

Dane put his hand up my sweater, sliding over the skin of my belly slowly, torturously, his palm warm and slightly calloused. That felt so good, but when he reached my breasts and pulled one bra cup

down to thumb my nipple, I cried out in bliss. He moaned against my neck as he continued to play with my nipples and I writhed against him. “Oh God, Audra, I’m so hard. I don’t think I can wait.”

“Don’t wait,” I begged, using my hands to unbutton my jeans, wriggling this way and that so I could pull them and my underwear down my thighs.

Dane reached under the blankets as well and I heard the zip of his jeans right before he came over me, adjusting the blankets so they were pulled over his back. He reached down with his hand and slipped a finger through my folds, our eyes locked in the dim light. When his finger dipped inside me, I sucked in a breath and his eyes went half-mast. He used his finger to bring the slippery proof of my arousal up, running his finger along my outer lips slowly and finally circling the spot that made me

pant and cry out.

Dane leaned in to whisper in my ear as he pleased me. “I’m going to make you come this way, honey, because there’s no way I’m going to last longer than about a minute once I get inside you.”

“Mmm,” I moaned, arching upward into that magical hand. He stroked me gently but with the perfect amount of pressure as if he’d never forgotten how to touch me so that my body spiraled toward climax. It made me feel cherished, adored, loved. “Dane,” I gasped as I soared up, up, finally tipping over the edge as I cried out his name once more. In the back of my pleasure-soaked brain, I heard his grunting sound of approval and before I’d even begun to come down, I felt the blunt tip of him at my entrance. He moaned as he pushed

inside, easily entering on one quick thrust.

“Ah, Jesus,” he groaned as he started moving, slowly, his expression tensed, as if he wanted to make it last but was barely holding on. He clenched his eyes shut for a moment as his thrusts increased in pace. I closed my eyes, glorying in the fullness of his invasion. “Look at me,” he said, his thrusts becoming jerky.

I did as he said, opening my eyes and staring at his pleasure-tightened expression, seeing what was so clear in his eyes. This wasn't only sex, not only the enjoyment of a physical encounter. *Not like in San Francisco.* This was a reclaiming. I knew it because I'd been claimed by Dane Townsend once before and it'd made my heart leap fiercely the first time just as it did now. “Tell me you're mine,” he grunted.



“I’m yours,” I breathed. *Forever.*

That same expression of deep satisfaction came into his eyes, right before he pressed into me once, twice, and then tipped his head back, his expression contorting with the pleasure of his orgasm.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him to me as he shuddered one last time. Dane rolled off me slightly so I wasn’t taking on his full weight, but most of his body was draped over mine and I luxuriated in the hot, heavy mass of him covering me. He was even warmer now and for a moment, I drowsed, caught somewhere between sleep and wakefulness as my body and mind drifted back down to earth.

Dane didn’t pull out of me. I noted lazily that he’d come inside me, but I couldn’t care about that

now. Not when there were so many other things to worry about. That one seemed distant and unimportant, a worry, perhaps for another time, another place.

Here, there was nothing but the dictates of our hearts. Here, we grasped what pleasure could be found in the union of our bodies. There was nothing else—only us. And we either wandered away from one another, an unbearable, lonely suffering, or we clung together. And so this time, we clung. This time we forgave, for the alternative was far too bitter and we knew it well.

“I love you, Dane,” I whispered, the feeling so strong in that moment it felt as if it had fallen from my heart. Like those shooting stars, light streaking through the murky darkness.

Dane lifted his head, stared into my eyes for a

moment, and as the expression on his face filled with so much tenderness, tears came to my eyes. “I love you too. I know now that I never stopped.” He nuzzled his nose against my own. “I love you,” he repeated. “In this lifetime and in any that follow. I will always love you, Audra.”

I smiled on a quick inhale of breath, my heart squeezing with love for him. “I will always love you too.”

For long minutes we simply cuddled, our hearts beating in time, living only in that moment because it was all we really had. I played with his hair as his hand ran lazily over my hip. I felt half-awake, like this all might be a dream and at the thought my heart lurched. I knew it wasn't . . . but what if . . . what if it was and I woke up in my house, alone, staring at the cracked ceiling.

Dane lifted his head and looked at me as if he sensed the change in my mood. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. It’s just . . . do you think . . . I mean, if not for this accident . . . do you think we would have . . .” My heart clenched and I sucked in a breath. “Do you think we would have lived the rest of our lives apart?” In some ways, all the revelations I’d experienced were a direct result of these extreme circumstances. Would I have seen the light, allowed Dane’s love back in, felt just desperate enough to finally speak all my ugly truths if I’d been able to run away, to erect more walls? Would Dane have pushed me like he had if we’d been anywhere but here? It scared me to think about it. More perhaps, than being stuck on this mountain. Which was . . . unbelievable. But true.

He smoothed my hair back, leaning in and

kissing me once on the forehead. “I don’t know. But maybe”—he smiled—“the universe wasn’t going to stand for that so it sent a flock of birds who made the ultimate sacrifice so we’d come to our senses.”

I let out a small laugh, the tension uncoiling inside me. *The universe wasn’t going to stand for that.* “If we get off this mountain, I’m going to build a statue in honor of those birds.”

Dane laughed, pulling completely out of me as he rolled to the side.

I bit my lip and turned to him, rubbing my nose on his shoulder, my smile fading. “Do you think the plane will come back?” I asked.

Dane paused for so long, I tipped my head back and looked up at him. He glanced down at me, pressing his lips together once before answering,

“No.”

My stomach dropped. I'd known that would be the answer. “What are we going to do? We have enough food for today and then, that's it.” I felt tears pricking my eyes and a feeling of angry resentment raced through me—resentment at what or whom, I didn't know, but it was there. I wanted to bask in the beauty of lovemaking, the joy of having told Dane I loved him and hearing it back. But we were not in a position to revel in either. The cold, harsh truth was that no one was coming for us. We were almost out of food, and we might very well starve to death up here. We'd lit the fire together again last night, right before my phone charge went out. We had no way to make another fire if this one died, and our supply of wood to burn was limited and becoming more so every day.

“We’re going to keep the fire burning, for one.” He began to sit up and I did too. “And then we’re going to talk about our options.”

I pulled myself together as Dane did the same, lifting the “door,” and crawling outside as I followed him. We both stood, Dane stretching and then reaching for me, pulling me to his side. I looked up at him as we huddled together in the chilly morning air. “We have options?” I asked.

“Not many. We can either try to survive the winter, or try to hike out of here.”

“Hike out of here? How? We’re surrounded by rock walls and cliffs too high to climb down without breaking our necks.”

He put his hands in his pockets and shivered slightly. I frowned, bringing the back of my hand to his cheek and feeling his skin. It felt hot and slightly

clammy. “My God, Dane, I think you have a fever.”

“A fever? I actually feel more cold than anything, not hot at all.”

“Well, you are. Do you think it’s your leg?”

“If it is, I’m sure it’s just a low-grade fever as my body heals. Or, I have a bug or something. I’m fine, Audra. Really. I’ll let you know if I feel bad. In the meantime, soak up my heat.” He pulled me to his side again, and even in my worry, it felt wonderful to be pressed against him. *We could cuddle anytime we wanted now.* There was joy in that.

I sighed. “Okay, speaking of heat, we need to collect some firewood.”

“Let me put the last of this on the fire and then we’ll go out together. I saw a wolf or a coyote



or something yesterday, and I don't want you to come across one of those things on your own."

"A wolf? I've heard them at night, but I thought they were far away. Are they dangerous?"

"I don't know, but let's not find out."

I shivered slightly, not just with cold but with the thought of running into one of those wild things on my own in the forest. Not that there was much meat left on my bones at the moment anyway. I probably wouldn't look very tasty to a carnivore.

We collected as much wood as we could, Dane lifting me up to reach the higher branches he couldn't reach on his own. I was able to collect more that way. The higher the branches went, the stronger they got, and we still had no way to chop them off, relying on our own ability to pull and wrench them off the trees. By the time we were

done, my arm muscles ached, but we had a decent-sized pile of wood.

As we were heading back, I noticed a furry brown plant growing near a dip in the snow. I rushed over to them, turning toward Dane. “Cattails,” I said. “The stalks are edible.”

“How do you know?”

“I work with plants. I don’t know . . . I come across weird information in books, magazines. These won’t fill us up, but they’ll feed us.”

“Hand me the wood you’re holding and pick as many as you can,” Dane said, coming up right behind me. I transferred the branches to his arms so his pile was up to his chin, and he waited as I plucked as many cattails as I could from the ground.

We headed to our camp and fed the fire and

then ourselves, Dane's expression grim as our eyes met over the precious little food left. I reached for a cattail, pulling off the fluffy head and handing Dane the stem. "It probably won't taste great, but it has vitamins in it. Wash it down with some water."

He nodded, ripping off a piece of the stem with his teeth, chewing and swallowing. "Not bad, actually. Kind of starchy and sweet." He took another bite as I plucked another stem for myself, taking a bite and nodding in agreement with his assessment of the taste. It wasn't bad. I still felt hungry after we'd eaten, but the hunger's sharp edge had been dulled and for that small mercy, I was grateful.

"What are your ideas about climbing out of here?"

Dane looked at me, putting the last piece of

the cattail stem in his mouth and eating it slowly. “We’d have to make something—a rope—to get us down one of the cliffs. I think the eastern one is our best bet. There’s a rock formation to tie one end to and it looks just slightly lower than the others.”

I nodded slowly. He’d obviously put some thought into this. He must have admitted to himself days ago that our rescue hopes were over. “What could we possibly use as a rope? We don’t have anything strong enough.”

“We could strip the leather from the airplane seats and cut it into strips, tie it together to form a long rope,” he said.

“You said we wouldn’t get back on that plane, that forcing a seat from the base would jar it too much to be safe.”

“I know what I said, but it might be worth the

risk. It might be our only option.”

I stared at him. It seemed like a terrible option. That precariously balanced plane scared the hell out of me. I had a bad feeling about it. If it even slipped a little, the ice it was on would only make it slip that much more easily. “What if we get down the cliff and then there isn’t a path from there that doesn’t involve an even higher cliff?”

Dane puffed out a breath, sticking his hands in his pockets and shivering slightly. “There’s no way to know that. We just have to decide if it’s worth the risk.”

“We’d have to leave our fire behind, with no way to make another one. And how would we bring the things we need to make a shelter?”

Dane massaged the back of his neck. “We could use the same method you did to get me up

here from that plane. We'd make a sled, decide what we couldn't do without, and carry that behind us. Maybe we'd make a strap so the sled would be easier to drag."

"God, Dane, you really have thought about this."

"I think we have to. No one's coming for us. We're on our own."

My heart seemed to contract slowly and then expand all at once, my breath coming out in a quick gasp. But I forced myself to breathe deeply, to nod my head. "Yeah," I whispered. "Yeah."

"We're going to survive this, Audra. Do you trust me?"

I stared at the man sitting across from me, the man I'd fallen in love with so long ago, the man I'd never truly gotten over. We'd gone to hell once

together, and we'd walked out separately. In some ways it felt like we were in hell together, again, just a different sort. But this time, we wouldn't make the same mistakes. This time, we were going to link hands and survive. Somehow. *Somehow*. "Yes. I trust you."

His expression softened and he smiled, small, tender. "You and me?"

"You and me," I confirmed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### Audra

Dane's fever was getting worse. I rolled toward him two mornings after we'd spoken of trying to get to a lower altitude, putting my hand on his sweaty forehead as his eyes blinked open. "Hey," he said, his voice gritty with sleep. My heart started beating faster when I saw his reddened cheeks and slightly glazed eyes.

"Your fever is getting worse," I said.

He put his hand on my cheek. "I know."

"It's your leg. You have an infection, Dane. I don't know what to do."

"There's nothing to do. We just need to let my



body take care of it. It'll be fine.”

“What if it isn't, Dane? Not everything is always fine. Things don't always just end well! Sometimes they end horribly. We know that better than anyone.”

Dane regarded me for a moment, his gaze moving over my face, pressing his lips together as if he wasn't sure what to say. He took a long breath, blowing it out. “This will end well.” He leaned forward and kissed me. I knew he was trying to distract me, but I let him. “It will,” he said, and I suspected he was trying to convince both of us. Hope was a funny thing—it didn't rely on evidence to exist. And I guessed that was sort of the whole point.

He made love to me slowly, his heat simultaneously worrying me and providing comfort.

Afterward, he held me as we dozed some more, neither one of us rushing to get up to a breakfast of water and cattail stems. I felt weak, sick, and so tired, I just wanted to sleep continuously.

“I’m going to try to hunt today,” Dane said.

I opened my eyes and stared at the rock in front of me. “How? What?”

“I’ll try some different things. A rock, maybe just surprise. These animals aren’t used to humans in their forest. Hell, it can’t hurt.”

I was pretty darn sure animals would know instinctively to be cautious of anything bigger than them, but I didn’t say that. Maybe we both needed the hope of food—no matter how pitiful the plan, no matter how unlikely of working. Maybe we just needed to feel like we were *trying*.

“No, I guess not. But you should rest.”

“I’m not resting, Audra. I have a mild fever. I’m not useless.” He sounded offended, his pride hurt, and I knew it still upset him to think about me alone for the first couple of days out here while he’d been unconscious.

“I know that.”

We were both quiet for a few minutes and I’d almost fallen back to sleep, when Dane said, “Can I ask you a question?”

I paused, but nodded. “Yes, anything.”

“Why do you still live in that house?”

I thought about it for a moment, admitting the truth to myself, letting it sit inside for a moment before sharing it with Dane. I knew the answer, and it pained me to admit out loud. “To punish myself.”

“Oh, Audra. Why?” His breath was soft on my neck. His arms held me tightly and I felt safe,

loved. I wanted his forgiveness, and I wanted to forgive myself.

“It was my fault that my dad died too.”

“Your fault? How could it be your fault? His heart gave out, sweetheart.”

“I know. But I put him in that home so I could start my own family, and suddenly”—I swallowed back the tears—“suddenly, strangers were taking care of him. I think he just gave up. He didn’t want to be there. I saw it on his face when I visited him, but I convinced myself he’d grow to like it.”

“Audra, honey, he probably would have. And you had a right to find some happiness for yourself too. You were expecting a baby. You had to make a life for him. For us.”

“I know,” I whispered. *But did I?* “Maybe I should have brought my dad to live with us. The

truth is, Dane, I didn't want to," I confessed. "All my life, I'd taken care of him and I just wanted"—I sucked in a sharp breath—"I just wanted something for myself. And look what it got us."

He pulled me closer, smoothing my hair.

"My dad passed away a couple of months after our divorce became final and"—I took a moment to collect myself, the heartache of that day the paperwork had come in the mail washing over me—"I was still so devastated, so numb, that I didn't . . . I didn't grieve for him enough."

"Oh, sweetheart. There's no right or wrong way to grieve. You did the best you could. The best anyone who had just faced so much loss would do." He paused for a moment. "I went to his funeral. I watched you from across the cemetery. I—" He blew out a breath and I turned my head.

“You did?”

“Yeah. It broke me, to see you standing there, so stoic and so . . . alone. I thought about going to you, but you had asked me to leave, and I thought I’d make things worse for you.”

My heart felt like it was in a vise. I clenched my eyes shut for a moment. I was so thankful to know he’d cared enough to come . . . but he was right, it would have made things worse because I wouldn’t have been able to accept his comfort, and I would have had to face the heartbreak of watching him walk away all over again. And at the time I’d been so raw, barely holding on. It would have shattered me.

Dane stroked my hair again, his warm presence soothing me. “You weren’t responsible for your father dying, Audra. And you had no part in

what happened to Theo either. Is that what you meant when you said you felt responsible for your dad's death *too*?"

"I don't know. Maybe. He died inside of me, Dane. And for months and months I just kept going over every movement I made in those days leading up . . ." I sighed. "Maybe it was something I did that caused him to die before he was even born."

I could feel him shaking his head behind me. "It wasn't. But would you have done anything to hurt him, ever, in any way?"

"No," I breathed. "Never."

"Never," Dane repeated. "You never would have done a thing to jeopardize his welfare. Hell, you wouldn't drink a cup of caffeinated tea when you were pregnant. I was there, remember?" I heard the smile in his voice, and it almost made my

heart feel lighter.

“I know. It’s just”—my breath hitched as I felt the sadness well in my throat—“I was his mother. I carried him inside of me. I felt every movement, every hiccup. I knew his personality just by the way he moved. I knew when he’d be awake and when he’d be sleeping. I *knew* him, Dane. And it makes me feel so lonely that no one else will hurt like me because no one else lost all that along with the promise of him.” Tears were falling from my eyes now, and I reached up and swiped them away, despair making my chest so full of pain, so tight with longing.

“But, sweetheart, that’s not a burden. That’s a gift. Truthfully, I’m jealous. You got a part of him I never will and I’m envious of that.”

His words gripped me, causing me to gasp out



a tiny sob. I felt laid bare, and yet with his statement, a warm glow seemed to infuse my heart, beginning at the edges and moving inward until I sagged against him, stunned by the sudden realization. Yes, I had loved Theo in a way no one else had a chance to. In a way no one ever would. I'd always, always looked at that as such deep pain but . . . but yes, yes, it was also a gift, wasn't it? No one would ever have that but me. *And for all those months, Theo had me.*

“Oh, Dane,” I whispered, turning, wrapping my arms around him and crying into his neck. “Thank you. Thank you for that.”

He hugged me back, and we clung to each other that morning, two lost souls, stranded on a dreary plain of ice, hungry, tired, weak, but together. Providing comfort when the other needed

it most.

We slept on and off and whispered in the dim light of our shelter that morning and when I woke, Dane was gone, but the spot he'd vacated was still warm.

I sat up dazedly, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, forcing myself from the shelter, though I wanted to stay there all day. I needed to pee and to drink some water. And I was going to force myself to eat a cattail stem or two. Maybe I'd venture into the woods to see if I could find some rosehips. They were winter plants. I could make tea with them that would probably be bitter but could provide some vitamins.

I stepped into the cover of the woods and squatted down to pee, my thoughts still foggy from sleep. How long could humans go without any food

at all? Longer than without water, I knew that. God, I wished it wasn't so evident just how little knowledge I actually had without Google to assist me. The thought amused me slightly and I felt one side of my lips tug into a smile.

A loud splintering groan seemed to scream through the mountains and I jolted, pulling my jeans up quickly and turning back toward camp. I'd only taken a few steps when I heard something that sounded like a bomb had gone off, halting where I stood, my mind racing with possible explanations. Avalanche? Another plane crash?

“Dane!” I screamed, my heart pounding rapidly in my chest, running toward the place the sound had come from, out of the woods and into the empty space at the top of the hill.

Panicked, I practically tripped when my feet

hit the deeper snow outside the cover of trees, my head jerking to the left where Dane was climbing the hill, dragging something large behind him, his breath coming out in harsh pants of white vapor. I let out a choked sound of relief, moving toward him. He lifted his head when he spotted me, holding up his hands to indicate I should stay where I was.

Looking behind him, my heart lurched when I saw that the plane was . . . gone. Where it had once been, now there was only hard-packed icy snow, and a blackened trail that led straight over the cliff. The tree that had once held the plane in place was gone too. *Oh God.* I swallowed, horrified as my eyes tried to make sense of what had happened. I could see a round arcing mark in the snow where the plane must have turned before sliding down the hill and into the void.

My breath came out in fearful gasps. I needed to regulate my breathing. My galloping heart slowed slightly when I saw that Dane looked okay, the thing he was dragging behind him one of the airplane seats.

“What the hell happened?” I cried, wanting to beat at his chest in my terror. He stopped in front of me, dropping the heavy chair in the snow behind him, breathing harshly, his face flushed, small droplets of sweat clinging to his forehead and upper lip.

“I didn’t want to scare you.”

“Didn’t want to scare me?” I sputtered. “Well, you did. Were you on the plane when it started to slide?”

“Audra, I’m fine. Look”—he pointed behind him at the chair lying in the snow—“mission

accomplished.”

I made a grunting sound of anger. “You went to get that stupid fucking chair off the plane while I was *sleeping*? You could have gotten yourself killed. And then”—I sucked in a huge breath of the sharp, frigid air—“then what would I have done? I wouldn’t have even been able to say goodbye. You’d just be . . . gone.”

“Hey, Audra, honey, I’m fine.” He moved closer, trying to put his arms around me but I pushed him away. He sighed, stepping back. “I know you’re upset, but I did this without telling you because I knew you’d be a wreck the entire time I was doing it, and I wanted to spare you that.”

“Spare me? You don’t get to decide to *spare me*. The way you *spared me* by not telling me your grandmother cut you out of the family business

when we got married? We're a *team*. We do things together. We decide things together. Or, or—"

"You're right. I should have told you. We're a team."

"*Yes.*" I let out a shuddery exhale. And because I had just pointed the finger at something he'd done without my knowledge years and years ago, so it was only fair that I acknowledge decisions I made on my own too. "And I should have talked to you before I signed that prenuptial agreement. I should have trusted you. I shouldn't have done that without you knowing."

Dane pressed his lips together, regarding me for another long moment. "We make decisions together or not at all."

I nodded jerkily, feeling better about *us*, but still feeling panicky and angry and scared and a

dozen other emotions I couldn't even put my finger on about the risk he'd taken. "Were you on the plane when it started to slide?"

I watched Dane's face and saw when he considered lying, then when he dismissed the idea. "Yes."

"How'd you get out in time?"

"I threw the chair out and jumped. Like I predicted, it took the plane several minutes to go over once it started to slide."

I shook my head. "I should kill you myself."

He gave me a repentant look, the one no woman on earth could resist, even if he hadn't eaten, shaved, or taken more than sponge baths in weeks. Bastard. But without my permission, my stupid heart softened.

I attempted to look away, but one side of my



lip quirked up into a half smile. He grinned, still looking slightly woozy.

I sighed. “Come on, it looks like that stunt zapped your energy. You need to be resting, and I’m going to look at your leg.” I turned, starting back for the camp.

“Hey, Audra?” Turning back around, I gave him a questioning look. “We’re going to make it out of here. And when we do, I’m going to spend the rest of my life loving you like crazy.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, Dane Townsend,” I said. And I would too. We didn’t hold each other to our marriage vows the first time. To love and support each other in sickness or health. But next round, I was going to hold on with everything I had.

“Need help with that?” I asked, nodding to the

chair behind him.

“Nah. I got it.”

I watched as he dragged it toward me, noting that he looked shaky. I'd assumed it was mostly from the strenuous nature of what he'd been doing, but now I thought it was more likely that he was sicker with fever than I'd thought. A whisper of worry ghosted through me, but I couldn't let myself dwell on anything other than Dane's assertion that his body was dealing with the small infection, and all we could do was wait for his body to gain back control.

When we'd made it back to our campfire, Dane sagged down onto a rock, holding his hands out to the fire and closing his eyes as the heat met his skin. “God, that feels good.”

I handed him a bottle, filled halfway with

water, and told him to drink the rest of it. I'd melt more snow later and re-stock our supply. Once he'd downed the water, I handed him two cattail stems, but he held up his hand, rejecting them. "Not hungry."

I hesitated. *Not hungry?* Probably a side effect of the fever, still . . . "Force yourself, Dane. We need every ounce of strength we can get. This won't provide much but something is better than nothing. Feed a fever, starve a cold, right?" Or was it the other way around?

Begrudgingly, he took the stems and began eating them.

"So what do we do with that?" I nodded over to the hateful chair, the reason Dane risked his life.

"Strip the leather and then cut it into strips—not so thin they won't hold our weight, but thin

enough that we can accumulate as many as possible. The longer our rope, the better.”

I nodded. “All right. Let’s clean ourselves up first, and I want to re-dress your stitches.”

He nodded, but the weary look on his face sent another frisson of worry through me.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## Dane

We spent the day stripping the leather off the chair—relatively easy as it was only stitched onto the foam cushions in a few spots. But once we'd removed it, cutting it into strips proved more difficult than I'd thought with the small scissors from Audra's mini sewing kit. It took more muscle than I'd anticipated, and it alarmed me how exhausted and bleary I felt after only fifteen minutes of work. Still, I continued on, cutting strips, one after the other until there was no more leather left to work with. This would have to do.

I'd woken up sick and shaky, lying there in the

dark with Audra, and I had this burning feeling in my gut that told me I needed to *do something* to get us off this mountain—sooner rather than later. *Now*. I suspected my infection was getting worse, not better, and I needed to tell Audra because we'd just talked about not “sparing each other” and I meant to keep my word. I wanted to yell with frustration and anger at the way my body was betraying me. I refused to let Audra pick up the slack again as I lay useless beside her.

And so I'd left her sleeping while I'd hiked to the plane. I'd seen immediately that it had already begun to turn sideways as the tree it leaned against at the edge of the cliff had split wide open. It was hanging by a thread, so to speak, and for a moment I'd rejected the idea of getting on it and wrenching the seat out of its base, a task I wasn't even certain

I could accomplish. That fucking thing was likely bolted to it tightly. But this might be my last chance. Another day, maybe two, and that plane would go over the cliff and anything on it would be permanently out of reach. We needed that leather, two seats' worth if I could manage it, but one at the very least.

*Hey Theo, little man. If you can hear me, help me out here, buddy.*

With that whispered prayer, I'd climbed into the plane, wrenched that fucker loose with the last of my strength, the plane beginning its icy slide just as I'd tossed it out the back. The tree shrieked as it cracked in two, and I hurled myself out just as the whole thing turned ninety degrees and slid over the edge. It had all happened in less than three minutes. But I'd been successful. I'd been terrified, but I'd

fucking done it.

And now I needed to get us out of here, because I needed to get to a doctor, and soon.

“Look at that,” Audra said, breaking into my thoughts. I laid down the strip I’d just cut from the cloth, grateful for the break. Looking in the direction she was facing, I saw that the spaces between the trees was vibrant red, orange, and mauve.

Audra stood. “Let’s go watch it.”

I took her hand and followed her out of the break in the trees. Thankfully, there hadn’t been any significant snowfall in the last couple of days and it made walking around on this mountain a lot easier.

My head swam. I felt so hot I was tempted to strip off my jacket and the shirt wrapped around



my neck. I was also shivering. We both stopped and stood staring at the sky, the heavens burning in a fiery glow of color. It was the most magnificent thing I'd ever seen. I sat on a rock and gestured for Audra to sit on my good thigh. She did, frowning when she got close, putting her hand to my forehead, her face contorting in worry. "Dane, you're so hot."

"You don't have to use lines with me, baby. I told you I'm already—"

"Shut up." She smacked my arm. "No, really, you're burning up."

"I know." I cleared my throat, pulling the shirt she had tied around her head more tightly under her chin, making her smile. "I need to talk to you about something."

A cloud of worry darkened her expression.

“Okay.”

I pulled her closer, wanting to rest my head on her chest, just to close my eyes and breathe her in for a while, but I didn't dare. I was so damned tired and if I closed my eyes now, I'd give in to the fever's pull of sleep, even sitting upright on a rock on a freezing cold night. “My fever's getting worse. It might get better but . . . it might not. And if it doesn't, it probably means I have an infection in my blood that's not clearing up on its own.”

Audra's eyes filled with shocked pain. “This is my fault. I didn't do the stitches right. I—”

I put a finger to her lips, stopping her words. “No, this is *not* your fault. Not even a little. And I don't want to scare you, but you need to know this, and you need to promise me that once we get down that cliff, if I get worse, if I can't continue on with

you, that you'll leave me behind."

Her face contorted into such a mask of horror that I clenched my eyes shut, hating that I was putting her through this. Hating my body for not healing itself faster, feeling shame and anger at not being able to *fix* this. "No," she hissed. "Never."

"Audra, listen to me, I'm not telling you to leave me to die. But if I become so sick that I can't even walk, you have to be prepared to leave me in a shelter and continue on for help. You'll have to do that, sweetheart, because I will not let you sacrifice yourself for me. Promise me that."

She was shaking her head vigorously. "It won't come to that, Dane. It won't. We'll get down that cliff and then we'll make the journey together. It will get warmer the lower we go, easier to walk, and your fever will start subsiding. It will."

“Maybe. I hope. But if not, promise me you’ll go on.”

She put a hand on my face, her eyes filling with tears. “I won’t leave you behind again, Dane. I . . . I can’t.”

I smiled weakly. “You won’t be leaving me behind. You’ll be strong if I can’t be. And if I get better and you fall behind, then I’ll be the one to carry you. Promise me, Audra.”

She sniffled, her face crumpling. “I promise.”

I let out a relieved exhale. “Thank you.”

Audra put her forehead against mine. “What would your grandmother say if she could see us now?” she whispered, her lips tipping in a wry smile. “All her evil plans and she only managed to bring us back together.”

I chuckled. “Good old Bea. I guess we should

thank her.”

Audra leaned back, blinking at me. “Bea?”

“Oh, it’s an old nickname. Her brothers, Bryson, Brett, and Baron, started calling her that when she was a little girl because she was the only one without a name that started with B. They figured she should be a B too, so they took to calling her Bea. It stuck. She gets angry if anyone calls her that now.”

She was still blinking at me, her head tilted slightly. “I . . . see.”

“I swear we talked about all the B names in my family when we were picking out Theo’s name. My dad decided to continue the tradition with my brother and sister and me, just using a different letter.”

She glanced behind me for a moment, a look

of pain skating over her expression. I knew why. We'd picked Theo's name after we'd found out we were having a boy, and after we'd found out he wouldn't survive much past birth, if he survived at all. We'd chosen his name together, and only months later, we'd had it etched on his headstone. With the memory, grief punched at my insides. "Maybe," Audra murmured. "I don't really remember." I squeezed her hand and she smiled sadly at me, understanding flowing between us without either of us having to say a word.

After a moment, she looked down as if in thought and murmured, "Bea . . ." She shook her head slightly as if rejecting an idea. I started to ask her what she was thinking about, but she adjusted herself on my knee, and even though she was on my non-injured leg, she bumped my other knee and

it caused a spear of pain to stab into my thigh. I let out a small grunt of pain, pulling my knee away.

Audra's gaze shot to mine. "You okay?"

"Yeah. The skin around my stitches just pulled a little. I'm fine."

She nodded, but I could see the worry in her eyes. She put her forehead back on mine, and then stroked my hair and kissed my cheekbones. For several minutes we sat that way, foreheads pressed together, hands intertwined between our bodies as the dying sun illuminated the sky, reflecting off the ice in a dazzling show of sparkling color.

"What can I do right now to make you feel better?" Audra asked, placing her palm on my grizzled jaw.

I nuzzled her nose. My head was aching, my muscles were tight, and I felt so weak I feared I'd

topple right over, but I forced a smile. “Show me how you used to dance with the butterflies.”

She laughed, a surprised sound. “What?”

I nodded behind her to the snow where prisms of light moved in the air, a gift from the heavens. “Can’t you see the butterflies?”

She laughed again, but then her face sobered. “Are you having delusions?”

I laughed. “No, just imagining. But it’s easy to do. Can’t you see them?” Again, I gestured my head behind her.

She glanced back, pausing, and then turning back to me, a smile, filled with wonder adorning her pretty face.

“You’re right. I do see them.”

“So dance, Audra.”

She gave me a shy glance, but smiled, standing



and offering a curtsy. She put her arms in the air like a ballerina and twirled gracefully in the snow, spinning again and laughing as she raised her face to the sky. I laughed too, the joy of the moment feeling suddenly more powerful than the fever, the hopelessness of our situation, the uncertainty of tomorrow. For a brief blink of time, it was just Audra, the woman I loved with every piece of my heart, dancing in front of me with a kaleidoscope of translucent butterflies glinting in the air around her.

She turned, grinning as she held her hand out to me and I stood, answering her call, walking to her and taking her in my arms. We danced slowly together as the sun lowered behind the mountains, taking the butterflies with it. But we still remained, holding each other, heartbeat to heartbeat, as the sky grew dim.

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That night I dreamed. Misty visions of Audra reaching for me as I tried desperately to grasp her arm, the distance between us expanding no matter how fast I ran. I woke up gasping, my throat burning, my head cradled in Audra's lap. She was dribbling water into my mouth and I swallowed greedily, reaching for the bottle of water so I could drink it in large gulps. I was so thirsty, so hot, it felt like my head was on fire and every muscle in my body ached.

But Audra pulled the water back, hushing me. Her words drifted to me—muted and strange—as if

I were underwater and she was above. “Don’t leave me, Dane,” I thought she said. *I won’t*, I wanted to say, but the words wouldn’t form. Sleep pulled me back under.

I woke drenched in sweat, grimacing at the dim shafts of light through the sides of our woven door. I cried out as I sat up, pulling myself out through the door and into the light of day. What time was it? How long had I slept?

I squinted up at the light-dappled ceiling of pine branches, not able to see enough of the sun from here to guess at the time of day. God, I felt like fucking hell.

Audra was probably using the bathroom. At that thought, I wove my way over to the nearest tree, holding on to it for support as I pissed. Not much, though, and I hadn’t gone since yesterday,

early evening. That couldn't be a good sign, could it? What was happening with my body?

I zipped my pants, spotting the bottles of water sitting next to a rock and making my way toward them. As I drank, I glanced at the fire, still burning. Shame filled me when I realized Audra had to have gotten up all night to feed it. *Goddamn it!* It filled me with impotent fury to know that I hadn't been able to perform that small task for her the night before. I set the water back down and then picked up a pinecone, hurling it toward the trees, the movement causing me so much agonizing muscle pain that I sat on the rock on an exhale of curses, breathing heavily. My head throbbed as the forest radiated around me and I clenched my eyes closed, holding my scalp in my hands.

That's when I heard her scream. It rang

through the forest, through the canyons, echoing off the rock. I jolted, jumping to my feet and staggering as I took three steps forward, looking around wildly. “Audra!” I called, racing in the direction her scream had come from, not out into the wide-open space, but back, through the trees, into the forest.

As I passed the back of our shelter, the silver glint of metal caught my eye and I grabbed the piece of edging I’d used as a walking stick what seemed like so long ago.

I wove through the forest, dodging trees, moving faster than my body wanted to manage, single-mindedly trying to get to Audra. I gripped the piece of metal in my hand, a weapon, though I had no idea what had caused that terrifying, blood-curdling scream. My heartbeat pounded in my ears,

in my head, a raucous percussion of pain and dread.

*Where is she? Where is she?*

“Audra!” I called again. No answer. I heard them before I saw them, a low growl of animal aggression. Breathing harshly, my muscles screaming and my head throbbing, I stepped through a gap in the trees, my stomach lurching in horror to see Audra standing near the edge of a cliff as two wolves stalked toward her, their heads low, their teeth bared as low, twin growls shattered the quiet of the forest.

*Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.* This could not be happening. Adrenalin spiked through my body and I gripped the weapon tightly in one hand, swiping my arm over my eyes when I felt the cold sting of sweat obscure my vision. *Come on, Townsend. Get it together. Now.*

Audra caught sight of me, her eyes wide with horror as her gaze beseeched desperately: *Help me.*

My eyes moved back to the wolves. “Hey!” I yelled and the creatures turned, snarling viciously, their jaws snapping. *Oh God, fuck, they’re big.* I took several steps toward them, and one lowered his head as if ready to rush me. Audra let out a tiny sob, but it echoed in the stillness of the winter morning, and the second wolf turned back to her, slinking along the ground for one step, two before it leapt into the air, hitting Audra square in the chest.

I heard a deep inhuman yell mixed with Audra’s scream and somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I realized that it was me. I threw myself toward Audra who was now screaming on the ground, the wolf on top of her, yanking his head back and forth as if tearing at her flesh. I released

another battle cry as the second wolf attacked me, his jaw snapping just under my chin, a hairsbreadth away from my jugular. With every ounce of strength I had, I brought the piece of metal back and then thrust it forward. The wolf released a piercing yelp, his body jerking as we both went down, me on my back and him sprawled on top of me.

I shouldn't be able to, but I pushed him off, pulling the weapon from his body on a wet sucking sound. The whole thing was surreal, a horrible fever dream. I rushed to Audra, who was still screaming as she grappled with the wolf. With a yell, I thrust the bloodied metal into the wolf's flank and it immediately jumped off Audra and came at me, stopping inches from where I stood. I swiped the metal back and forth as it made a whistling sound in



the air in front of the wolf, who then backed slowly away.

For a second, I thought it was going to turn and run, but it suddenly turned back toward Audra who, bloody and crying, scabbled backward at his approach. The growl was something I'd never heard before, and I hoped to God I never heard it again.

And then . . .

It seemed to happen in slow motion. The snow under Audra dropped out from under her and she flailed her bloodied arms as I dove toward her, our fingers brushing as she let out another blood-curdling scream, plunging backward and out of sight.

With a deep, guttural yell, I landed on my stomach, reaching for Audra who was no longer

there. Below I heard the sickening oof sound as she hit the ground. I screamed her name, the wolf next to me letting out another low growl. I stood, swinging the metal crazily, connecting with his flank again as he yelped. “You bastard! You fucking bastard!” The wolf backed up, turning and limping away with a horrible, broken gait, glancing back only once before he disappeared into the forest.

I dropped back to my stomach, breathing harshly, filled with blinding terror. On the ground below, Audra lay, one leg bent up unnaturally, her eyes closed as blood darkened the snow around her. “Audra!” I screamed, my voice cracking.

For a horrifying moment, she was completely still, silent, but then a soft moan drifted up to me and I sobbed out an incoherent sound of relief. *She*

*isn't dead. She isn't dead. Thank God, thank God.*

“Audra, honey.” I tried my best to sound steady, calm, but my voice broke as I sucked in a shuddery moan.

Her eyes blinked open and she stared at me as if she couldn't comprehend the situation. Finally, “Dane?” Her voice was so soft it barely made its way to me where I lay looking at her from a hundred feet above.

I attempted a smile but it felt like my lips stuck to my teeth in what must be a grotesque grimace. “You're going to be okay, Audra.”

“Dane,” she sobbed, “Dane, I can't feel my legs.”

*Oh God, no. No! This cannot be happening. God, this cannot be happening.*

“It's okay. You're going to be okay.” I pulled

myself to my knees, the world tilting on its axis for a moment as the adrenalin surge wore off and my body protested any movement violently. I choked back the vomit in my throat. She was down there, paralyzed, with no way to defend herself. “Audra, honey, I’m going to throw this spear down to you. I’m going to try to get it to land so you can reach for it, all right? Put your arms over your head in case my aim is off.”

I saw her head move in acknowledgment and then I aimed as best as I could, tossing the metal down to where Audra lay, and slightly to the right. It landed in the snow above her head and I let out a breath of relief as she reached for it, her arm leaving a smear of red in the snow.

“How bad is your arm?”

“I don’t know.” She started crying, her sobs

pinching my heart, as dread and panic warred in my chest, along with the terrible, feverish sickness.

“Apply as much pressure as you can to the places where you’re bleeding. I’m coming down to you. I’ll be there in a minute. Just hold on. Hold on, honey. Hold on.”

# CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

## Audra

Another sob escaped my lips and I tried my best to suck back the scream working its way up my chest to lodge in my throat. This couldn't be happening.

*No, oh God, no.*

I'd just wanted to find some rosehips for Dane. He'd been burning up, tossing and turning, muttering in his sleep, his glazed-over eyes unfocused when he'd woken to drink the water I was dripping into his mouth. I'd been so scared when I'd woken in the morning. If I found some rosehips, I could heat water and make him tea, maybe bring relief from the ravages of the fever.

Doing nothing was slowly driving me insane. The helplessness was like a knife carving into my heart as I watched him suffer and slip away from me bit by bit. *I'm going to lose him. I'm going to lose him.*

I'd gone all the way to the edge of the forest when I'd decided to give up. And that's when I heard the growls behind me, the soft crunch of snow as they stalked closer and closer, backing me toward the cliff.

And then Dane. Dane had come up behind them like a warrior charging into battle. *For me.* Hot tears leaked from my eyes and rolled down my cheeks to collect in my ears.

I heard a small sound to my left and let out a small, fearful gasp, clutching the metal in my sock-covered hands and whipping my head toward the noise. A cardinal. We made eye contact and he

lifted from the ground, soaring up and away into the safety of the trees. I let out a gasping breath, the white vapor rising and dissipating in the cold air as I released my grip on the weapon Dane had thrown me. I hardly had the strength to hold it. How would I use it against something that meant me harm if I needed to?

“Audra?” I heard Dane call and a gasping moan of intense relief burst from my lips at the sound of his voice. He was back. I was hurting so badly, but I wasn’t alone. *I wasn’t alone.* “I’m tying the leather strips together. I have them all here. This isn’t the ideal spot to climb from”—his voice faded away for a second as if he needed time to collect his breath—“but we work with what we have, don’t we, honey?”

I nodded my head, my teeth chattering as the



wet snow beneath me soaked through my jeans, into my very bones. My jacket was ripped where the wolf had torn at my arm and I could feel the blood freezing on my skin. “Y-yes,” I agreed. We did. We worked with what we had.

“Okay, but first, I have my duffel bag here,” he said, his voice slurring just slightly, “and I’m going to throw it down to you. Pull it toward you and take out the shirt on top and wrap it around your arm like a bandage. Stop the bleeding as best you can, okay?”

“O-okay.”

“Good. I know you can do it, Audra. You’re the strongest person I know, baby. You’re Wonder Woman.”

I let out a small, strangled sound, halfway between a laugh and a sob just as the duffel bag

landed on the ground near my left leg.

“Shit, sorry, I tried to get it closer to your arms. Can you get it with the piece of metal?”

I nodded, lifting my head just enough to see exactly where the duffel bag was, using the long piece of metal to hook on the strap so I could drag it closer.

“Good work,” Dane said. “After you tie your arm, there are blankets in there, too. Try not to get them wet because we need them, but cover yourself with them, all right?”

“Y-yes,” I said, unzipping the bag now next to me on the ground. I pulled out the cotton shirt and then unzipped my jacket, crying out in pain as I pulled my right arm from the sleeve, inch by slow inch. I heard Dane swear above, so I attempted to reassure him. “I’m okay. Just h-hurts.”

I didn't want to look at my arm. I just wanted to continue to cradle it against my body, but I stole myself, taking a deep breath and looking down. The top of my arm was relatively untouched. It was the underside that was bloody and mangled, the flesh hanging loose in two spots. Bile rose in my throat but I swallowed it down, searching for every ounce of courage. Dane was going to rappel down to me on a handmade rope while practically unconscious with fever. I was not going to lose it over a bloodied arm.

Using the cotton to wrap around the worst of my injuries, I used one hand to tie the sleeves at my wrist so it was pulled as tight as possible. I worked as quickly as I could, shivering so severely I could barely manage the task. But I did, and as soon as it was done, I pulled my coat back on, took the

blankets from the duffel bag, and carefully put them on top of me, ensuring the edges didn't touch the snow. *Better, better.*

“Just a few more,” Dane said, referring to the knots he was tying, I assumed. God, how was he doing it while he could barely walk? *How could this be happening?* Even if he did make it down to me, what were we going to do? I couldn't walk. *Don't think, not now. Wait for Dane and come up with a plan together.*

*Together.*

My heart raged in my chest, and my harsh breathing plumed in the air and I focused on Dane's voice above me as he talked. “Did I ever tell you I took sailing lessons when I was fourteen?” he asked. I knew he didn't expect me to answer because he didn't wait for my replies, just peered at

me between sentences. I was thankful, because the effort it took for me to yell up to him was too taxing. I was sure talking wasn't any easier for him, but at least he didn't have to shout. His voice carried down to me. But there were unusual pauses between his words, so I knew he was having trouble catching his breath, or perhaps concentrating. "Dustin took lessons too, and he was better at it than I was, which pissed me off. So I decided, fuck it, who needs to sail when you can swim? That's what I was good at. But, one thing that came out of it is I learned how to tie a damn fine knot."

I felt my lips tip into a small smile and my love for him was a living, breathing thing around me, swirling in the icy air. This awful, awful, unfathomable moment and I felt my love for him so

clearly, so profoundly, a current of warmth, a burst of light in the darkness. Nothing was certain, nothing except the love beating through my veins, wrapped around my soul. I closed my eyes and let it burn inside me like I'd swallowed one of those glowing stars and made it mine.

“I'm going to throw a few more things I grabbed at the camp, but just leave them where they land. And then I'm coming down.”

Oh thank God. “Please be safe,” I managed.

“I will.” I heard a few things hit the ground near me, and one farther away, but didn't turn my head to look. My eyes were trained on the spot where Dane would come over the cliff, my heart thumping loudly in my ears. *What if he fell too? What if he couldn't make it? What if—*

The soles of Dane's shoes came into view first

as he backed up over the mountain ledge, not a single piece of mountain climbing equipment in his possession, only a flimsy, handmade leather rope. A small gurgle of terror sounded in my throat. I would not distract him, not now when he needed to focus the most.

Slowly, slowly, he backed over the edge, my heart lurching ferociously with each movement he made. The leather rope he'd fashioned looked so damn thin, so inadequate to hold the weight of a grown man. He dangled, trying to find purchase with his feet on the rock, but seemingly unable to because of the coating of ice. After a short pause, he un-gripped one hand and moved it below the other, moving down another foot. *Oh please, please, please.* He came down another few feet, slowly, slowly and as he drew just a little closer, I

could see that his arms were shaking. *Oh Dane. Oh God.*

He lowered, hand over hand, feet finding a tiny ledge when he could, but otherwise dangling. Hot tears leaked from my eyes to watch him struggling so mightily. He was supporting the entire weight of his body with only his arms and they had to be burning so badly. It should be unendurable. And yet still he held on, still he came for me.

As he approached the halfway mark, I saw that he was running out of rope and my heart stopped before resuming in a quickened beat of fear. *Oh God!* What was he going to do? I wanted to ask him, to call up, to help, to do something, but I knew he couldn't answer. And I knew I was all but useless. My breath came out in small panicked bursts.



And suddenly I heard an awful tearing sound as the piece of leather at the top of the cliff, the one stretched over the edge, ripped, and Dane began to fall.

My own scream pierced the silence right before Dane's cry of pain accompanied the heavy thud of his body hitting the ground. "Dane! Dane!" I cried, struggling to pull myself toward him with my arms, my legs dragging uselessly behind me.

"Stop," Dane panted out in a harsh, wheezing exhale. "Stop." I halted in my movement, drawing in huge mouthfuls of air, trying desperately to catch my breath. "Don't move," he wheezed. "I'm okay."

For a moment he didn't move at all as if he was gathering some last vestige of inner strength, and then on a loud, gasping moan, he pulled himself to a sitting position, grabbing his head in his hands

and wincing.

After another few seconds, he let go of his head, turning his body toward me and crawling to where I was waiting, still up on my one good forearm. “I’m okay,” Dane said again but he most definitely didn’t look okay. His face was flushed red, and he was sweating profusely, his entire body shaking with fatigue or sickness, or probably both. “I’m okay,” he said, as I collapsed onto my back. He took my face in his hands and I could no longer hold back the tears. I cried silently, tears streaming down my cheeks as he brought his bearded face to mine, kissing me and whispering words of comfort.

“Y-you knew the rope wouldn’t reach—”

“Shh. I had to tie it on a tree at the edge of the woods. There was nothing else. That took up half the rope. I thought it would hold until I was close

enough to drop with less risk. But I'm okay."

But I knew he wasn't okay. As far as broken bones, yes, but as far as the infection that affected him, no. He needed to be in a hospital, and badly.

*God, please give him strength. Theo, help your daddy.*

"I saw some smoke. I think. Did I tell you that?"

"Smoke?" I whispered, my mind becoming fuzzy as if it had taken all the stress it could and was closing down at the edges.

"Mmm," he hummed. "Just this far-off wisp of it, baby. I . . . wasn't . . . sure, but we're going to head in the direction it came from. Hope . . ."

I hummed back, comforted by his voice as he talked, the words only barely computing. Smoke. Just a wisp. Maybe. And that was our hope—a tiny

tendrils of vapor that Dane wasn't entirely sure was real. But it was a small something. And that was better than nothing at all.

And I'd come to realize that any hope . . . no matter how small, no matter how unlikely, was just that: a wisp of smoke in the misty distance that you headed toward no matter the cost to get there.

And that's what we would do. Together.

But right now it hurt too much to move. Dane wrapped his arms around me tightly, trapping my arms to my sides. I felt like a burrito.

"I'm going to buy you a burrito when we get back," I murmured.

He smiled, though his eyes were filled with feverish sadness. "I'm going to hold you to that," he said, his teeth chattering. "And then I'm going to marry you."

“You already did that once.”

“I know, but I’m going to do it right this time.”

“*We’re* going to do it right this time,” I murmured on what I hoped was a smile. But was my face so frozen it wasn’t cooperating? *No idea.*

“We are,” he agreed.

I nodded, my eyes closing, my body giving way to sleep, the cold no longer permeating my entire being.

The sound of metal on rock followed soon after. Sounds of retching pricked at my consciousness and I tried to pull myself from the blessed nothingness of sleep, but couldn’t. *Dane was here. It was okay. I could let go for a while.* And so I drifted again . . . falling, jerking awake and then falling again, my body a heavy weight my brain had no control over. Sometime later, Dane

shook me awake. “Open your mouth, Audra, and swallow this. Don’t chew. Just swallow. And then I’m going to give you a drink of water.”

My stomach clenched in hopeful agony at the thought of food and I forced my eyes open. Food? Where had Dane gotten food?

“What is it?” I murmured groggily, opening my mouth.

His hand paused in its movement toward my face and he said simply, “Liver.”

I sucked in a small breath, glancing behind him at one of the things he’d tossed over the cliff before he’d descended. The dead wolf, now lying in a pool of blood, his stomach cut open with the sharpened piece of metal. “Oh God,” I moaned before Dane’s fingers came to my lips. Despite being sick with horror and disgust, my body wasn’t going to refuse

food, so my mouth opened of its own accord, taking the still-warm, slimy piece of meat inside and swallowing quickly. Dane brought the water bottle to my lips immediately and I drank in long sips before he took it away.

I ate three more pieces of raw liver that way and though it was one of the most awful things I'd ever experienced, my body rallied almost immediately with the fresh meat now taking up room in my stomach. "It has lots of iron in it," Dane said numbly. "You need it."

"Are you going to eat some?" I asked.

He wrapped the remainder of the meat in a piece of cloth—some item of clothing or another—and put it in his pocket, standing and swaying for a minute on his feet before steadying himself. "I tried. My body rejected it. I'll try again later. I got

some water down.” With that, he put the duffle bag over one shoulder, and I saw that while I’d been sleeping, he’d fashioned two straps with the leather rope that had fallen from the cliff along with him and attached them to either corner of the front of the carpet. *Our sled.* Each strap was then wrapped around his shoulders so his back and arms were taking my weight.

And so we began the journey toward that small wisp of hope.

At first Dane’s steps were slow—though mostly steady—as I stared at the silver sky, sometimes through breaks in trees, and sometimes unobstructed. We went over small hills, down valleys, through woods, and around obstacles in our path. Several times Dane stopped, still dripping sweat, his expression woozy, his eyes glazed with



fever, to lower me over small cliffs using the leather strap. Then he would jump down himself, taking longer each time to orient himself, getting me situated again and continuing on our way.

At night we stopped and took shelter among the trees. Dane laid half on top of me, his overheated body keeping me warm as he shivered and moaned in pain through the deep, dark of the night. I cried as I held him. He was asleep or barely conscious. We talked sometimes, I think, though it's hard to say whether the words were in my mind or on my lips.

My makeshift bandage had bled through and I watched the trail of scarlet left in our wake. I was woozy from blood loss, from fear, from lack of food and sleep. But I choked down the pieces of meat Dane fed me when we stopped and that small bit of

energy may have been the thing keeping me conscious. The hateful creature had tried to take, but had ended up giving after all, though it was difficult to be grateful under the circumstances.

Dane walked, pulling me behind him, for three days, maybe four. I counted the sunrises, though I was so weak by then, I couldn't be sure. I drifted. I talked to Theo, half in this world, and half in the next. I felt as though I were drowning.

Dane had been lurching for hours, stopping and then starting again, holding on to trees and then pushing himself forward, picking up his legs with his hands a few times as if to make them remember how to work. I knew I should be afraid, but I couldn't muster the feeling. I felt the earth slipping away too, felt myself falling. Yet, there was no fear.

Dane fell to his knees on one final yell of rage

and grief. I reached my hand back to him, my fingers falling in the cold snow, the blood still seeping from my arm. How much had I lost? Buckets? Gallons? Too much. Far too much to survive. I knew. I knew.

I tilted my head as Dane crawled toward me, each movement a grunt of Herculean effort. He bent over me, to shield me with his body. His final act, to protect me. I brought my hand to his face and attempted to smile, though the edges of reality were closing in.

*You must bloom, Audra.*

“You’re . . . like . . . the tree,” I whispered. And I was the flower. I’d pushed through the snow to see the warmth of the sun. How could it be that I had bloomed on this cold, desolate mountain? And yet, I had. I’d danced with butterflies, admitted to

the love I carried in my heart, and then I'd set it free. I'd grieved the loss of my beloved boy. Finally. I'd *loved*. Yes, *yes*, I'd bloomed. A field of vividly colored flowers opened up before me, the breeze warm and gentle across my skin. I reached for it. It was time to go—to be with Theo. It was okay. For both of us, it was okay. I closed my eyes on a breath of thanks, as Dane's weight fell over me one final time.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## Dane

“Code blue, code blue, his organs are failing. One, two—”

*Noise, cold, pain, pressure.*

*Then falling, quiet, blankness. Warmth.*

“Get Harding in here to look at that leg—”

*Voices, beeping, music. I was dreaming . . .  
dreaming. Yes.*

“No frostbite that I can find. I have a new respect for garbage b—”

*Who was talking? So far away . . .*

“One hell of a story to tell when—”

Light. Too bright. It was day. Pain bit into my

head and I groaned. A wolf. It was a wolf and my head was in his jaws. I ripped him open, his guts spilling out in a slithery mess of blood and steam as I vomited in the snow. The smell. Oh God. The smell. I vomited again as I fell over the edge of a cliff, falling, falling into a deep, dark void.

“Can you hear me, Dane—”

*Dustin.*

How was Dustin here?

“Let him sleep. His body needs time to recover. Did you hear how they found Audra?”

“Yeah . . .” The voice. Whose? “. . . frozen.”  
So quiet and filled with sadness.

*Audra! Audra!* I moaned, fighting my way to her. I’d been dying but I’d curled over her, around her. She was right under me. Why couldn’t I feel her?

“Shh. Relax, buddy. I’ll get the nurse. Dalila, tell the nurse he needs more pain medication.”

*No, no, no medication. Audra!*

I moved toward the steady beeping noise, pulling myself through the snow, my legs so heavy, the world blinking in and out around me. Help. I had to . . . had to . . .

My eyes opened and I blinked, moving my gaze around the room, my heart lurching as I realized I was in the hospital. *How? How?* The beeping sound next to my bed increased with the anxiety that coursed through my system.

Oh God. I . . . I searched my memory, wincing with the effort. I hadn’t been able to go on. I’d tried. I’d tried, but my body wouldn’t work anymore. But then . . .

“You’re awake.” I heard the creak of a chair

next to me as someone stood and I turned my head to the side, my eyes searching. My grandmother. She took the couple of steps to my bed, looking at me with tears in her eyes. “You’re awake,” she said again. “Let me call the—”

“Audra?” My voice was hoarse, so scratchy that the word came out sounding like sandpaper.

Her eyes moved over my face and my heart dropped, but then she smiled, a small one and said, “She’s down the hall. She’s going to be okay.” I let out a gasp, stark relief filling my chest. “Do you want some water?” She began to turn and I grabbed her hand, pulling her attention back to me.

“See her . . . now.”

“Dane, dear, you can’t. She’s still sleeping. She lost so much blood, and she only just got out of her second surgery this morning.”



“I want . . .” I took a deep breath, trying to clear the cobwebs from my throat. *How long was I out?* I had a million questions, but they all could wait. I needed to see Audra more than I needed anything else on the face of this earth.

“It’s absolutely not possible—”

Rage filled me. No one was going to keep me away from Audra. Not another living soul.

I ripped at the needle sticking out of my hand, slapping tubes away, moving the blankets back so I could get out of bed. Nothing would stop me. I’d damn well get to Audra myself.

The room spun, turning sideways, as I fell back on the pillow, pushing off it again in an effort to get up. My grandmother held my shoulders to keep me steady. “Dane, you’re going to hurt yourself!”

I pushed at her. “Goddamn it, get off me. This is your fucking fault.”

She stepped back immediately, her face stricken. I shouldn’t feel bad. This *was* her fault. She’d started everything that led us to this hospital. “Help me up or get out,” I grunted, pulling myself to a sitting position and waiting as the head rush cleared. My body ached everywhere, especially my leg, which felt extra thick with some sort of bandage wrapped around it.

Luella nodded, her eyes filled with something that looked like remorse. I couldn’t be sure, as I’d never seen that particular expression— Fuck if I cared anyway. *Audra!* “I’ll call the nurse so she can help you into a wheelchair.” She leaned over and pressed a button.

“I don’t need a damn wheelchair,” I said

breathlessly, moving my legs off the side of the bed as the room tilted again.

“Please, Dane. I won’t keep you from her, but please don’t hurt yourself more than you already are. I think Audra would tell you the same thing.”

“As if you would fucking know what Audra would or wouldn’t say,” I bit out. When her face blanched, I took in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. “Fuck,” I muttered, just as a nurse came in the room.

“Gail, will you get my grandson a wheelchair so he can go see Audra?”

Gail gave me a small smile and a nod. “It’s nice to see you awake, Dane. We’ve all been waiting.”

Once I was situated in a wheelchair, Gail wheeled me the short distance to Audra’s room.

Outside her door, Gail began to push it open when I turned, putting my hand on hers and halting her. I cleared my throat. “Is she . . . I mean, her legs . . .”

But Gail smiled kindly, placing her hand on my shoulder and leaning forward. “The trauma of her fall, combined with several broken bones and nerve injury caused the leg paralysis. She’s showing signs that it was temporary and the nerve function tests are positive.”

*Thank God. Thank God.* I shuddered with deep relief, nodding at Gail, choking out, “Thank you.”

She nodded again, smiling. “You saved her life.”

No, she’d saved mine, I thought. Gail pushed the door open and wheeled me inside.

Audra’s room was dim and quiet, the steady

beat of her heart reassuring mine that she was alive.

*She was alive.* Oh, thank God. Thank God.

I wheeled closer. Both legs were in casts, the right one only going as high as her knee, and her arm was wrapped in thick bandages. Her face was gaunt but perfect, her dark lashes fanned over her cheeks, and her lips opened slightly in sleep. As I stared at her in thankful wonder, I heard the door behind me open and close. Glancing back to find the room empty, I stood shakily from the chair, walking the two steps to Audra's bed and sitting next to her, taking her hand in mine, unable to bear not touching her for another second.

I felt a hot tear run down my cheek, but I felt like laughing and shouting with happiness, the reality of the situation hitting me full force.

*We'd made it. Survived. I had no clue how, but*

*we emerged from that dark forest, not unscathed, but whole. Together.*

I laughed, a strangled sound, bending over and putting my face next to hers, kissing her lips, her cheeks, her forehead, and the top of her head as I muttered unintelligible words of love and gratitude.

I felt her move under me, so I leaned back as her large, dark eyes blinked up at me. “Dane?” she whisper-croaked.

I nodded. “Yeah, honey. I’m here.” I smoothed my hand over her hair, down her cheek. “I’m here.”

“Dane,” she said again, her voice breaking, her eyes moving over my features, as if accounting for every detail of my face. Assessing whether I was okay, or perhaps whether I was real. Her fingers followed her eyes, touching my cheekbones,

my nose, running over my lips as I smiled and kissed her fingertips. “You shaved,” she choked out.

I laughed, taking her hand in my own and kissing her fingers again. “Someone else did. It must’ve taken hours.”

She laughed too, a small sound filled with wonder, with joy, with heartache.

I pulled away for a second, lifting her very, very gently and scooting her over so I could climb in bed beside her, turning on my good side. She turned her head toward me and for a brief moment it was as if we were back in our intimate shelter on the mountain. Only this time, we were safe, we were warm, and there was easily accessible and nutritious food. “You owe me a burrito,” I murmured and Audra laughed again, pressing her

lips to mine, so I could drink down her happiness.

She nodded, still smiling. “The biggest burrito you’ve ever eaten.” She paused. “Have you eaten?”

“I must have. I don’t feel hungry.” I was sure they’d been pumping me full of glucose or whatever all the tubes attached to my body were for. All I knew was that the burning ache of hunger was gone.

I adjusted my arm, wincing slightly as the bandages shifted—the ones I’d investigated as Gail wheeled me down the hall. They started at each side of my neck and went under each arm and around the back of my shoulders. Audra frowned, pushing back the collar of my hospital gown and peered inside at the bandages, her face still confused for a moment.



“It’s nothing, just some skin irritation,” I said, downplaying the deep abrasions that cut into my skin on both sides of my body, the places where the strap I’d used to drag her had dug into me.

Audra’s eyes moved to mine, understanding dawning as tears filled her eyes.

“Oh, Dane.” She leaned her head down and kissed the spot at the side of my neck where the bandage started. For a second she lingered there, her warm breath on my skin.

I kissed the top of her head. “It’s nothing,” I repeated.

“You saved me. You saved us. How . . .”

“A house. There was a house. And a man.”

“A man?” she whispered.

I nodded, the hazy picture of coming through the break in the trees returning. There’d been a

man, a pile of wood in his arms. He'd turned toward us just as I'd collapsed again. "A prepper," I murmured, moving my eyes to the wall behind her, trying my best to grasp the memories, the few words I recalled him saying.

"A prepper? What's a prepper?"

I moved my gaze back to Audra. "Someone who's preparing for a catastrophic disaster. Moves off the grid and stockpiles food and supplies."

"You don't say," Audra breathed out.

I smiled. "That small wisp of smoke."

"It was real."

"Yeah. It was very real." I furrowed my brow. "I think I remember him using some sort of radio to call for help. And then . . . there was a helicopter . . . the sound of one anyway, and that's all I remember."

We stared at each other, the moment full with the miracle of our survival, all we'd been through, and all we'd endured. I wanted to tell her more. And I wanted to hear her voice, speaking to me, reassuring me she was all right, but my eyes were so heavy, my body so languid, lying beside her on a soft mattress, a pile of blankets keeping us warm. And her eyes were closing too, her lips still curved into a soft smile.

Outside the window, I could see soft snowflakes hitting the glass. I drifted back to sleep, only woken momentarily by whispered words from the doorway. "No, don't move them. Let them stay together. Let them sleep."

# CHAPTER THIRTY

## Audra

Dane and I were discharged on the same day. He had been up and walking around—albeit slowly—for days, but I think the hospital staff knew he wouldn't leave without me, so they kept him until I was ready to go home too.

They'd finally moved another bed into the room when Dane had refused to leave mine, and Dane had pushed them together to create one big bed for the both of us. We still ended up huddled on one, sleeping in the familiar way we'd come to know, each other's solace when life as we'd known it had ended. Perhaps it was just temporary, maybe

we'd drift to our own sides of the bed as life moved forward. Or maybe we'd always come back together at the end of each day, into each other's arms, sharing warmth, rekindling hope, meeting at that familiar place in the middle. I liked to believe the latter.

Jay came to visit every other day, hugging me tightly, the look on his face incredulous as I recounted the story. He'd kept himself from going crazy, he'd said—even when it was reported that our situation was hopeless—by keeping the business running as best as he could. His own wisp of smoke that I was still alive, that I'd return. He'd even contacted another florist who agreed to take over the events that would have been left without flowers had it not been for him. “You've been such a good friend to me,” I told him, tears in my eyes as

I hugged him again. “The best.”

Dane’s mother, along with Luella, were the first ones at the hospital when we’d arrived. Dustin and Dalila had flown to Denver the moment they’d gotten word that we were found. They were at the hospital continually, and filled in the gaps about what had been going on since our plane went down.

The storm had kept rescue planes from going out in the first few days, and when they finally got clearance, they had searched the area where the signal from the black box was coming. It was as Dane had guessed, and though Dustin had worked tirelessly around the clock, hiring private helicopter companies, and experts who were familiar with the area to try and locate the plane, in the end, nature had just been too ruthless and the search area too vast.

And yet, somehow, Dane and I had done what no helicopter, no expert, no room full of a hundred volunteers could accomplish. We'd survived, and we'd gotten ourselves out of there. Alive . . . barely.

All told, Dane had pulled me through miles and miles of snowy, rugged terrain while in severe septic shock, his organs beginning to fail one by one. His body had given out just fifty feet from the prepper's house. Yet even then, he'd rallied, dragging me those last precious inches.

Some would call it luck. I called it a miracle.

My legs would heal, and so would my arm. The experience had changed me forever, in ways I was still sorting through—mostly with Dane in whispered words during the dark of night as we held each other close, revealing our secrets and fears as we'd learned to do.

There was a short knock on my hospital room door, and Dalila peeked her head in, smiling. “You decent?”

I laughed. “Finally,” I said, glancing at the altered sweatpants and T-shirt I was wearing. If I never saw another hospital gown that opened in the back, it would be too soon.

“Great” She came in, glancing at my bag, packed and ready by the door. “What time are you getting sprung?”

“The doctor’s supposed to be in with my discharge papers in about an hour.”

“Awesome. I’d ask if I could cook you and Dane dinner tonight, but I kinda figure you’ll want some alone time.” She gave me a kind smile, but I didn’t miss the flash of disappointment in her eyes at her own words.



I smiled. “Thank you, Dalila, but . . . I think we’ve had plenty of alone time.” I laughed softly. “We’d love to have you over.”

She grinned, putting her hands together as she gave me an excited glance. “Really? I don’t want to bombard you on your first night out of the hospital. But”—she shook her head, her eyes tearing up—“I’ve missed you, Audra. I’ve missed you a lot.”

I opened my arms as she moved into them, hugging me, both of us laughing and crying a little. “I’ve missed you too. So much.” Dalila had always been like a real sister to me. She’d tried to stay in touch after Dane and I divorced, but I’d rejected her attempts. It was just too painful to have contact with any of Dane’s family members. And it felt wrong to *keep* anyone who I felt rightfully belonged to Dane. But really, I’d cut myself off from

everyone who might potentially make me face the deep well of pain I kept locked inside. I saw that clearly now. I saw a lot of things more clearly now. Being a whisper away from death could do that for a person.

Dalila pulled away. “So when’s the wedding?”

I laughed, wiping the tears from my eyes. “We haven’t gotten that far yet. Our big plans are working our way through the fast food restaurants of Laurelton.”

Dalila laughed. “Good, you’re both skin and bones.” She paused. “Dane told me he’s moving here, though.”

I nodded. “Yeah. He’ll be transferring to the new industrial park.”

Dalila nodded. “Good. He really does love his job.”

“I kn—”

There was a knock at the door and after I called out, “Come in,” it opened slightly, Luella Townsend peeking inside, looking strangely uncertain, strangely small as if she’d shrunken in some elusive way.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Dalila, I didn’t realize you were here. I can come back.”

She turned to leave, but I gave Dalila a small smile and a nod and called, “Actually, Luella, I was hoping to speak to you for minute.” Luella had come by a few times over the past week, but she’d only really ducked in and out, and always while other people were visiting, so I hadn’t had a moment alone with her, nor had she made any effort to speak to me privately or in front of Dane. He’d told me how *and what* he’d yelled at her

when he first woke up. I think it shocked both of them.

Dalila smiled, patting my hand. “I need to get going anyway. Audra, see you tonight? Six thirty-ish.”

“Sounds great.”

She breezed out the door on a smile, stopping reluctantly to kiss her grandmother on the cheek. We hadn’t caught up fully, but she understood the gist of how Luella’s actions nearly cost our lives. I almost felt sorry for Luella. Many in the family, who had previously respected her, felt angry toward her now. I suspected it would take some time to heal that rift.

Luella stepped into the room and I nodded to the chair sitting next to my bed. She took a seat, her fingers moving over the hem of her short, silk

jacket. Nerves raced along my spine, but this talk was one both necessary and overdue.

“You were in love with my grandfather,” I stated bluntly.

She lifted her head, her eyes filled with shock. “I . . .” She paused, a myriad of emotions flitting over her face before she took a deep breath, sitting back in the chair, and looking over my shoulder for a moment before meeting my eyes. “Yes. How did you know?”

“I found a letter in the attic right before I left for San Francisco.” I turned, reaching into my purse on the table next to the bed. I’d asked Jay to retrieve it for me a couple of days before. “He broke your heart.”

She regarded me for a weighted moment, her gaze flitting to the paper in my hand, and suddenly

I saw that that frosty stare also held a well of hurt. She looked down to where her fingers continued to play with her hem, ceasing their movement when she realized what she was doing. “Yes. I met him on the street on my way to lunch with a friend. My hat flew off and he”—she smiled a sad smile, her eyes staring off behind me, into the past—“ran after it. He brought it back to me and we talked, he insisted on walking me to the restaurant. I fell in love. It only took four blocks.” She smiled again, though it wavered, and helplessly, my heart squeezed. “He was all wrong for me. A welder who barely made ends meet. My parents never would have approved. We met in secret after that, planned to run away together. I waited that day by the pond on my property, my suitcase in my hand, and he never showed up.”

She took a deep breath. “I waited for hours, thinking he must have been delayed . . . but, no, he never showed.” She sat up straighter, clasping her hands in her lap. “I thought . . . there must have been an accident . . . some explanation. I went to his job the next morning. He was outside the factory with some other men and he saw me”—she took a shaky breath—“and then he . . . turned away.” She was silent for a long moment, her gaze cast downward. Finally, she looked back at me, straightening her shoulders. “I was determined to put him out of my mind after that, to move on. I began dating the man my parents had been pushing me toward. We married that same year.” She gave a small shake of her head. “I did come to love him. Not with the same fiery passion of that first love, but I was very fond of Dane’s grandfather. He was

a good man.” She tilted her head. “I suppose there’s never another love like that first one, is there?”

“No, I suppose not,” I said, my chest hollow as I pictured her waiting alone next to the pond, a suitcase full of clothes, a heart full of hope that slowly drained away as the sun moved across the sky.

“I heard that Wallace married a couple of years later. I told my husband I was sick and cried in my room all day. I convinced myself I hated him, vowed to hate him forever.”

“And then I showed up.”

She nodded. “Yes, then you showed up.”

“To do to Dane what my grandfather had done to you?”

She shrugged. “Maybe. Probably. I couldn’t



bear the thought of looking at you at my dinner table, the product of his marriage to another woman, for the rest of my life.”

I tilted my head, trying to understand, trying to imagine the bitterness—the deep pain—that had festered for so many years, warping her heart so that she saw me as an adversary. “Is that why you’re trying to take my building? Because of what my grandfather did?”

She regarded me for a moment, before saying quietly, “I never tried to take your building. That was a ruse.”

I frowned in confusion. “A ruse? A ruse for what?”

Luella took another deep breath. “Last year, Dane came home to visit. I was certain he was going to ask for my diamond so he could propose to

Winnie.”

I winced, biting my lip as I looked down, the thought of him marrying someone else still a tender bruise inside me.

She sighed. “But he looked so torn up when he arrived. There was no happiness in his expression, only . . . this look that reminded me . . .” She shook her head. “Anyway, he went out and when he returned, his face was so full of longing. That same longing he’d always had in his eyes when he looked at you. He said he’d changed his mind about marrying Winnie. I knew, I just *knew* he’d gone to see you. He didn’t deny it, told me he’d just caught a glimpse of you from across the street.” She paused and I remained silent as she organized her thoughts. “After that, I thought a lot about Wallace. I cried. I realized the part I may have played in the

demise of Dane's and your relationship, how very selfish and unfair I'd been."

At that I shook my head. "It's true you didn't make things any easier, Mrs. Townsend, but Dane and I are the only ones responsible for what happened between us."

She pressed her lips together, doubt clouding her expression. "Well, all the same, I wondered if there might be something I could do to bring you back together. I thought with a little push . . . But I knew you'd inherited Wallace's stubborn streak, that annoying penchant he had for martyrdom."

I laughed, surprising even myself, and she gave me a wry tilt of her lips. "I figured the only reason you might go to Dane is if I threatened your business, the one thing you seemed to care about once I looked into your life a little."

I made a sound in the back of my throat. “You were right on the money.”

She smiled. “I’m good with money.”

“That you are.” I shook my head in amazement as I stared at her. “So that whole scene at your country club, that was all—”

“An act to light a fire under you, yes.”

“It worked,” I murmured. “I did exactly as you figured I would.” I thought about flying to California, confronting Dane . . . all a setup. God, my mind was whirling with a hundred questions, but one thing confused me. “Did you tell Dane’s secretary not to let me see him?”

She shook her head. “I told her not to let you speak to him on the phone. I suggested you were a persistent ex-wife who was trying to get more money out of him. After I heard how difficult she

made it for you to see him once you arrived in California, I suspected she had her own personal designs on him. That difficulty wasn't my doing."

"Huh," I said, still shocked. "Well, it turned out as you'd planned in the end."

She looked down. "Yes, only my actions almost got both of you killed. When I heard your plane went down, I was horrified, devastated."

I regarded her, noticing that her face had paled at the mention of our crash, and her hands were trembling slightly. "There was no way you ever could have anticipated something like that happening. It was just . . . an act of God. You can't prepare for those," I said softly. "You can only survive them."

Her shoulders slowly lowered as if in a small measure of relief. "Still . . . I would have blamed

myself forever.”

I bit my lip, my mind whirling with everything she was telling me. “Mrs. Townsend—”

“Please. Luella.”

I gave her a small smile. “Luella, did you somehow set up those jobs I got at the country clubs and charity functions?” I’d been thrilled when I’d secured such lucrative jobs at events where my work would be on display for other potential big-spending customers, but I’d never been able to pin down exactly who had first heard my name and began spreading the word.

She nodded. “I figured you could use the work. It was mostly because of me you were struggling.”

“I wasn’t struggling that badly,” I murmured, feeling slightly defensive.

“Even so, I have plenty of friends with money just burning a hole in their gold-lined pocketbooks.” She shrugged. “And you do lovely work.”

I tilted my head. “Thank you. So . . . my building, it was never in jeopardy of being taken away?”

“No.”

“Huh,” I breathed, not helping the small laugh that bubbled up in my chest. The old bird wasn’t only a good actress, but she was cunning. It’d take some time to sort through my conflicting feelings for Luella Townsend, and I didn’t imagine we’d ever have the close relationship of a typical grandmother and granddaughter, but I couldn’t help the streak of respect and understanding that speared through me at the knowledge of her story and her plan to reunite Dane and me.

Remembering the letter was still in my hand, I held it toward her. “I believe this belongs to you.”

Her gaze landed on it, and her expression was one I hadn’t seen before. Nervousness. But she took it with a trembling hand, opening it, her eyes moving over my grandfather’s words. When she’d reached the bottom, she looked up, her eyes filled with tears. “Oh, Wallace,” she breathed. “You stupid, stubborn fool.” She smiled, though, a tremulous tilting of her lips and slipped the letter into the clutch on her lap.

She stood. “I have something for you too.” She reached into her clutch again and brought out a folded piece of paper. Then she leaned forward, surprising me by kissing me on the cheek. “Welcome to the family, Audra. I’d say, welcome back, but I never truly extended a genuine welcome



the first time, did I?”

“Thank you,” I whispered. And with that, Luella Townsend, my former arch-enemy-grandmother, soon-to-be grandmother again, walked out of my hospital room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

I took a moment to digest some of what we’d talked about, but I knew I’d need longer than I had that moment to ponder everything I’d just discovered. The doctor would be in any minute.

I looked at the paper in my hands and slowly unfolded it. It was a professional engineering sketch of the industrial park that I’d first seen the model of in Dane’s office in California. But there had been an addition made to this version. At the entrance to the park was a large sign, flanked by trees and greenery. The sign read: Theodore John Industrial

Park.

Underneath in Luella's handwriting, it said,  
*Named for my first great-grandchild.*

A sob came up my throat and I clutched the piece of paper to my chest, joy and sorrow mixing to form a heavy happiness in my heart. Tears pricked at my eyes. *My beautiful boy will be remembered.* A gesture I never expected.

The click of the door opening startled me, and when I saw Dane entering my room, I sniffled, letting out a small half laugh, half sob that had him frowning as he walked toward me.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

I shook my head, handing Dane the paper and grabbing a tissue to wipe my nose.

He stared at the picture for a few minutes, his eyes softening as he brought his bottom lip between

his teeth and then gave me a sad smile. “The old lady’s not a hundred percent evil, huh?”

I laughed softly, sniffing again. “Only about fifty percent. I have so much to tell you, but my building, it’s all mine. She doesn’t want it. She never did.”

Dane looked confused. “I was planning on talking to her about that later today. She’s been ducking out before I could get a word in with her.”

“It’s okay. We talked, and it was better that way.”

Dane sat down on the edge of the bed, using his thumb to wipe away the last trace of my tears. “Okay. You’ll fill me in later.”

“Yeah.” I looked at the magazine he’d set down on the table next to my bed when I’d handed him the paper. “What’s that?”

He picked it up, handing it to me. “Oh,” I breathed when I turned it over and saw the cover. The magazine I’d sketched in on that mountain while half dead and starving, waiting to be rescued by help that never came.

I opened it slowly, cautiously, stopping on the first sketch I came to. Dane, leaning against a tree, his face in profile, shoulders hunched as he looked into the darkness of the trees. I ran a finger down the lines of his face, over the shadow of his beard, tears pricking my eyes again. I could smell the pine and the crisp cold of the mountain air. I could feel the gnawing, never-ending hunger in my gut, and I could feel the fire in my heart for the man I’d always, always loved.

I sniffled, flipping the pages until I came upon a sketch of Theo, the way I remembered him, his

eyes closed as though he were only sleeping, his tiny face so perfect. “He looked like you,” I said, my eyes moving to Dane’s.

He nodded, his expression serious, filled with gravity. “I know. But I have a feeling he had your brown eyes.”

I tilted my head, my lips tipping up very slightly. “Someday we’ll know. Just not quite yet.”

Dane smiled back. “No, not quite yet.”

I studied the only picture I had of my child, running a finger over his cheek, recalling the satiny feel of his skin.

After a moment, I found the strength to turn the page, finding the picture of the sun setting over the mountain, recalling the vivid grandeur of that beauty in the midst of such unrelenting harshness. “Hmm,” I hummed.

There were other sketches in there too, I knew, pictures of the mountain, the place the plane had come to rest and eventually went over the cliff, and of our tiny shelter from the storm, the place we'd come together to share our warmth and eventually our hearts.

“I don't know why I grabbed that,” Dane said. “When I raced back to the camp after you'd fallen, my mind was so foggy with sickness and so filled with terror for you, I grabbed the things I thought were important and stuffed them in the duffel bag. I'm glad I knew, even somewhere in my feverish brain, that that was one of them.”

I let out a ragged breath. It was. It was important.

A knock sounded at my door again and we pulled apart as my doctor came in the room. “You

two ready to get outta here?”

Dane laughed, standing and shaking Dr. Fletcher’s hand. “You have no idea.”

Dr. Fletcher smiled. “I can only imagine. You’ll want to tell your ride to pick you up around the back, though. There is a horde of reporters waiting in the lobby.”

“Ah. I’ll tell my brother. Thanks.” We still hadn’t talked to the reporters who’d been trying to get more information about our harrowing tale, but we’d decided to talk to them after we were out of the hospital and feeling up to facing a camera or two. Not only that, but we were still coming to terms with all we’d been through, and to try to put the ordeal into words before we’d done that, would be impossible.

“I have your discharge papers here, all signed,

and all your numbers look great from your checkup this morning. There was only one thing that was a little bit off with you, Audra.”

“Oh,” I said, glancing at Dane who suddenly looked worried.

“Apparently it was too early to know when you first arrived at the hospital, but you’re pregnant.”

I blinked at the doctor and then just stared. Pregnant? *Pregnant?* I swallowed, a buzz beginning in my brain. I looked at Dane who looked shocked too, though a small smile seemed to be trembling at the edges of his mouth, as if he wasn’t sure whether to hold it back or set it free.

“That . . . rattrap hotel,” I murmured, trying to piece together how this had happened.

“Or the shelter,” Dane offered, smiling openly



now.

The doctor laughed. “Whoa. I’m going to let you two hash out the memories. I just wanted to say congratulations and set you free.” He turned and shook Dane’s hand and then leaned forward, kissing me on the cheek. “You two take care of each other. Call me with any questions that arise.”

I nodded dumbly. “Yes, thank you, Doctor.”

He left the room and Dane and I looked at each other, Dane’s grin increasing. I kept staring at him, the soft beginnings of joy fluttering in my heart, along with a thousand other emotions. “A baby,” I whispered.

Dane sat back down on the bed, taking me in his arms. “Yeah, a baby.”

“Is it going to be okay this time, Dane?” I asked, my greatest fear bubbling to the surface.

He pushed a piece of hair away from my cheek, taking my face in his hands and looking directly into my eyes. “Yeah, it is. It’s going to be okay.” He kissed me softly on my lips. “Let’s go home.”

I nodded, breathing in his scent, love filling me, and a strange sense of peace that didn’t seem to make any sense with the worries bouncing around in my mind. “Yes, let’s go home.”

# EPILOGUE

## Dane

“One more push, baby. You can do it, Audra. I see our baby’s head, honey,” I choked out as she gripped my hand.

My wife sat up slightly, sweat dripping off her forehead and down her cheeks as she curled forward, gritting her teeth as her face turned red and she screamed into the final push.

The small patch of dark hair grew bigger and bigger and I held my breath as the baby’s head emerged, followed quickly by the shoulders as the doctor pulled him—*it was a him*—from Audra’s body, placing our son on her stomach, and rubbing

his back briskly.

For a second, time stopped as my eyes met Audra's, a thousand words, a thousand feelings, a thousand memories, passing between us in a single glance.

This time, though, it wasn't only my wife's cry that filled the hospital room where a baby's wail should have been. No, no, this time the lusty squall of our baby boy burst forth, filling the silence, causing me to draw in a sudden breath of thankful joy. Audra's face crumbled as she, too, let out a cry filled with both deep relief and happiness, lifting our son and bringing him to her chest where she cried against his head, kissing his temple, her tears falling on his skin. "Hi," she breathed. "Hi, baby boy. Hi, Noah."

I bent over both of them, smoothing Audra's

sweat-soaked hair back as I marveled at the most beautiful sight I'd ever seen: my wife holding our newborn infant as he cried angrily, rooting for the breast that wasn't being immediately offered to him. Audra laughed through her tears, cradling him in her arms as a nurse handed her a blanket, placed a hat on Noah's head, and listened quickly to his heartbeat. "Good and strong," the nurse said on a smile, turning away. To prove her right, Noah let out another furious howl and Audra guided his small mouth to her breast. He quieted, happy with his new circumstances, and I laughed, wiping away the tears I hadn't realized were moving down my cheeks.

"That's my boy," I said and Audra nudged me slightly, but continued smiling the awe-filled, love-drunk smile of a new mother.

Noah stared, his dark eyes fixed on her as he nursed. They finally fluttered closed, his mouth going lax as he fell asleep. Audra beamed up at me as I bent over them, whispering words of love and joy, vowing to protect them forever.

Later, I held Noah in my arms as Audra slept, the hospital room dim, the halls quiet outside the door. I swayed in front of the window, my son's small body swaddled safely in my arms, watching as a few late-fall snowflakes fell from the sky

I thought about everything that had happened to bring us to this very moment, my gaze following the deep purple outline of the mountains on the distant horizon. I closed my eyes, picturing that endless, arctic terrain, swearing that for just a heartbeat, I caught the sharp scent of pine in the air, felt the whip of the wind across my cheek.

Sometimes, still, I think of grief that way—as a vast, icy mountain, seemingly impossible to survive, so frigid the cold permeates your very bones, the depths of your soul. Each step takes a monumental effort, making any real headway seem insurmountable. And yet, if you raise your eyes to the horizon, looking with your heart as well as your eyes, you can see a tiny wisp of smoke rising from a cozy cabin where you will finally, finally find warmth. Hope. And if you have another who will take your hand, drag you when necessary, and travel through that unforgiving landscape, you will emerge through the trees, changed, yes, but together. Stronger. And when you turn your head and look back at the stark, sweeping vista from which you somehow emerged, you will know, deep down to the very core of yourself, that nothing,

*nothing* is impossible when love is greater, more vast, more solid and immovable than the mountain itself.

I cuddled Noah closer, bringing my face to his, breathing in his sweet baby smell—the scent of purity, of mother’s milk, of my wife, still so very much a part of him, though their bodies were now separated. I snuggled him for a moment, rocking gently, and then I told my second son all about his brother. I told him how his mother and I had once gotten lost in a cold, desolate terrain, and found each other in another. I told him how the *second* time we’d learned to curl *into* the cold spaces together, sharing our hearts, our warmth, our tears. I told him how that had made all the difference.

And finally, just as the sun began to rise over those jagged, distant peaks, I told him about a blue



butterfly, the soft brush of wings against my cheek as I lay dying. The tiny flutter that had brought me from the edge of death, given me one last surge of energy, the very final burst of strength that had brought us out of the clearing and into the view of a man holding an armful of wood.

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## About the Author

Mia Sheridan is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* Bestselling author. Her passion is weaving true love stories about people destined to be together. Mia lives in Cincinnati, Ohio with her husband. They have four children here on earth and one in heaven. In addition to *Dane's Storm*, *Leo*, *Leo's Chance*, *Stinger*, *Archer's Voice*, *Becoming Calder*, *Finding Eden*, *Kyland*, *Grayson's Vow*, *Midnight Lily*, *Ramsay*, and *Preston's Honor* are also part of the Sign of Love collection.

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