

KARICE BOLTON

The
CAMP



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DEDICATION

To my incredible husband who knows how to
make me smile no matter what.

I love you deeply!

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Chapter One

The Cessna 180 engine rumbled through the small six-seat aircraft cabin, but unfortunately it did little to block out the words of the other passengers. I glared at the back of the Captain who was lucky enough to be wearing a headset.

“I’d love to see what’s under her jacket.” I heard the guy behind me say to no one in particular.

“I’ll second that, and I bet we’ll get the chance,” another one said.

The gnawing in my stomach only grew with every passing minute, but there was nothing I could do. I was stuck in a plane where I could literally touch the pilot. I didn’t need to start something that I couldn’t finish and have the plane crash because I couldn’t handle a little heckling.

I looked out the small, oval window pressing my head against the cold glass covered in water droplets. I couldn’t really see anything out the window because the weather was so bad. It was like we were trapped in one continuous rain cloud that was sent from the Gods to mess with me.

Getting tired of seeing nothing but ominous grey, I looked down at the pamphlet hoping the description would magically change, but I wasn’t that lucky. My fingers trembled as I silently read the overview once more.

The ReBoot program is a juvenile camp for mid-range offenders who have yet to become established criminals. Youth in their mid to late

teen years are often responsive to this type of program which includes occupational training and behavior rehabilitation. We've found that the potential criminals at our work camp for forestry and conservation in Southeast Alaska never become repeat offenders. We generally only accept less dangerous delinquents but all cases are subject for review.

I loved the 'yet to become established criminals' part, as if the first time around didn't really count for these misfits. I so didn't belong here. It wasn't like I needed to be reminded that my newfound campmates weren't savory characters. All I had to do was turn around in my tiny airplane seat to see their predator eyes taking me in.

I couldn't believe my mom let this happen to me! There's no way she could have been fooled into thinking this was a conservation-slash-forestry camp... although I was fooled. I actually thought my stepdad was trying to do something nice for me, for once.

God! I hated my stepfather, and he obviously hated me. This was his last sendoff before I went to college, and it was a doozey. As if living with him since my father's death wasn't horrible enough, he just wanted one more way to stick it to me.

The tin can I was riding in suddenly took a plunge, and all of the instruments went berserk. Gasps and whines filled the air as the high-pitched warning beeps sounded through our tiny capsule. My hands immediately became clammy as my heart raced. There was no calming down in a situation like this, especially when a person was born as jumpy as I was. My fingers gripped the armrest so hard that my nails hurt, and I took a deep breath in and exhaled slowly.

"It's okay, everyone. Just a little turbulence," the pilot told us as the beeps silenced, but the heavy breathing from everyone continued long after his announcement.

I was tempted to turn around in my seat and gloat at all of the guys who were big and tough only a few minutes ago and suddenly turned to pansies, but the Cessna took another huge dip, sounding the bells and whistles again. Man! I hated small planes. Actually, I don't even think this would qualify as a small plane, more like a car that could fly.

As the beads of water continued rolling down the tiny window, I noticed we had begun our descent. *Finally!*

"We'll be landing in approximately fifteen minutes," the pilot said as he continued adjusting controls.

Things were looking up. The dampness on my palms began to evaporate, and I looked back out the window as our plane flew barely above the treetops. The conifers looked like a brightly massed green quilt underneath us. Turning my head in any direction gave way to a completely different landscape. Alongside the deep green woodlands, there were rocky peaks, and monstrous cliffs that trees avoided calling home. If I wasn't so scared to death, I might be able to appreciate the beauty of everything.

I maneuvered my head so that I could see out the pilot's window. Directly in front of us there was a grassy field with small ponds surrounding it, or at least I think they were small ponds. I craned my neck as far as possible searching for the airport. Not only did I not see any buildings, I didn't see any sort of landing strip.

But I did catch a huge bear. I'm sure it was a bear. There was nothing else that big that walked on all fours.

"Whoa, check it out," one of the guys behind me said.

"That thing's huge," the guy next to him said. "I could totally take it down."

I couldn't handle it any longer.

“Why don’t you? I’d love to see it,” I taunted without looking behind me. There was no way I’d undo my seatbelt in transportation like this even if it meant I couldn’t give him my best scowl.

“She does speak,” he replied sarcastically.

Gritting my teeth, I watched as we passed by the brown bear with the plane descending at what felt like record speed.

“Please make sure your seatbelts are fastened. I’ll make the landing as pleasant as possible,” the pilot told us.

What? Landing? There’s no runway!

This can’t be possible. I’ve got a bear as an official greeter and our plane was landing on gravel or dirt or something. The only saving grace of this observation was that it kept the other passengers on the plane as silent as me.

I continued to watch the pilot pulling and pushing on things, and realized I really didn’t want to see how little control he had over the situation. I’m sure he felt he had it handled, but from this viewpoint it was utterly terrifying. I clamped my eyes shut just in time to feel the plane shudder as the wheels began to touch down.

There was nothing smooth about it as our plane briefly greeted the gravel before pushing back up, only to quickly meet again with the surface below. It felt like a rollercoaster that had no tracks and no intention of stopping. Our plane continued to jump and skip its way down the non-existent runway. I slowly peeled open one eye and watched as we whipped by the tall grass and water finally coming to a slow stop.

The guys’ celebratory hollers were deafening. They began throwing off their seatbelts, but I refused to budge. The pilot turned around and I wanted to hug him, but I restrained myself. Instead I looked out the window at the wilderness wondering if I’d survive.

“I’ll be around to open the door, and the CLs should be here to greet you any minute. It’s best if you don’t wander off,” the pilot instructed.

“CLs?” I asked, turning my attention back to him.

“Camp Leaders,” he responded, his eyes connecting with mine. He opened his door and got out of the plane.

“Newbie. We’ve got a newbie on our hands,” the guy sitting directly behind me shouted, kicking my seat. *What was he, twelve?*

“I wonder if that makes her a newbie in all areas? I can’t wait to find out,” he continued.

That was it! My seatbelt came flying off, and I leaned over the back of my seat, grabbing the guy’s shirt, surprising him and myself. I was gripping the fabric so tightly I raised him slightly off his seat. He looked to be a year or so younger than me with blond hair that was greased back. His clothing was ten times too big for him, but he was still bigger than me.

“If you even look in my direction while we’re at this camp—” I began, but the pilot opened the side door interrupting me. I pushed him back on the seat and turned back around in mine.

“Jeez, chill out,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Still gonna get some, Luke?” I heard someone whisper.

Everyone on this plane was so sleazy, except for the poor pilot. I didn’t even want to imagine what everyone else at the camp would be like.

I was the last to jump out of the plane, as I looked around the land void of civilization. I couldn’t believe my mom fell for allowing my stepdad to send me here.

“Emma Walton?” A girl asked.

I turned around and relief spread through me instantly. The girl looked to be a couple years older than me, so probably twentyish. And she looked normal. Her dark brown hair was bundled into a loose ponytail, and

she was dressed in green cargo pants, a black T-shirt and rubber boots. Her smile was friendly, and I knew I'd be sticking around her as much as possible.

"I'm Steph," she said, smiling as she stuck her hand out for a handshake, "one of the CLs here."

Wow! That's formal. I shook her hand quickly.

"Nice to meet you." I grabbed my duffle bag and backpack

"Got everything?" she asked.

I nodded, and she waved at the pilot who was already preparing the plane for takeoff. "See ya in a week," she yelled at him.

A week! I'll be eighteen in a week, and then I can get out of here.

"We're in bear country out here," she began as our group followed her and the other CLs through the tall grass.

"I saw one on the way in." I adjusted the large strap on my shoulder, hoping we wouldn't be hiking all that far.

"It's all part of being in the backcountry," she replied. "We'll go over everything when we get to camp, but it's nothing to mess with. A ranger went missing a week ago on Baranof Island, and they just found his remains."

A shiver ran down my spine.

"And Baranof Island doesn't have nearly as many brown bears as we have," another CL replied from behind.

Not what I wanted to hear!

Chapter Two

We made it to the edge of the camp fairly quickly. I think we'd only been hiking fifteen minutes or so, and in that time I realized every CL was carrying a rifle. *Right! Bear country!*

I smelled wood smoke and then spotted an assortment of tents positioned all over. Some were large and equipped with a deck. I'm sure there was a name for that kind, but I had no idea what it was. Others looked like maybe only one person could fit inside. I hoped I didn't get one of those.

"Okay, so the first order of business is to put up your own tent," the CL standing next to Steph directed. "And my name's Danny if you need any help in that area. The equipment is spread out around the site, so just find a pile where you'd like to be located and get going. Directions are on top of the equipment."

You've got to be kidding! In shock, I dropped my duffle bag to the woodland floor with a thud and everyone looked at me. *Oops!*

"Sorry," I waved to everyone, picking it back up.

"All the CLs wear a green bracelet. Just ask if you need anything." Danny held up his wrists and sure enough he had the same bracelet that Steph wore.

“It’s unusual for us to get many females. There are only three of us total,” Steph whispered. “So it’d probably be best if you chose a tent over by us.”

I saw her point to the north side of the grounds and agreed wholeheartedly. After the plane experience, strength in numbers sounded good to me! As my eyes scanned along all the tents, my vision did a backup and reverse as I saw a guy pounding in a tent stake. His fingers were gripping the stake so firmly it was impossible to miss how muscular his forearm was, but he was missing a green bracelet. His shoulders were broad, and if only he’d look up I could gauge the rest of him. He certainly wasn’t on the plane ride here, but he was *here*, and that wasn’t a good thing. If I’d met him say at a Starbucks I’d feel a lot better about it, but this wasn’t ideal. Definitely not ideal! Although, it would be fun to bring one of them home to meet my stepdad.

“Emma?” Steph prodded, tapping me on the shoulder and getting me out of my fog. “Right this way.”

I looked away from the hot-totally-off-limits guy and followed Steph as the rest of the new arrivals thankfully went the other direction.

“That’s the CLs’ yurt.” She pointed to one of the round tents that had a deck around it. “If you ever need anything, head there. It’s kind of like our break room. That’s where the meds are dispensed too.”

I nodded and continued following her through the maze of tents.

“How many people are here?” I asked.

“There are five CLs and thirteen campers.”

“That’s a nice way of putting it,” I muttered.

“What’s a nice way of putting it?” she asked, turning to me.

“Campers,” I replied.

“We try to give everyone a chance here.” She smiled kindly at me, and I felt guilty before remembering Luke back on the plane.

We stopped in front of a pile of nylon, stakes, and poles, and my internal sigh accidentally escaped causing Steph to laugh.

I dropped my duffle and backpack off and grabbed the instructions.

“We get a file on every camper, and you didn’t have one,” Steph said quietly.

“You mean like a criminal file?” I asked, arching my brow.

She nodded. “We usually get things we need to work on, psych evals, mandates from the courts...” her voice trailed off.

“I don’t come with any of those things.” I smiled grimly. “That’s why you didn’t get them. I’m not on meds either, but I might want some by the end of this ordeal.”

I bent over and grabbed the tent instructions when I heard a deep voice coming from behind. “Anything I can help with?”

I spun around and saw *him*. He was even more gorgeous up close, and this time he had a face! I glanced at Steph who was doing a horrible job of hiding her amusement as I was violently nodding my head and taking him in. A warmth tingled through my body as my eyes connected with his. This took dating a bad boy to a whole new level.

“That’s usually against the rules,” Steph chimed in. “But I’ll let it slide.”

“Thank you,” I mumbled, my gaze falling to my backpack.

Whoa! I wasn’t expecting him to look that good up close.

“Have you done this before?” he asked in a rumbling voice, his cool fingers touching mine as he took the instructions from me.

My lower belly contracted, and I completely wanted to reprimand myself for doing the whole lust on first glance thing, but there was

something really commanding about this guy. He seemed so...capable.

I looked up through my lashes and the most amazing caramel eyes locked on mine, waiting for my answer. Up close he had chiseled features, and his lips looked so full and soft complimenting one another nicely. His strong jaw line only accentuated how perfectly proportioned his features were. His dark hair was ruffled enough from the wind that it created an unkemptness about him that I liked.

The corner of his mouth began to curl slightly, and I realized it was because I was staring at him completely dazed and unable to speak. *Great!* The juvie thinks I've fallen for him...except he looked too old to be one.

"You okay over there?" he asked, with a twinkle in his eye that meant only one thing. He was fully aware of himself and what he was doing to me. I was going to make sure that stopped.

"Of course I'm okay," I sputtered.

"Thought I lost there you for a second." His voice, now smooth, coated me from the outside in. "So have you put up a tent before?"

"I used to help my dad back when we went camping," I nodded. "But it was mostly me handing him whatever he needed. I was like twelve."

My mind quickly flashed to our last camping trip together. It was right before my dad got diagnosed. We had so much fun. I never knew how much I'd treasure those moments.

"Looks like you two have it handled. I'm going to go check on the rest of the group. Chelsea's sleeping in her tent, but I'll introduce you once she's up," Steph said.

"Okay." I waved as she took off, and I glanced back at the mystery camper who was looking over the instructions, but I knew full well he didn't need them.

"You're not missing anything," he muttered.

“Excuse me?” I asked, tilting my head slightly.

“I mean with Chelsea. She’s not a real people person.” He bit his lip as he waited for my reaction, and all I could do was focus on his lips.

“I feel like I could say that for this whole place,” I grumbled.

“Present company excluded, I hope.” He laughed.

I avoided his gaze and perched my hands on my hips.

“Not really sure about that,” I huffed.

“Ouch.”

“So what first?” I asked, keeping a distance.

“How about names?” he asked, tossing the instructions on the ground and looking at me once more.

“Emma... Yours?” His brilliant eyes stared into mine and a smile danced across his lips.

“You totally look like an Emma.”

I wondered what that meant. Did I look like an Emma? I always thought I looked like a Sarah. The longer I stood staring at him waiting for his name, the deeper his smile etched into his features, creating a deep dimple in his left cheek.

Just when I thought I couldn’t take anymore, he bent down and shook the poles and stakes onto the ground, and my gaze happened to notice how well his jeans fit him. God! What was happening to me? It had to be the outdoors! This was ridiculous, especially considering where I was. I wanted to start laughing but instead walked to the other side of the pile to avoid staring at him any longer.

“I’m Liam,” he finally revealed.

“Fits you,” I replied, attempting to sound casual as I pulled the base of the tent toward me.

“Looks like you remember the basics,” Liam said, as I tugged on the corners by the loops. “You guys don’t camp now?”

My breath caught as the familiar ache in my body surfaced whenever my dad came up in conversation. I was told his death would get easier as time went by. I’ve come to realize that it’s not that the death gets easier, it’s that people quit asking.

“Uh...no. Not really our thing anymore,” I replied.

This wasn’t the group of people I wanted to find myself confiding in. Besides, I never wanted to bog down anyone in all that stuff, my stuff. He just asked an innocent camping question. I didn’t need to take him into my world — the world where parents die and leave inept ones in their place.

“Maybe this experience will get you back out there with him when you go home. “ He fed the poles through the nylon openings, and I shifted my focus to the tasks at hand to force the sadness away.

“You never know,” I said in my best chipper voice.

I watched as he went around securing the poles, and I realized I wasn’t really doing much of anything.

“Hope this doesn’t come out the wrong way, but it really doesn’t seem like you belong here,” he said in a hushed tone as he tapped in one of the stakes with the hammer.

“My god! How could I take that the wrong way? I’d be pissed if you thought I did.” I laughed. “I’ve been thinking the same thing ever since I was handed the brochure by the pilot.”

“By the pilot?” he asked, tossing the hammer on the dirt. His eyebrows furrowed as he was trying to compute what little I’d told him.

I nodded, picking up the hammer and pounded the stake into the loop I’d been holding onto.

“The social worker didn’t even tell you?” he questioned at long last.

“Uh...No, I don’t have one or...” I exhaled loudly. I was at a complete loss for words. “It’s complicated.”

The tent was fully erect, and I followed him to the front of it where he unzipped the door. He grabbed my duffle and backpack and threw them inside the tent.

“I’d like to hear about it sometime,” he said softly. His eyes flickered to mine and carried a kindness that I hadn’t seen since my father’s. Now I was sure I’d lost my mind.

I shifted uncomfortably and dropped my gaze.

“Didn’t mean to pry,” he said. “I’ll go get a sleeping bag and pillow for you.”

“Thanks,” I said. My lips pressed together in a tight smile, and I stepped inside my tent hoping for a little time to regroup. Who was this guy? He didn’t seem anything like the guys that came with me on the plane.

“No prob. I think they’ll be doing orientation in a few minutes,” he yelled over his shoulder, taking off toward one of the larger tents.

I opened my duffle bag and grabbed a sweatshirt to wear. It was mid-day and colder than I was used to for a day in June, but then again I was in Alaska. I heard a couple guys talking, coming up behind my tent, and I tensed up. Their conversation was harmless, but I still didn’t like the uneasiness that continually wanted to push its way through me. I needed to find out what kind of people I was here with.

A bell chimed through the air, followed by a CL’s call for everyone to gather around the fire. I wasn’t looking forward to whatever activity they had planned, but I was looking forward to standing in front of the heat source.

I zipped my duffle back up and closed up the tent. I scanned the small group that was gathering and didn't notice Liam, but I did see Steph. She was talking somewhat heatedly with a girl. Must be Chelsea. Liam's summation of her not being a people person seemed quite fitting as she turned her dark eyes to glare at me.

Chelsea had pale skin that was in stark contrast to her shiny black hair, at least where it wasn't shaved off in patches, and the tips were a faded purple. She was dressed in turquoise leggings with black shorts and a red top. She was definitely one of those that didn't want to be stared at, but who did everything to make you stare.

Steph saw me and waved me over and shrugged off whatever conversation she and Chelsea were having. I pulled my hood around my head and trundled over to where they were, hoping a shred of a smile would make its way onto Chelsea's lips. No such luck.

"Hey, Emma. This is Chelsea." Steph took a few steps to the side. Apparently she wanted me to stand next to Chelsea. Wonderful! Chelsea looked like she might be fifteen or so, but it was hard to tell with all the makeup she had on.

"Nice to meet you." I lied, hoping my smile would make up for it.

"I'm sure it is." Chelsea turned to take me in, and I can say without a doubt the stare she gave me was far worse than anything the guys on the plane could've come up with. "How old are you anyway?"

"I'll be eighteen in a week." I shoved my hands in my hoodie pockets and found myself skimming the group for Liam.

"Looking for someone?" Steph teased.

"Nope," I crinkled my face at her as she rolled her eyes. Steph was probably only a couple years older than me, and if we had happened to have met at college, instead of here, I'm sure we would've become fast friends.

“I’m out. I don’t need to stick around for this,” Chelsea grunted.

“Actually, you do.” Steph placed her hand on Chelsea’s shoulder.
“Sorry. Those are the rules.”

Chelsea pulled the sleeves of her shirt down over her hands, but not before I caught a glimpse of some pretty gnarly scars. I forced my glance away quickly once I realized what the gashes in her skin meant. I suddenly felt bad for the girl hiding behind her rough exterior.

I spotted a log and decided I’d much rather sit than stand. I plopped on the end and unfortunately made myself too easy of a target. Three guys made a beeline for me and shared the log with me.

“We heard about you,” one of them whispered. “Someone’s got a plan for you.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Justin,” he whispered.

He slowly slid his hand down my back and rested his fingers between my waistband and skin. My flesh crawled with this skin-to-skin contact.

I looked over coolly at him. He was wearing a torn black sweatshirt that appeared older than he was. He looked really twitchy and nervous. His fingers began sliding lower, and I turned quickly to face him, forcing his hands away from my back.

“And what did you hear?” I narrowed my eyes at him. He looked to be sixteen, maybe seventeen. It was really hard to tell. He was a lot bigger than I was, even sitting down. His dark blonde hair was shaved short, and his eyes were as pale as ice. There was nothing kind behind them.

“Thanks everyone for joining us,” Dan began, interrupting our conversation.

“As if I had a choice,” I heard Chelsea mumble behind me.

“This is it,” he continued. “Look around at everyone because these are the people who we’ll all be spending the summer with. The last flight of campers arrived this afternoon so let’s welcome Emma, Luke, Justin, and Mark. The majority of you have been here a week, already making friendships, but please make sure you welcome everyone. These are the people you’re going to learn to trust. Out in these woods, you’ll be finding yourself in many situations where you’ll need a partner. It’s crucial bonds are built and never broken. I’d like to think we won’t encounter situations of life and death, but we must always be prepared.”

I looked at Dan and knew there was no way this was how stern he acted in his off hours. There was something really carefree hiding behind those eyes. His hair was as long as Steph’s, and he looked like he belonged on a surfboard, not here.

“Caleb’s going to go over the rules,” Dan said to a crowd full of groans. “It’ll be a good refresher for everyone. And judging by what happened yesterday, apparently some of us need reminders.”

What? What happened yesterday?

I looked at the guys next to me, and they seemed pretty oblivious; but then my eyes landed on a guy across the way who looked like he got beat up pretty badly. His lip was sliced and the skin around it was swollen. I explored the rest of the group, wondering who might have beat the poor kid up, and found someone whose injuries looked even worse.

Ugh. Seven days and I can get out of here. I can make it seven days.

Caleb handed a stack of red paper to circulate through the group. When I got my copy I looked down and began reading the list.

ReBoot Rules

- 1) *No illegal activities*
- 2) *NEVER leave food or garbage out*
- 3) *No fighting. Be respectful of others and nature*

- 4) *Never leave your partner*
- 5) *Travel in groups or, at a minimum, in pairs.*
- 6) *Don't leave the camping area at night*
- 7) *Never go into the woods or tall grass alone. Ensure a CL is with you at all times if you must leave the immediate premises*
- 8) *Report any misconduct to a CL immediately*
- 9) *When completing forestry duties always obey the CL in charge*

Caleb read the list out loud, and I stared line by line as he went through the rules. A chill ran through me as I realized someone was watching me. I felt the person's gaze slink along my body and I froze. I didn't know if it was better to acknowledge it or ignore it.

I folded the list and stuffed it in my pocket. Caleb continued talking, but I didn't hear any of it. My blood was pumping so quickly I only heard a ringing in my ears. Everything else was muffled.

I finally brought my head up to see Luke staring at me, licking his lips. His hands were pushed deep into his pockets and I swore I saw movement, which only churned my stomach more.

C hapter T hree

Most of the group disbanded, but I stayed on the log wondering if there was any possible way to get out of here sooner. Everyone had introduced themselves and as their names rolled off their tongues, so did their rap sheets. There was Shane who was busted for both robbery and assault. Then there was Luke, who enjoyed setting fires, a little something I'd like to call arson. And he got in a brief argument with Jake, who apparently shared the same passion. The CL stepped in to move the conversation forward. Everyone else was a blur. I didn't care anymore. The wind was really beginning to pick up, and I wondered if I should head back and put the tarp over my tent before it started to rain.

"Hey, pretty girl." Luke's voice crawled up behind me.

He placed his hand on my shoulder as he climbed over the log to have a seat next to me.

"What do you want?" I snapped, turning my face to look at him head on. "I thought I made things pretty clear on the plane."

Luke scooted closer to me and my stomach became nauseated. He placed his hand on my knee and began gliding it up toward my thigh. I clamped my hand on his and threw it off me. There were a few of the guys around, but they didn't do anything but stare at us. *Why was I not surprised?*

“Don’t touch me,” I said through clenched teeth.

“Come on, baby,” he hovered closely to me, “give me a chance.”

I stood up quickly, but not before he grabbed my wrist and tugged me toward him, anchoring me on his lap. He began pressing himself against me, holding me tightly. His lips slowly grazed my neck, landing near my ear.

His mouth parted. “You’re making me crazy. You know what I would have done to you already back at home?”

The fear swirled in my body creating an explosion of adrenaline as I quickly slammed my palm into his nose, startling him enough so I could break free.

“Oh. You never should’ve done that.” Luke stood up and reached for my hand.

“And why’s that?” Liam’s voice boomed through the air as he jumped over the log and landed on Luke, taking him to the ground.

It only took one punch from Liam’s fist and Luke was completely out. I’d never seen someone land a punch with such incredible force. I’d heard of hits like that but had never seen one up close.

Liam jumped off Luke and rushed over to me.

“Are you okay?” His eyes were still blazing from taking Luke down and my heart rate was off the charts.

No. I wasn’t okay. I wouldn’t be okay until I got to college and away from anything to do with my stepfather, including this. He’s the one who put me here. He knew what this place was. But then I realized that going home would be just as horrible as being here. I had no idea what to do.

I stood and stared at Liam, saying nothing. His expression softened as he took me in.

“We’ve gotta talk to Steph and get you out of here.” He glanced over his shoulder at Luke who was still groggy and then his gaze landed back on me. “It’s just not safe.”

The guys who had been around gawking completely disappeared.

I shook my head and reached for his hand. “I’m fine.”

His left brow shot up and he watched me carefully.

“No. Seriously. I’m fine. I was gonna pepper spray him,” I confided.

A grin surfaced along Liam’s lips. “Really?”

“Yeah. Really,” I replied, feeling a little less shaken.

“I still think we need to talk to Steph. She’s in the break room,” he said, pointing to the yurt she’d shown me earlier.

I nodded and kept my fingers intertwined with his as we headed for the CL’s safe haven.

The door opened slowly, and Steph stepped out onto the deck catching Liam and I traipsing over to her.

“What’s up?” she asked, her eyes dropping to our hands. We’d made it to the deck and were standing in front of her.

“We had a situation that I had to take care of. Luke went after her,” Liam’s tone was sharp but quiet.

Steph became wide-eyed and shook her head, quickly leading us into the yurt.

“Is there any way we can get her off the island?” he started.

“The next plane isn’t coming for a week, but I’ll call and explain the situation. See if we can get her off quicker. Is that what you feel comfortable with?” she asked me.

“Yeah. I was planning on leaving as soon as that plane returned,” I told her.

“You’ll be eighteen in a week?” Liam interrupted. “Why would anyone send you up here for such a short amount of time?”

“It’s complicated,” I replied, knowing that was the same answer I’d given him earlier.

“It sounds like it,” Steph confirmed.

I looked up at her quickly realizing she was treating Liam as an equal and felt a little safer divulging a little bit of information.

“It’s my stepfather. The uncomplicated version is that he hates me. He tricked my mom and me into thinking that this was a conservation and forestry camp because that’s what I’m hoping to study when I get to OSU in the fall,” I explained. “And I actually fell for it.”

“So Kroy is your stepdad?” she asked.

I nodded.

“He’s the one who filled out her admission paperwork, citing ‘problems with authority’ but that’s about it,” Steph confirmed to Liam.

“Brutal,” Liam said, but I saw a glimmer of something behind his eyes, and I wanted to find out more.

Steph reached for a phone-like contraption that looked like it was from the eighties.

“What’s that?” I questioned.

“Satellite phone,” Liam answered. “It’s all we’ve got in remote parts out here. It’s crazy expensive.”

“So if that goes out?”

“Then we’re screwed,” he muttered.

Stephanie was already talking to someone on the phone, and I began feeling better already.

“We’d always camp where we got cell service,” I said, dipping my gaze to the floor. “This is so unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.”

“It’s like that for most people,” he agreed. “I grew up here so —”
“You’re from here?”

He nodded. “Well not *here*, here. I grew up in a village on the island though. We have electricity,” he joked.

Steph hung up the phone and turned to us.

“I’ve got some bad news.” She grimaced. “A storm’s on the way. They wouldn’t be able to come for you for at least two days, and that’s still not a guarantee.”

My heart plummeted. I had a way off the island and then a storm’s coming. Why did I feel like this was a pattern in my life?

“If I call them when the storm’s over, they’ll see if they can schedule an early attempt. We’re really at the mercy of the weather.”

Liam glanced at Steph. “I don’t think she should be in her tent alone.”

“I bet you don’t,” Steph laughed.

Liam threw his head back and began laughing. They seemed really comfortable around each other, like they’ve known one another forever. A tiny bit of jealousy swelled, but I pushed it away. What does it matter anyway?

“I’ll move my tent next to hers,” he stated. “And if a storm’s on the way, I better do it fast. It sucks setting up in storms.”

Steph agreed and I followed Liam out of the tent. I was definitely not looking forward to the storm. Forget the fact that no planes can get to us, I’ll be stuck in a tent in the middle of Alaska with the rains pounding and winds blasting. Things just kept getting better.

We stepped onto the deck, and I noticed a group congregating where we’d left Luke. Mike, who was one of the CLs, looked over at Liam and nodded. He must have figured out it was a worthy KO.

“Why don’t you stay inside with Steph while I go move my tent? I’ll put your tarp up too. I think it’s a nasty system, whatever it is.”

“Yeah. It’s freezing.” I nodded and went back inside the yurt.

“Doing okay?” Steph asked.

“Been better.” I sat on a camp chair while she messed with the stove.

“I can imagine... did you want to talk about it?”

I felt bad. I actually *didn’t* want to talk about it. There never seemed to be much to say. I was pinning everything on escaping.

“Just looking forward to going away to college and putting everything behind me,” I said at long last.

“I completely understand that one,” she agreed, taking a seat next to me.

“What made you sign up for this?” I asked.

“Volunteering with ReBoot?” she paused. “Well, I’m studying Psychology, and I thought it would be interesting exposure. Liam heard they were looking for a woman camp leader because of Chelsea and you so I applied. It’ll look good for graduate school, I suppose.”

“So you live up here too?” I questioned.

“No. I’m from the lower 48. I just visited Liam during the summers.” Her eyes smiled as she looked like she was remembering some happy memories. I recognized the look from when I thought about my dad.

She slowly kicked her legs out. “Liam said that this was going to be his last year here so if I wanted to do it, now was my shot. There’s no way he’d let me be here unless he was around. He’s very protective that way.” She laughed and turned to me. “But I think you saw that about him already.”

So she and Liam had to have dated at some point or maybe still were. A tiny bit of disappointment grew inside.

Steph must've caught the look in my eyes because she began laughing.

"We're cousins, Emma." And she kept laughing. "I'd recognize that look anywhere."

"What look?" I demanded, feeling my face flush.

Steph watched as I fidgeted in my chair and finally gave up. I'd been caught.

"It's not like that," I insisted. "Besides, the criminal life isn't really my thing."

Steph was now completely rolled over in laughter, and I just felt myself getting more frustrated and embarrassed.

"Well, Liam will be disappointed to hear you say that," she said finally calming down a little. "On that note, I think it's time to go get dinner. Dan was grilling salmon and some vegetables last I saw. The quicker we eat, the sooner we can hunker down before the storm hits. I've only been through a few summer storms, and they're never enjoyable."

I followed her lead and walked out the door, not realizing my life would never be the same after tonight.

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By the time I had finished dinner, the wind was blowing with such violent force that everyone quickly dispersed back to their tents without saying a word. Liam asked me to wait so he could help the CLs put everything away. He wanted to walk me back to our tents so I agreed. They were locking everything up in the bear-proof (if there were such a thing) containers with such speed I knew the weather had them concerned. They also had to haul them way up into the air, lodging them on the bear-proof platforms high in the trees.

A branch cracked, falling with a thud against the ground. I nearly jumped out of my skin. I looked around quickly, trying to gauge if the trees around my tent might catapult limbs toward me during my sleep, and unfortunately the answer I came up with was of course they could. The branches continued to dance and shake with each new gust of wind. A mist began filling the air, and I hugged myself tightly wishing I could just run to my tent now before I got completely drenched.

“All done,” Liam yelled to Caleb, strapping the lid on the last giant box where the cooking pans were kept.

“Awesome, thanks,” Caleb yelled, along with something else I couldn’t hear because of the gushing in my ear.

The rain began to pour as I watched Liam trudge over to me.

“Ready?” Liam asked, holding out his hand.

“This is going to be a long night,” I shouted, hoping I could be heard over the wind.

Liam nodded and helped navigate us toward our tents. Every so often a dim glow from a tent would help guide the way.

“Does this happen often?” I asked.

“Not quite like this... but yeah. We get stormy weather in the summer.”

It was getting more and more difficult to march through the soil that was already saturated from the heavy downpour. Every step I took resulted in my boot getting sucked back in the ground, and the longer I took trying to pull my foot out of the mud the worse it got for us both.

“You got it,” Liam said, helping to pull me through the muck.

“You’ve got to twist your foot as you take the next step so that you stop the mud from—”

And then it happened. My foot finally became free and just as I was about to take another step a giant gust of wind blew me down face first into the mud.

“Shit,” Liam muttered.

I attempted to move my arms, but the suctioning only got worse every time I wiggled. Liam’s strong hands quickly gripped my underarms and scooped me up from the mud with a big sucking and slurping sound as my face and chest became unglued from the mess below.

“Thank you,” I said, but then regretted it as the grit fell into my mouth.

Liam smiled widely and lifted me into his arms.

“You owe me one,” he muttered close to my ear, making my stomach flutter. “This was my favorite shirt.”

He got us to our tents and set me on the ground. I couldn't help but laugh out loud as I realized how closely he'd placed the opening of his tent to the opening of mine. There was a slight hallway between the two and that was it.

Liam reached over and unzipped my door.

"I thought it would be best if I kept an eye on things." His usually cocky demeanor was turned down a notch. His eyes darkened, but as he caught me staring, I almost detected a slight amount of embarrassment as I stared at the tight space.

"Thanks," I replied, climbing into my tent. There was a hanging lantern that I switched on. Liam must have hung it when he dropped off the sleeping bag and pillows. That was nice of him.

I heard him zip the door of his own tent and let out a sigh. Where to even begin?

I spun around in my tent and the loneliness soaked deep inside of me. My sleeping bag was unrolled on top of a skinny camping mat along the left side. The two pillows were placed on top of the red, fluffy bag. In addition to several flashlights, my duffle and backpack were the only other things inside the tent. I had brought several books, including my favorite collection of Edgar Allen Poe, but I doubted they'd last long. I'd probably inhale the books in a matter of days. But I was so dirty I didn't even want to open the duffle. I'd ruin anything my fingers managed to touch. The mud was plastered on my face and stuck in my hair. I had no idea how to even begin cleaning myself off. I was in a tent with no running water.

The sides of my tent rippled with each gust of wind, and the tarp flapped against the tent. I saw Liam's lantern flick on and felt strangely comforted by it.

I unzipped my sweatshirt and took it off. Using it inside out as a rag, I rubbed the caked on mud off my face. It had already started to dry so a lot of it fell to the grey tent floor. I was constantly spitting out wet hair and mud that was invading my mouth as I tried to keep the dirt away from my somewhat clean t-shirt. I wiped my hands off on the sweatshirt and threw it to the far corner. I stripped off my jeans and kicked them to the same place as my sweatshirt when I saw a large figure hovering outside my door.

The fear climbed up my body, as I stood completely vulnerable in a short t-shirt and my favorite Victoria's Secret boy shorts. Every step I took produced a crinkling sound from the tent flooring, but I doubted anyone could hear it, including the person outside my tent, but I'm sure they could see my shadow.

I slowly reached for my duffle and unzipped it, grabbing a pair of sweats, which I quickly slipped on. I watched as an arm stretched up and paused.

He's reaching for the zipper!

My heart pounded. I went to scream, but nothing came out except a hoarse grunt. The figure's arm stopped for a second as if he was gauging my response.

A huge gust of wind blasted the side of my tent, rippling the fabric and my breath caught.

The fingers began tugging on the zipper once more.

"Liam," I screamed, finally finding my voice.

The shadow swiftly moved through the narrow space between our tents, escaping. Liam was instantly out of his tent, but then struggled with my tent door's zipper.

Throwing the fabric door open, Liam's eyes were blazing, dark.

"What happened?" he asked gruffly.

“Someone tried to get into my tent.”

“Which way did he go?” He poked his head outside the door.

“Never mind. I see the tracks. I’ll be back. Use a shoelace and tie the zippers together.”

“Wait! Where are you going?” I asked, beginning to freak out again. He took off without answering.

I quickly zipped my tent and grabbed one of my boots. I unlaced it and wove the shoelace through the door zippers, tying it in several knots. That would at least slow someone down.

I fell to the ground, scooting my back up against the far wall of the tent. My flesh prickled with every whoosh of the wind. I began feeling dizzy and clenched my eyes shut. It’s just a few days at the most. I was wet, dirty, mentally exhausted, and stuck in a tent, but I had to get through this.

A thump outside the tent interrupted my thoughts. My eyes flashed open to reveal an empty tent. There were no shadows dancing outside. Maybe it was just the wind picking something up outside and tossing it around. Now I was only being overly jumpy. If anything, maybe it was Liam.

Before I could get control of my breathing, something slammed against the right wall of the tent. I stood up immediately and grabbed a flashlight to shine on the tent wall. I couldn’t see anyone outside, but another slap on the tent confirmed someone was out there.

“Go away,” I screamed, flipping off the lantern but keeping the flashlight on.

A man’s deep voice growled with the wind and my veins filled with terror. That was definitely not Liam. A finger began scratching the fabric of the tent drawing a straight line as the figure walked along the tent, taunting me.

“I’ll be watching you,” the voice murmured.

Two hands pressed on the fabric of the tent so firmly that I could see the tip of each finger. My pulse raced, and my hands trembled as I shined the flashlight directly against the hand imprints. The wind gusts were nothing compared to the sounds of my own breathing.

I tucked my legs underneath me, put the flashlight down and reached for the pepper spray with my trembling hands. I also grabbed the bear spray. If it worked on a bear, maybe it would cripple whoever was on the other side of the tent.

“I can see you moving, grabbing useless things to hold on to in there,” he laughed wickedly. “But nothing you have will work against me.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I hissed, wiping away the sweat that was now trickling down my forehead, even though it was freezing outside.

His fingers released from the tent, and I turned off the flashlight. I didn’t want him to see me. I spun around slowly as I sat, looking for any sign of where he might be. The walls of the tent felt like they were closing in on me as my head pounded with fear.

Unable to see any shadows lurking outside, I brought my legs out from under me and tightened myself into a ball, resting my head on my knees. I continually scanned all four walls around me for some sign. My mind began racing with horrid thoughts, knowing Liam was outside trying to track this person down and here he was back at the tent.

“Over here,” the voice mocked me from behind before quickly running to another section. “No, over here.”

I couldn’t place this guy’s voice. It didn’t sound like any of the CLs or campers.

Fury began replacing fear as I listened for more clues from this trespasser, but I knew I needed to stay inside these four walls, as transparent

as they seemed. There was a part of me, however, that wanted to fling open the door and hose him down with every spray I had and watch him writhe in pain.

“You’re pathetic,” I replied.

“It’s not me who’s pathetic. You’re the one who needed help earlier tonight, more than once if I recall.”

“You should be worried. Terrified, especially once I get rid of Liam,” he laughed as he spoke and suddenly jabbed the tent wall to my right. I made myself stiffen rather than jump, but my head was pounding with pain trying to hold everything in.

“You’re outnumbered.”

"It was night, and the rain fell; and falling, it was rain, but, having fallen, it was blood," he groaned, reciting Edgar Allen Poe.

My marrow froze as I realized whoever this was had been through my things, knowing I’d recognize that quote from the poet.

"It was night, and the rain fell; and falling, it was rain, but, having fallen, it was blood," he whispered once more, tapping on the tent wall.

“Good night for now.”

Chapter Five

“Good news and bad news,” Liam’s voice hit me from outside the door.

“He was here again,” I hissed to Liam, frantically trying to untie the lace I had just knotted between the zippers. I freed the zipper and flipped on the lantern again.

“What?” he asked, flapping the door wide open and stepping inside.

He was completely drenched. His hair was plastered to his head, his shirt stuck to his chest, and he was breathing heavily. Droplets trailed down his face, and I threw a shirt at him to wipe off. I realized my hands were shaking and so did he. It wasn’t anything I could hide. But having him here made me feel a million times safer.

“Can I have the good news first?” I asked, watching him rub the shirt over his hair quickly.

“The good news is that it probably wasn’t anyone in the camp.” He tossed the shirt over where the others were piled.

“And that’s also the bad news, isn’t it?”

He nodded.

I sat down on the sleeping bag and raised my knees into me.

“It’s not like there are houses anywhere around. This place is only accessible by plane or boat. The nearest town is definitely not reachable by

foot.” He shook his head and sat in front of me. “It’s weird.”

“Well, whoever it was didn’t really leave the area. They were pressing their hands against the tent, trying to freak me out I guess.” I glanced to where I last saw the handprints. “He’s also been through my things.”

“What? Why didn’t you tell me that first thing?”

I shrugged. “He recited a line from Poe’s *Silence – A Fable*. Told me he’d be back.” My words were shaky, and I hoped I could get a grip on my nerves.

“Shit,” Liam mumbled more to himself than to me.

I dropped my eyes to the floor. “Believe it or not my cool exterior is just a façade. I’m panicking inside.”

He smiled and moved his gaze to the door.

The wind seemed to be lessening, and I could actually hear Liam without straining.

“Yeah. You completely have me fooled.” He flashed a smile that completely warmed my insides. “But I’ll put an end to it.”

“He said he was going to take care of you,” I told him.

“Not gonna happen.” Liam’s confidence was calming and something I needed.

“I wonder why it’s me,” I whispered under my breath.

“Maybe it’s as simple as your tent being closest to the woods.”

I nodded. “I’ll go with that.”

“We’ll get it figured out,” he promised and reached over to touch my hand. A spark ran through me as I tried to fight the reaction that his touch brought, but my skin gave it away. My face reddened and I pulled back.

“I hope so,” I muttered.

For some odd reason, I believed him. It's not like I thought he had Superman powers or something, but he was so self-assured that I couldn't help but go along. Anyone who grew up around here was on an entirely different level.

"In the morning, things will be different, and I guarantee whatever is going on will be stopped." His eyes hardened and he shoved his hands through his damp hair. "It's probably a prank or something."

"It's not very funny." I nodded and let out a deep breath as I pulled a pillow to my lap. Liam leaned back and rested on his elbows. I noticed a wide black handle sticking out of the waistband of his jeans. The handle was at least six inches long. I couldn't imagine how long the blade might be. He caught me looking and grinned.

"Things must be different in Alaska." I raised my brow.

"Very."

"It makes me feel better knowing you weren't going out in the dark depending only on your fists." I smiled and noticed the sexy dimples forming in his cheeks, as his grin grew wider. "Not that I haven't seen the damage they can cause."

The thought of being alone in the tent overnight sent chills through me, and I was thankful he wasn't rushing away.

"So you had no idea that this camp was like this?" he asked, catching me off guard.

"Not until I was on the puddle jumper. I should've known though. It's not like my stepdad has ever done anything for me out of the kindness of his heart. I'm not even sure he has one."

Liam laughed and sat back up.

"It's like that, huh? How about your real dad? He's the one you camp with, right?"

My stomach turned in knots, and I felt a lump in the back of my throat that hijacked my voice. How could I still be like this when so much time had gone by? I quickly looked down at the pillow that I was crushing to death.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“No. It’s okay,” I interrupted, looking at him through my lashes as the tears soaked back in from where they came from. “I’ve gotta get better at this whole talking about him thing.”

“If you’re not ready I understand.” His eyes held the warmth that I’d recognized so often in my father’s eyes, or maybe it was just that I wanted to see it in Liam’s, but regardless I felt okay opening up to him.

“He died a year ago, but he was sick for several years. The doctors gave him less than a year, but I know he hung on for me. It killed me to see him suffer for me.”

“Cancer?” his voice softening.

“Yeah. Lymphoma.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Thanks. I never really talk about it. I noticed if I brought it up around my friends they immediately began to shy away. I felt like I was the immediate buzz kill for them.”

“They don’t sound like very good friends,” his voice low.

“Maybe not, but it’s not their fault. I mean they’re young and don’t want to be bogged down by all that stuff.”

“But so are you. And it’s not stuff. It’s your father — your life.”

I looked at him, and he was studying me closely. A shiver went through me when I caught something else in his eyes, desire maybe? No. I was just being crazy.

I forced a smile. He didn't understand and that's okay. Friendships were complicated. I'd rather shove aside my problems in order to keep friends than divulge everything and not have any left.

"When my mom died—"

I gasped. "Your mom?"

He nodded. "I was thirteen. It wasn't like what you went through. It was sudden. I'm not sure which is better or worse. It all sucks, I guess."

I watched him speak of her and the incident with such ease, and I wondered if I'd ever get there.

"She died of a heart attack, and it's not like we live where there's the best healthcare." He stopped and cast his eyes down before connecting with mine once more. "I was the one who found her."

I reached my hand out to his and he squeezed it, not letting go.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

"It teaches the cycle of life pretty quickly. Also puts things in perspective," he said, biting his lip.

A big gust of wind plowed the tent wall behind me and I jumped.

"Guess, I'm a little nervous still." I laughed.

His eyes widened and he smiled. "I would be too if I were a city girl."

There was a moment of silence between us. He still held my hand, and I didn't want him to let go. His eyes searched mine like he was looking for something more, and his smile faded slightly.

"My parents divorced when I was young. My mom cheated on my father. I didn't know it at the time, but I figured it out as I got older. The guy she cheated with, she married. My dad got full custody," I said.

"Isn't it unusual for the dad to get full custody?" Liam asked.

“Not when your mom doesn’t want it. I think she would’ve been fine if there was no visitation in there at all, to be honest,” I replied, feeling the anger begin to boil over. “I’m not sure why she became a mom. I think it was an accident. Anyway, I was scheduled to be with her two weekends a month. That was it and most of the time that didn’t even happen. I’m thankful I didn’t have to go there because I got to spend more time with my dad, but it sent a message to me loud and clear.”

“I can imagine.” He shook his head slowly as his smile faded into a frown. “Nobody deserves that, especially you.”

“My dad was such a nice guy. He was my best friend. We did everything together. When he got sick, even when he didn’t feel well, he tried so hard to make my life easy. He was absolutely amazing. He sold his company when he found out he was ill to spend much more time with me. I think he knew deep inside he wasn’t gonna make it.” The wetness in my eyes was impossible to hide away, and for some reason, I didn’t care. It felt good, really good.

Liam reached out and brought my pillow and me into him. He held me tightly. For the first time in a very long time, I realized the tears I cried tonight weren’t sorrowful. They were joyful because I allowed myself to remember the father I had loved and what I’d always treasure about him, not what I was missing. Being away from my mother and stepdad was far more therapeutic than I realized.

“Thank you,” I whispered. Liam’s fingers ran up and down my arm as he hugged me. My eyes closed as I felt his heart beating, slow and steady. The longer I was in his arms, the more difficult it was to deny the attraction. But he wouldn’t be good for me. I took a deep breath in, enjoying how intoxicating he smelled and exhaled slowly. Heat and excitement ran between us, and I needed to break away. His breath tickled

my scalp as he held me tightly, and I didn't want to leave his embrace, but I knew I had to. It was the right thing to do. I backed up and broke his arms free. The energy running between us had quickly changed from confidant to something more, and he recognized it too as I watched his cocky grin grow wider.

"That's what friends are for," he said, winking at me.

I smiled and snuggled back on my sleeping bag, wondering if that was completely true. Was that what friends did for each other or was it more? That type of connection felt honest, real.

But, I was only going to be here a couple more days so what did it really matter anyway?

He leaned back on his elbows again, but this time my eyes skipped over the knife he was packing and fell to his abs. *Damn! I doubt he got those by going to a gym.* The wilderness really was good for people.

He caught me staring and started laughing, which only brought out my feisty side.

"Listen, I appreciate everything you've done for me. I mean I really do, but I just don't feel comfortable with..." I stopped unable to place the expression on his face. It was a mixture of amusement and gratification and something more.

"I just don't want you to get the wrong idea," I muttered. "You're an amazing person, and I'm sure whatever you did wasn't that bad, but I just can't get involved with someone that's got this kind of baggage. I've got enough issues for the both of us."

A few minutes of stunned silence surfaced as his caramel eyes twinkled with bewilderment. His lips parted slowly.

"You think I'm one of the campers?" he asked, angling his head. His lips turned into a pulse-quicken smile, his eyes darkening a shade before

he burst out laughing.

“You’re not?” I asked, completely confounded.

“No way. My dad would totally kick my ass,” he said, unable to stop laughing.

“Then why are you here?” I’m sure I was completely red in the face, but it wouldn’t go away.

“I’m kind of like their handyman, and I know the region like the back of my hand. It was easy money and good money at that. I did it a couple years in high school and this is my first year doing it in college. I actually get credit for it. The camp switched owners this year, and I’m not really thrilled with what they’ve changed so it’ll be my last summer here.”

“Oh.”

“That’s all I get is an ‘oh’?” he smiled, shaking his head.

“It makes a lot more sense now.” I grinned and a bit more of my heart softened.

“So what changes pissed you off enough to make this your last year here?” I asked, trying to shift the embarrassment and the desire that had started to run through me again.

“For starters, the tents. We had tiny cabins. They were probably more like sheds, but still... they weren’t tents. A bear could get through them easily, but it was a little more of a deterrent.”

“So the tents are a new feature? Great! I’ve been talking myself into falling asleep in them because I thought they’d already been here for years without problems. I’ve watched the Discovery channel enough to know that I should be scared to death.”

“It’ll be fine.” He assured me. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t think so. Right now it doesn’t seem it’s the bears we have to worry about anyway.”

“Not funny.” I scowled.

“So something tells me you won’t be getting any sleep if I leave. Is that true?” His eyes softened as he waited for my answer.

I nodded. “Positively true.”

“I can grab my bag and sleep on the other side of the tent if you want.”

I let out a huge sigh and before I could stop myself, I lunged at him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Thank you. I wasn’t planning on letting you out of my sight for more than thirty seconds,” I mumbled, letting go quickly.

“No sweat. I’ll be right back.”

I climbed into the sleeping bag and heard him zipping up his tent and watched as he climbed back into mine, bag and pillow in hand. He tossed them on the floor and zip tied the zippers together, creating a more substantial lock than my shoelaces.

My heart began racing as he unrolled his sleeping bag on the other side of the tent. There was something so addicting about him. His forearm flexed as he adjusted everything, and I felt an entirely new set of feelings run through me, knowing he wasn’t one of the campers.

He turned to face the wall of the tent and pulled his shirt over his head. I suddenly felt flushed as I watched him open up his bag. His shoulder and back muscles were so well defined I couldn’t even fathom what it would be like to be pressed up against him. He crawled in his bag, and I clenched my eyes shut so he wouldn’t catch me staring.

“Hope you have a good sleep, Emma. Thanks for sharing some of that stuff with me. I know it wasn’t easy.”

My heart flip-flopped as his words floated over to me.

“It’s amazing what fear will make a person confess,” I whispered.

“Or finding the right person to confess to.”

A big gust of wind cracked a branch outside, and I took a deep breath in hoping to fall asleep quickly. But all I could think of was Liam’s caramel brown eyes as he listened about my father and the warmth of his embrace. It was going to be a tough night.

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C hapter S ix

I woke up to the sound of the other campers roaming around outside, assessing the storm's damage from the night before. I turned over to check on Liam, but his sleeping bag was gone. It was like he'd never been here. My heart dropped a little, which was ridiculous. I'm not sure what I was expecting. I forced myself on my back and brought the sleeping bag up to my chin. It was so cold outside of my cocoon that I wanted to stay curled up in my bag all day, but I knew I needed to get out and see if there was anything I could help with. And I wanted a shower and had no idea how that was going to work out. The bathroom situation was precarious enough!

I sat up and gathered my hair into a loose ponytail and pulled on my boots, stringing the laces up again from the night before. I unzipped the door and was immediately greeted by Liam's orange tent and chuckled at just how close it was, especially in the daylight. I felt exhilarated as I thought about running into him, and then the realization of what I probably looked like occurred to me at the same time. Climbing out of the tent, I walked over to Steph's tent and she was inside, her door unzipped. Hopefully she could point me in the direction of looking decent and feeling clean.

“Hey,” I called. She turned around to greet me, looking concerned.

“How are you doing after everything? Liam told me what happened. He said nothing like that’s ever happened up here before.” She looked as on-edge as I felt the night before. Somehow the daylight made the night before seem surreal to me. I almost didn’t believe any of it happened.

I shook my head and smiled. “Not really looking forward to night two.”

“I bet. I think we’re going to rearrange the camp and everything,” she said. “It wasn’t only you who was taunted. Some of the other tents were targeted throughout the night.”

“Really?” I asked, feeling partly better that it wasn’t just me who was the target.

She nodded.

“So is there like a shower or something-somehow-please...” my voice trailed off, waiting for her answer.

She nodded. “It’s not ideal, but we’ve got one. You’ll learn how to take the quickest showers of your life because they’ll be the coldest showers of your life,” she replied, laughing. “And just always grab me before you decide to shower so I can stand watch.”

“Awesome! I’ll go get my soap and a towel and prepare myself for a chilly one.” I rolled my eyes and trudged back to my tent carefully since the ground was still pretty mushy and slipped my boots off before I stepped back into my tent.

I had wanted to ask her about Liam, but I didn’t want to sound too eager, especially since they were related. I was sure anything I told her would get right back to him.

I grabbed the shampoo, conditioner, and bar of soap out of my bag and noticed the Edgar Allen Poe book that looked completely undisturbed

from when I packed it at home. I dug deeper in the bag and grabbed a towel.

“Ready?” Steph asked, peeking in my tent.

“Yep.”

She grabbed the stuff from me while I slid my feet back in my boots, trying not to fall over. I wasn’t exactly my best in the morning, which only made my coordination even worse. Remembering back to the night before when I fell head first into the mud, I had to stifle a chuckle. Maybe I just wasn’t ever that coordinated.

“This won’t be your most pleasant bathing experience. I promise you that.” She sighed. “Amazing how adventures like these can seem like a good idea from the comfort of your own home.”

“No kidding,” I agreed. “So where do you live?”

“In Colorado, but before that my family lived in Arizona.”

I followed her to a line of tall, narrow tents and let out a sigh. Three of them were a dark green and two of them were bright blue.

“So the bathroom situation...”

“I’ve been eating and drinking very little just to avoid it,” I interrupted, shaking my head.

She started laughing and pointed to the structures. “Completely understood.”

“We also have portable washing machines, but I’ve had better luck just washing my clothes in the river.”

There was a makeshift hand washing station next to the structures with a red hose leading away.

“That’s the direction of the river you’re talking about?” I pointed to the hose.

“Yeah.” She unzipped a dark green structure and placed my bottles on the floor of the shower. I balanced my bar of soap on top the bottles. “It fools you into thinking that it’s a regular shower with all of the knobs, but don’t fall for it.” She smiled. “I’m still traumatized.”

“My two showers a day sounds like it will quickly morph into one.” I laughed, stepping into the structure. I folded my sweats and shirt in the corner because I planned on putting them back on before I walked back to my tent to change into something clean.

I stood to the side of the showerhead so that I could psyche myself up once I turned the water on.

“I’m not hearing anything,” Steph teased.

“Here goes nothing,” I shouted back, turning on the water.

The droplets that splashed from the floor to my ankle were freezing. I glanced at my shampoo bottle and quickly edged forward. I grabbed the bar of soap and lifted the shampoo bottle, flipping the lid and plopping the gel in my palm that also held the bar of soap. There had to be an easier way!

I took a deep breath in and ran under the sprinkling water, gasping as it trailed down my back. Once my hair was wet I massaged the shampoo through my hair as fast as possible, pausing only momentarily to slide the bar of soap all over my body.

My body started adjusting to the frigid temperatures, only marginally, as I let the shampoo run out of my hair. It felt amazing getting the dried mud out of my hair. Today was definitely *not* going to be a conditioner day. I rinsed all the suds off my body and turned off the water.

“Whoa,” I hollered, reaching for the towel. “That completely sucked.”

I dried off as fast as I could and slipped on my clothes, wrapping my hair in the towel.

I unzipped the shower door and grabbed everything, noticing that Steph was pacing. She turned toward me and smiled.

“At least I warned you.”

“True enough,” I said.

One of the guys from yesterday was at the hand washing station, and I noticed something different about the energy running between us. He glanced at me, smiling politely, before concentrating back on his hands. I was beginning to feel less like a piece of meat and more like a citizen in the world again.

“Which guy is that again?” I asked.

“That’s Erik.”

“So where’s Liam?” I asked, unable to hide my curiosity any longer.

“He took a couple of the guys and went out tracking,” her voice was edged with worry and my heart fell.

“Tracking?” I asked. “Tracking what? It doesn’t have to do with last night does it?”

She nodded, pressing her lips together.

“Are you serious? Why would he do that? The weather’s still horrible and —”

“I told him the same thing, but he wouldn’t listen. He was determined to find the guy who did that to you.”

My heart started racing, and I began feeling lightheaded. This wasn’t what I wanted to hear. If something happened to Liam because of me, I’d never forgive myself. Not to mention the thought of being at the camp without him was terrifying.

“When did he leave?” I questioned, reaching my tent and unzipping the door.

“A few hours ago, actually.”

“Who’d he take with him?”

She paused, not answering as she followed me into my tent.

“Who?” I asked again.

She let out a huge sigh, and I knew exactly who it was that Liam hauled with him.

Why would he do that? Why would he take Luke? I felt sick. How or why would he trust a guy he clocked out the day before? Luke was probably looking for any opportunity to payback Liam.

“And a CL, right?” I bit my lip, waiting for the answer. Two against one was always better.

She nodded. “Dan and Luke.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Then why are you?” I quirked my brows, and folded my arms in front of me.

I reached in my bag and pulled out a pair of jeans and another sweatshirt, this time teal. I shrugged off my sweats and sweatshirt and pulled on my new panties, bra and outfit. I unwrapped the towel from my hair and picked up a brush to run through it.

“I can’t even concentrate.” I told her, attempting to fight with my non-conditioned waves.

“I know. I was rearranging my tent for the third time before you came over this morning. Listen, I don’t know if this will make you feel better or what all Liam has told you about his upbringing, but he’s used to taking care of himself. He knows how to handle things, and he’s had a lot of

practice using his fists to solve problems because —” she stopped, realizing she said too much.

“Because why?” I prodded.

She shook her head. “It’s not my place to say. I shouldn’t have brought it up even.” She was completely backpedaling now. “If he hasn’t told you, I shouldn’t either.”

“Does it have to do with his mom’s death?”

“Partly.” Her expression softened. “His father became distraught after his mom died, and Liam had to fend for himself and learn to defend himself, not only around the village he grew up in but from his own brothers. If he’s already told you about his mom, I’m sure he’ll tell you everything else. I just don’t feel comfortable...”

“I understand,” I whispered. We all had secrets. My stomach twisted thinking how selfish I’d been assuming I was the only who needed comfort. My mind began racing, thinking of what could have happened to Liam. He’d only shown me such a wonderfully kind and soft side that it was hard to imagine him as anything but that. Although, he did take care of Luke in pretty rapid order.

My brush kept running into snarls and knots, and I yanked the brush through anyway, the pain tearing at my scalp.

“I really should’ve used conditioner,” I groaned.

“Let me do it. I’ve got the technique down for curls.”

She grabbed the brush from me and started sectioning my hair, from the bottom up, gently working the tangles out.

“I’m so frustrated. I can’t believe he’d be so careless to take off when there’s some crazy guy on the loose.” I exhaled sharply and took another deep breath in.

“All done,” Steph said, tossing my brush on top of my bag. “Let’s get some breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I’m not either, but it will take up some time at least. Nothing is simple in the woods, and you need to eat when you can.”

We climbed out of the tent and zipped it back up.

“Where’s Chelsea?” I asked.

“She’s collecting with Mark, one of the CLs you met yesterday.”

“Hi, Emma.” Justin waved at me, stepping back respectfully. That was the guy who thought his fingers had an all-access pass to me last night, interesting.

I furrowed my brow in confusion at Steph. “Why are they being nice all of a sudden?”

Steph smiled widely. “Word got around about Liam. Apparently it only took one example to set everyone straight, and Luke was the lucky one. Wait until you see him. He’s a constant reminder of what could happen if someone even looks at you the wrong way.”

A tenderness rose up in my body. I didn’t want to think I was a damsel-in-distress chick, but it was pretty sweet to have a guy care enough to handle a problem if one arose, especially like that. The memory of Liam jumping over the bench and landing on Luke warmed my heart.

“You’re blushing,” Steph teased.

“Whatever.” I swatted at her.

We were standing at the base of one of the fir trees, and she began climbing up to the platform where the bear proof vaults and containers were. My hands got clammy just thinking of having to hike up those tiny pieces of wood that she scaled.

She reached the platform and opened one of the containers.

“Cereal bars coming up,” she shouted. “Anyone else need anything?”

“Granola bar, please,” a guy said from behind me. I turned to see who it was and realized how few people I knew here.

He lifted his head in a knowing nod. “Hey, I’m Sam.”

“Emma.” I replied, turning my attention back to Steph as she managed to climb back down with one hand. God that seemed dangerous.

“Next time it’s your turn.” She grinned, walking over to me.

“No way.” I shook my head and grabbed the cereal bar, while she handed Sam the granola bar. “But I’ll always be down here waiting for you.”

The wind began gusting again, and I realized it would be impossible to eat at one of the tables that we were standing next to, even though it was only a lousy cereal bar.

“Things aren’t as they normally are with the storm and everything.” Steph said as we walked back toward our tents.

“How so?”

“Usually everything is very structured...up at a certain hour, eating, and then off to do chores or service in the field. I’m gonna go grab my bag and meet you in your tent, if you don’t mind.”

“Sounds great to me.”

I made my way through the tight space between my tent and Liam’s and fought the worry that was creeping through me. Why did he have to go play hero and why wouldn’t he have told me?

I sat down on my sleeping bag and ripped into my cereal bar, polishing it off before Steph even arrived. I slid open the bear proof disposal bag and stuck my wrapper inside and closed it back up. That was going to be really annoying for the next few days.

Steph finally arrived and tossed her sleeping bag and pillow inside the tent just as a huge downpour began.

“I’m really worried about him,” I confessed, looking over at Steph. Judging by the look in her eyes she was too.

“I fully believe in my cousin’s ability,” she stated, but it was more like she was solidifying that thought in her own mind by reciting it.

“Is he armed?” I asked, thinking of all the bear precautions that I was taking just with a food wrapper.

“Most definitely.”

We both snuggled into our respective sleeping bags and listened to the rain pounding on the tarp outside as we talked incessantly about how stupid it was that he’d left until we both fell fast asleep.

The yelling outside the tent roused me out of my sleeping bag. I looked over at Steph who was just starting to wake up. I shook her to speed up the process. It seemed pretty dark outside, but I think that was only the storm clouds producing the effect. The shouts were getting louder and coming closer. It sounded like the entire group was at the opposite end of the clearing from where my tent was.

“What’s going on?” she asked, throwing her bag off.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out.” I slid my boots on and climbed out of the tent, barely waiting for Steph to catch up.

I ran through the maze of tents. The voices were getting louder as I went until I finally came to the center where we’d had our camp meeting.

There was a crowd congregating and yelling, throwing their fists in the air, and my body began to fill with terror with every step closer. Did something happen to Liam and they’re all happy about it?

I stopped suddenly as the fear pulsed through me, and Steph put her hand on my shoulder, paralyzed with the same mounting fear. The

disorganized shouting turned into a rhythmic chanting, and I realized that they were now chanting Liam's name. I ran through the crowd, pushing everyone aside as I made it to the front and what I witnessed shocked me beyond belief.

There was a guy bound and tied to one of the logs we had used as a bench the day before. Liam was completely drenched and muddy, sitting next to the guy. His head was in hands as he looked down at the ground, breathing heavily. I scanned for Luke and Dan, but I didn't find either of them.

"Liam?" I called quietly at first, but the chanting from all the guys drowned out my voice so I kept walking, calling his name.

"Emma?" Liam lifted his head, his brown eyes connecting with mine.

He stood up quickly, smiling at me. There was something different about him, his eyes. They were more primitive, virile than I was used to seeing as he scanned quickly up and down my body, before holding out his arms.

I ran around the fire and directly into his arms. He hugged me tightly, bending his head down to mine. His soft lips touching my ear as he held me.

"I told you I'd take care of the problem," he whispered, sending chills down my spine. I hugged him back as his words sunk in.

"Thank you," I whispered.

"I won't let anything happen to you, ever."

C hapter S even

“Hey, I want to show you something,” Liam said, grabbing my hand, pulling me through the camp.

“Okay...” I said surprised, looking behind me back at Steph. I waved at her quickly as Liam pulled me along with him.

We walked through the camping area and up a trail about fifty feet when I saw something off in the trees.

“What’s that?” I asked. “Is that where we’re going?”

He didn’t say anything but kept hauling me up the trail. The ground was still soggy, and I really didn’t want a repeat of the night before so I was grateful that he held onto me.

As we got closer I saw a building that looked ancient, with darkened timbers for walls and very few windows. The building itself was fairly large, but there was one big issue that I saw with the structure. It was missing a wall on the side. The conifers towered over the building, but the structure still looked pretty substantial. The roof was completely covered in green moss but that probably helped to keep the water out at this point.

“What was this place?” I asked, looking into the building. There were a few wooden tables that looked as old as the building, and some large chains and hooks hanging from the ceiling but nothing else inside.

“It’s a smokehouse,” he replied, letting go of my hand as he motioned for me to follow along the side of the building.

The glass in the windows rippled showing age, but they were all intact, which I thought was pretty amazing for around here. On the ground, I saw what was probably the missing wall of the building. Vegetation had completely swallowed it whole, with only the worn corners sticking out.

“How old is it?” I asked, staring at the chains that dangled down. That was definitely creepy.

“From the 1940s. That wall was actually a sliding door. I’m showing you this because I haven’t been comfortable with the new layout of the camp since I got here, and even though I managed to find the dick who did that to you, we’ve still got the issue of brown bears...” his voice trailed off.

His eyes darkened as he looked back at the building. There was something else bothering him.

“I just don’t agree with the new management of this place. I’ve lived up here. I know the dangers, they don’t. No matter how much I tell myself that people go camping on the island and nothing happens, the truth of it is, we do get bear attacks. And it’s usually only the tourists who go camping, not locals. There’s a reason for that.”

“Huh,” I broke off, not sure what to say. I was hoping to make it a couple more days before I left.

“We still have another yurt we could put up so we’d have two, and then we could rebuild this section and use this to house people too.”

“You think you could get the guys to help rebuild it?” I asked.

“That’s what they’re up here to do. We’ve had an odd couple of days because of the weather. But usually all we do is work them, give them responsibility, and skills to take with them when they leave.”

I shook my head and crossed my arms in front of me. The chill in the air was getting colder by the minute. “In all honesty, I’d feel better in either a yurt or this compared to my piddly tent.”

“I thought so. Steph would too. I’ll coordinate with the CLs and hopefully get the guys working on it as soon as the weather lets up.”

“I hope it does. I’d like to see a little bit more of the island before I go back home.” I flashed him a smile and held out my hand. “Are there more places like this? This is actually kind of creepy.”

The thought of going back home really wasn’t appealing. Having to deal with my stepfather’s taunting or whatever else he conjured up seemed horrible.

He nodded. “There are abandoned hunting cabins and all sorts of weird things around here. It would be pretty cool to show you around. And some of the stuff is far creepier.”

He began walking toward me and grabbed my hand as we made it back down the hill.

“How did you find him?” I asked, his grip tightened.

“It wasn’t that difficult, but he wasn’t at his camp when we tracked him down so we had to sit and wait awhile,” he said.

“I wonder where he was while you guys were waiting?”

Liam shrugged his shoulders as we made it back into the camp. It was still pretty empty since most people were choosing to huddle in their tents to keep warm and dry. The rain would come on suddenly and by the time anyone made it back to the tent, they’d be drenched. But I liked being outside, mainly because it bought me more time with Liam.

It was going to be getting dark soon, and I hoped that Liam would still be willing to stay in my tent overnight, even though the guy was caught.

“Did you figure out who he was or why he was doing what he was doing?” I asked.

We sat on a wooden picnic bench together and Liam turned to face me.

“I grabbed his identification and Dan called it in. The authorities might be able to track down what flight he came in on and all that stuff.” I could tell he was hiding something. “When they come for you, once the storm is over, he’ll be put on the plane.”

“The same plane as me?” My voice trembled unexpectedly.

It would make sense, but I guess I didn’t think that far ahead.

“He’ll be restrained. There won’t be any issues,” Liam offered, his eyes narrowing as he watched my reaction. The protectiveness continued to build behind his caramel eyes, and he gently touched my arm that was shaking slightly. I hadn’t even realized it until his finger touched my wrist.

I shook my head. “That just doesn’t sound appealing. I mean those are small-ass planes, and it was bad enough flying in with these guys.” I motioned around the campground. “And they seem harmless in comparison.”

“I know. I didn’t really want to bring it up, but I thought I’d better.”

I let out a deep sigh. My life kept getting better and better.

“What’s with that look?” he asked, a ghost of a smile touching his lips.

“I keep hoping my life will turn around soon,” I mumbled.

He reached over and cupped my chin in his hand. “It will. I promise. Once you get to college, you’ll see how quickly things can change. I won’t pretend to understand the kind of shit you’ve had to deal with back home, but it’ll get better once you can distance yourself.”

“Did that happen for you?” I asked, enjoying the tenderness of his touch along my jaw.

He nodded his head. “I actually wouldn’t be coming back to the island at all if it weren’t for this job. After this summer, I don’t even know how long it will be before I come back, if ever.”

Wow. What’s haunting him back at home?

His hand fell from my face and he turned around, facing the campsite.

“Wanna go sit in front of the fire?” he asked, standing up. “You look like you’re freezing.”

“I’d like that very much.” I hopped up and followed him, listening to my boots making the soft squishing sound with every step. But this time I was twisting and lifting with each step to make sure I’d make it without getting an Alaskan spa treatment.

“So you really believe things will get better once I get to college?” I questioned, sitting down on one of the logs near the flames.

Liam was placing more wood on the fire, and sparks rose with every crackle.

“I do.” He started grinning an overly cocky grin, and the desire began stirring deep inside me, but then, unexpectedly, so did a bit of jealousy.

I recognized that expression in his eyes. Carnal desire flickered behind the caramel color, and I flushed realizing he must have been thinking about his conquests over the year. Of course, leave it to a guy to go there first. No wonder he loves college. I mean I couldn’t blame him. As good looking as he was, I couldn’t even imagine the number of girls falling at his feet, but I wanted to imagine myself as one of them — possibly the only one. Knowing I had to get my thoughts on something else less absurd,

I flopped my hood over my head and tucked the strands of hair that had fallen out of my ponytail behind my ears.

“So what college do you go to anyway?” I asked.

He strode over to me, sexy confidence bursting with every step, and I couldn't for the life of me figure out what drove this abundance of maleness all of a sudden. Maybe it hit him how enamored I was with him or that he managed to capture someone almost singlehandedly, and he was pretty proud of himself.

He sat down next to me, his energy radiating over my body. The warmth of him spread through me at an unexpected rate. It was hard to even remember what question I had asked as I watched the circle of his lips begin to part. I couldn't break my stare away as his mouth slowly moved. I was really doing a terrible job of hiding everything. This was definitely not the Emma from back home. I glanced away quickly and stared at the roaring fire. I had to maintain control of myself.

“OSU,” he responded coolly.

I was stunned and there was no hiding it. My jaw dropped and I couldn't pick it back up again.

I didn't have to turn to face him to see the smile spreading over his lips as he waited patiently for me to use my words.

“So you've known this whole time that we'd be at the same school?” I pretended to be annoyed but there was no way that was the expression that was happening. I jabbed him in the arm and huffed, but he scooted closer to me. His leg rubbed against mine as his side pressed into me.

“That definitely gives me something to look forward to,” I teased, getting my bearings.

“I’ll certainly be watching over you,” he warned, his eyes darkening.

A part of me felt disappointed. Was he taking on a big brother persona with me?

“I’m sure you’ve got plenty of activities to keep you busy besides worrying about me. Besides, I can completely take care of myself. It’s just living in bear country that’s a little bothersome and brings out the best in me. I’ll be fine on a campus in Oregon.” I rolled my eyes. “Believe me.”

“I don’t doubt that you’ll be fine on campus. I only want to make sure that you’re more than fine,” he murmured, bringing his lips close to mine.

Okay, so maybe it wasn’t the big brother thing. Thank God!

“I think I might like that,” I whispered breathlessly, unprepared for my reaction to him. Trying to get my wits about me, I moved away from him slightly.

“So do you live on-campus?” I asked, staring at the flames.

Even though I was trying not to look at him I saw him anchor his chin on his elbows as he bent over, and the contraction of the muscles in his forearm made my mind go down the Neverland hole again of him holding me and doing so much more.

“I was in the dorm last year, but this year I’m living off-campus with a bunch of guys.”

“Sounds like a party house.”

“Probably. But I’m not really that into it. I’ve got to keep my GPA up for the scholarships I’m on. But the money from here will pay my part of the housing for the year.”

“That’s cool. I can see why you did it.”

“What about you?”

“I’m in a dorm.”

“Yeah. It’s fun for the first few months, but by the end of the year you’ll want out.”

I laughed and found myself scooting closer to him again.

The CLs were starting the preparations for dinner and most of the guys, including Luke, were completely leaving me alone and were really pleasant when I did interact with them now. I realized that this wasn’t that bad of a place to be, now that the guy was apprehended.

“So remind me again of all the CLs’ names.”

“Dan, Caleb, Dave, and Steph.” He pointed to each of them and caught Steph’s attention. She returned his gesture with a curtsy and continued seasoning something that was in tinfoil. “And it’s Marty’s turn to stare at the guy we captured so he’s not out here.”

“Aw.” I squashed the tiny tremor of fear that wanted to emerge.

“How about if it clears up enough tomorrow I take you to a special spot?” he asked.

There wasn’t any way that I’d want to say no to that offer, and his smile full of anticipation was enough to melt my core.

“That sounds awesome. What do you have planned?”

“There’s a great lookout point up the hill behind us. I thought it would be cool to show you what you’re missing before you leave.” His mouth turned up in a tempting smile.

“Is that so?”

“Steph might come too,” he offered.

I slouched on the bench, not realizing what my reaction signaled, and he laughed loud enough to cause a few heads to turn.

“Or not. She doesn’t have to come. I didn’t invite her yet.”

“No I’d totally like it if she’d come,” I said, half-lying.

“Let’s pray for a little clearing and then it’s a date.”

“So you were showing me the building out there to convince me to stay longer because I’m pretty sure you can’t get it all completed within a day or two.”

He wrapped his arm around me and brought me into him and my heart literally stopped as he placed a quick kiss on my head.

“Just an option,” he whispered, his breath tickling my skin.

And not a completely absurd one considering what was waiting for me back at my mom’s house.

“You’ve certainly made sure the campers are behaving.” I laughed, scanning everyone as they wandered around the camp. “That certainly helps.”

“Steph has the paperwork that you can even turn into OSU for directive internship for credit, possibly. She filled it out this afternoon for you and signed off on it.”

“You guys are thinking of all sorts of things, aren’t you?” I looked at him slyly.

I angled my head to check him out and his dimples surfaced again, sending me over the edge. I didn’t know exactly what it was, but there was something that pulled me to him. Steph’s earlier words haunted me as I thought about what could be hiding in Liam’s past, but there was a part of me that needed to find out.

“We’ll see,” I hummed, standing up. “I’m gonna help with dinner.”

I walked several feet before stopping and turning to look at him. I knew he was watching me walk away, and my suspicions were confirmed when his eyes connected with mine.

“Because of your bear concerns, I was hoping that —”

“You can count on it,” he interrupted, answering my unasked question about spending the night in my tent.

Purely for protection of course.

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Chapter Eight

I woke up relieved that the tent wasn't flapping, and water wasn't dripping. The sun hadn't completely risen yet, but there was enough light to allow me to see inside the tent without a flashlight. I slowly turned over in my sleeping bag, trying not to crunch the tent flooring as I moved, to catch a glimpse of Liam sleeping. He looked so calm and beautiful. I reached up to my hair and felt the tangled mess. It was too early to wake up Steph for a shower, and I couldn't even imagine how cold it would be, but I kind of wanted a head start before Liam woke up.

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and turned on my back, staring at the ceiling of the tent as the condensation rolled off the fabric. If the weather really was clearing up there was a good chance the plane would make it in tomorrow, and I'd be able to leave. From the moment I was dumped off in this godforsaken place I'd wanted out. I'd been counting the seconds until the next plane arrived, and now that it was a possibility things weren't so certain. Liam had made everyone else in the camp aware of what it would mean for them if they touched me, and I actually could see myself possibly liking it here or at least more so than back at home. There was a part of being in the woods that reminded me of my father, and that memory

brought me happiness. But if things didn't work out with Liam then I'd be trapped here for weeks until the next plane arrived.

I accidentally let out a huge sigh that made Liam stir, and I froze in place closing my eyes. His breathing steadied as if he was asleep once more, and I quietly rolled back over to check on him, only to see him staring at the ceiling.

I started laughing and he turned to look at me.

"That's not fair to look so good in the morning," I said, scrunching my face at him.

"I don't know. The view's looking pretty damn cute from over here." He smiled, propping his head on his elbow. The sleeping bag slinked down slightly, and I noticed that he must've taken his shirt off sometime during the night.

"I think I could say the same thing." I laughed, dropping my gaze to his muscular chest before flitting back to his eyes.

"We might have lucked out," he said, sitting up. He grabbed his shirt.

My breath hitched, as my eyes dropped to his bare skin, realizing everything I imagined about him didn't even come close. Heat began rolling up my neck, and I quickly wiggled back into my sleeping bag, pulling it over my head.

"You're too much." I groaned.

"Just trying to work every angle I can." His voice had moved closer and I slowly lowered the sleeping bag to peer at him. "I want you to stay."

"Well, it just might be working," I mumbled, watching him only steps away.

"Do you always get up this early?" he asked, stretching.

He really was working all the angles. His shorts lowered, hugging his hips, exposing his v-muscle. My heart almost stopped.

Rather than give him the satisfaction of having him catch me taking a glimpse of his abs, I stared intently at his face. It was killing me not to sneak another look, but I stayed strong. Okay, not completely strong. My eyes might have dipped one other time.

“Not usually. It’s just something about camping. I always get up early, probably because I’m freezing.”

“The weather might be cooperating for us.” He smiled and raised his brows at me.

“I’m gonna go shower. Wanna come?” His eyes sparkled with mischief.

“Hardy-har-har.” I rolled my eyes.

“That’s pretty presumptuous of you.” He winked.

I grabbed my pillow and threw it at him and he slapped it down instantly.

“Very mature.” He laughed. “If you don’t plan on showering, maybe throw on some clothes for hiking and be ready when I get back.”

“No! I totally want to shower,” I said, springing up quickly. “I’d feel gross.”

I ran to my bag and dug out all the shower stuff, and I felt Liam’s gaze on me.

“After you,” he murmured, dropping his gaze.

We got to the showers and the camp seemed dead. We were the only ones crazy enough to be up.

“I’ve got a secret,” he whispered, lifting my hair up from my ear, sending violent chills up my spine. “The first shower, sometimes the second, has warmish water.”

I stared at him, my eyes huge, as he grinned ear to ear.

“Seriously?”

He nodded. “And because I’m a nice guy, I’ll let you take the first one. Just don’t be a water hog.”

“Unbelievable,” I uttered, as I started to have flashbacks to the day before.

“There’s a generator over there, but it only warms a really small tank and it takes overnight to fill up again.”

“Your secret’s safe with me,” I said, feeling a tad guilty about Steph, but not enough to ruin my chances of a warm shower now and then. How horrible of a person I was.

I unzipped the shower, dumped everything on the floor and quickly stripped. I turned on the water and stood directly in the spray, feeling the ice-cold water roll down my flesh. I was terrified of losing any drop of warmth and was willing to freeze before warming up. Liam better not have been lying to me and before I had time to start to get worried, my plan worked perfectly. The warm water ran against my skin, and my hair was already wet and soapy. I quickly rinsed my hair and squirted the conditioner in it and then worked my fingers through my hair to rinse it out.

I turned off the water, dried off, dressed, and wrapped the towel around my head, capturing the remaining heat from my scalp. I unzipped the door to see Liam standing, with his arms crossed waiting for a response.

“Nice?” he asked.

“Very. Now hurry up and use up the rest before it goes away,” I commanded.

“There’s a solution to this problem, you know.” His grin was adorable as he walked to the shower.

“And what’s that?” I inquired, lifting a brow.

“Tandem showers.”

My heart fell to my toes and my smile was impossible to hide.

“Think you’re getting ahead of yourself,” I joked, but the undeniable attraction was cruising through my body at an unstoppable pace.

He zipped up the door as he shook his head, and I stood staring at the shower tent trying to imagine what exactly was on the other side of the wall. My pulse was racing, and I felt warm all over as I thought about him soaping his body. I found myself taking a few steps closer to the shower when his voice interrupted me.

“Water’s not warm any more. I’m telling ya...my idea is perfect.”

I started laughing and he turned off the water, as I quickly took a few steps back so I didn’t look like I wanted to jump him. As long as he didn’t exit the tent with a towel wrapped around his waist, I thought I’d be okay. I’d manage to exert a little bit of control.

He unzipped the door and looked over at me, flashing a grin. He was completely dressed. *Darn!*

“Ready for the day?” he asked, walking toward me. “Are you blushing?”

“Nooo! I’m not blushing,” I said, stomping off to my tent.

“Well, it was nice of you to stand guard for me while I was in the shower.”

I glanced back at him and scowled but started laughing.

“I’ll meet you back at your tent. I’m gonna go grab some supplies for our hike. Dan and Caleb are on watch-duty so I want to make sure that guy hasn’t given them any trouble.

“Okay,” I nodded.

“And if the weather doesn’t hold, we’ll come right back.”

“Is Steph coming?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Want me to wake her up?”

“No. That’s fine,” I said far too quickly.

He flashed me a dubious grin and took off toward the yurt.

I finished getting ready and towel dried my hair as much as possible before twisting it into a clip. I layered heavily and put on some wool socks and grabbed a rain slicker. It’s not that the potential for a nice, warmish day didn’t exist, but it just hadn’t surfaced since I had arrived.

Liam was back at my door and ushered me out. My eyes stared at the barrel that was sticking out over his shoulder.

“It’s a Winchester .308,” he replied to my unanswered question.

It was kind of alarming to have someone so heavily armed just for a hiking excursion, but then again I was in Alaska. I tried to ignore the fact that it was strapped to his shoulder, balancing along his back and I grabbed the backpack he handed me, strapping it on.

“Doubt we’ll use it.” He winked at me

“That’s a nice thought.”

We began walking and talking, discussing all sorts of safe things. Every once in a while he would point out some cool flower or berry. Wild blueberries were mixed in among the native vegetation and I’d sneak one whenever I could.

I was reaching for a couple plump, dark ones when Liam touched my hand and began whispering.

“You’ve gotta be on the lookout. The bears love those things.”

Instead of popping them in my mouth, I scowled at him and threw the handful at him and watched them bounce off him like he was a stone statue. *It figures!*

“Nice.” He shook his head and kept walking up the trail that wasn’t a trail. I was a little winded, but I didn’t want him to notice that.

“What’s that noise?” I asked, hearing a constant rushing.

“That’s the river I wanted to show you. We’re getting close to the lookout point.”

“So how many girls have you taken here?” I teased.

He stopped walking and smiled at me. “None. Believe it or not, just like you I tend to have standards for the girls I like. Criminal records aren’t really a turn on.”

I started laughing, thinking back to all the crazy things that were running through my mind about Liam. I really could have embarrassed myself if I’d actually vocalized any of them.

We walked a little farther, and I could see what he was talking about. The view was spectacular, even more so than when I came in on the plane. The river rushed quickly, and the vegetation was beautiful as it draped over the running water in between the large rocks and boulders.

“We do need to be on the lookout because the bears tend to visit these places.”

“You really know how to ruin a moment.” I laughed, feeling a prickle up my spine.

The breeze began to pick up slightly, but the sky was still blue with only the occasional cloud or two.

“Steph talked to the airline last night.” He stopped himself and looked behind us toward the rocky cliffs.

“And?” I asked, taking a deep breath in.

“They’re going to fly in tomorrow and take the guy out. There’ll be a police escort, and they’ll be dropping off the rest of the supplies so they won’t be making the trip that was scheduled for later in the week.”

“So it’s now or wait for several weeks,” I stated.

A sudden and unexpected ache surfaced along my body. Liam looked down at me and grabbed my hand. His eyes probing me for some sort of answer that I wasn't sure I wanted to give yet. If everything could continue the way it had been, I would like to stay, but the thought of not being able to get off the island for weeks if I don't hop on the puddle jumper frightened me. However, having to deal with my stepfather terrified me more.

“You said there’s a lot to explore around here…” I trailed off.

His eyes brightened as his grin grew into a deep, warm smile.

“Tons.”

“Tomorrow afternoon, if the weather holds, we’re doing a rock climbing exercise with some of the other guys. You might have fun.”

My hands started getting clammy immediately at the mention of heights and jagged rocks, but I looked into Liam’s brown eyes and knew if I stayed, I’d definitely be rock climbing.

“You’d have to show me how. I’ve never done it.”

“So you’ll stay?” his voice broke off.

“I don’t know yet. I don’t want to get stuck here in case—”

“No one will come near you,” he interrupted.

“I can totally see that already unfolding.” I paused, weighing my options. I shuddered when I thought back to my stepfather, and Liam picked up on my hesitation but for the wrong reason.

“If it doesn’t make you comfortable to stay, I don’t want to make you.” He took a step closer to me and grabbed my hand.

“There’s nothing really waiting for me back at the house. I’d probably stay long enough to pack and figure out where to stay in Oregon. The thought of seeing my stepdad makes me…” I looked away, swallowing

the dryness in the back of my throat. “I don’t get the heebie-jeebies from thinking about staying up here if that tells you anything.”

“Then why go back?” he asked, his eyes softening.

“I’m not even sure. It’s like there’s this ridiculous morsel of hope that I hold onto that my mom will suddenly come to her senses and love me.”

“I’m sure she loves you.” His eyes hardened.

“I don’t think so actually, but I keep trying to make her. My dad basically paid them to take me in after he died.”

“What?” A flash of anger flickered behind Liam’s caramel eyes.

I nodded and pressed my lips together. “Yep.” Liam walked over to a large boulder and sat down, trying to absorb what I was implying.

“My father was a really dynamic man. Did well with everything he ever touched. When he decided to sell his company he told me I’d be set for the rest of my life. I never listened to the sums of money he spoke about. He had financial advisers already set in motion to deal with that. I didn’t care. I just wanted him to live. He put the money in a trust for me and on my eighteenth birthday I’m allowed access.” I shrugged my shoulders. “But I’d give it all back just to have another day with him.”

I sat next to Liam and he locked his fingers in between mine.

“Anyway, my mother and stepdad agreed to be my guardians if my father supported them, in a sense. He left them two million dollars when he died.”

Liam’s eyes widened and he looked away.

“And the worst part is, they complained about the amount. They thought they should’ve gotten more.” My stomach twisted in knots reliving everything. “I’ve never spoken about it to anyone.”

Liam wrapped his arms around me and brought me into his chest. I attempted to hug him back, but my hands ran into the straps holding the gun and I thought better of it.

“They sound truly evil,” he whispered.

I slowly brought my head up and said, “That’s not even the worst of it. So to say that I’m not dying to go back there, even for a short time, is putting it mildly.”

I recognized the familiar glint of protectiveness surface in Liam’s eyes and knew my decision had been made. I wanted to stay here — with him. I just couldn’t tell him that yet.

“Maybe I could incorporate a lot of what I was hoping to learn from this trip about forestry and conservation if I stayed? Pretend it’s not like a juvenile delinquent camp?” I laughed, hiding the feelings of sadness that emerged thinking about my father.

“I’d help in any way you’d want.” He smiled, pecking me quickly on my forehead.

“Thanks,” I whispered, attempting to recover from the charge his lips produced.

“So does that mean you’re staying?” he questioned, his eyes burning into me.

“I’m not a hundred percent sure, but I’m feeling better about it with every minute that goes by.”

We continued hiking along the river for hours and only stopped to snack on a couple of protein bars. The terrain was beautiful, and I couldn’t imagine being lucky enough to live somewhere this beautiful. I hoped someday my degree would allow me to. We were on our way back to the camp when we heard the screams.

“It’s coming from the camp,” he yelled. “Follow me, quick.”

He began running and I followed immediately behind him. He slowed to let me pass so nothing snuck up behind me, and I ran as fast as I could, the screams propelling me forward.

We ran into the center of the camp where a big group had formed. I watched Dan and several of the campers carry Chelsea to the campfire.

I was panting so loudly trying to catch my breath that I didn't hear Steph run up behind us until she spoke.

"It doesn't look good," she whispered, making me jump out of my skin.

I looked over at Chelsea as they laid her on the ground. Steph and I ran over to her. Her right leg was completely twisted. It had to be broken. Chelsea cried softly and I knelt by her head, touching her cheeks softly.

"You're gonna be okay," I told her.

She kept her eyes closed, letting out cries mixed with completely carnal screams that sent chills through me.

"None of us are going to be okay," she screamed, flashing her eyes open, revealing the most terrified expression I'd ever seen.

Her eyes were wide with horror as her lips kept trembling. She began shaking her head violently back and forth, arching her back.

She looked like she was possessed.

"We need to get out of here. You don't understand what's out there," she screamed over and over.

"She's going into shock," Dan said from behind. He kneeled next to me with the first aid kit.

He began working on her leg as Steph got the pain medicine ready. I looked over at Liam who was studying Chelsea with the same curiosity as me.

Steph opened a bottle of water, but Chelsea sprung into an upright position, knocking the water onto the ground. Her screams startled us all again, and I knew then that those weren't screams from her pain. She was terrified of something.

“Get me out of here. They're coming for us.” Chelsea's eyes danced with a wildness that only insanity could rouse, but what caused it?

“We're here. You're okay.” Steph attempted to comfort her. “We'll get you out of here on the plane tomorrow.”

“You think you can stop this?” Chelsea's screams turned to maniacal laughing, and my blood turned to ice as she turned to stare at me. “None of us will make it out alive.”

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Chapter Nine

“What the hell is she talking about?” Liam asked Dan. They were behind some of the tents, but I could still hear them over Chelsea’s screams and cries.

“I think she’s in shock.”

“Well, where was she when you found her?” Liam’s voice hushed considerably, and I could hear the tension rising.

“She was right behind the shower tents. A couple of us heard a piercing scream and ran over quickly to find her. Brady saw her first. I expected to come up on a brown bear or something, but there was nothing but Chelsea on the ground screaming. There was no trace that anyone or anything had been around her, but her leg was visibly messed up. I don’t even know what could have happened to it.”

“I wanna go check the spot out,” Liam said.

I snuck around behind the tents where they were talking and stood next to Liam. He slipped his arm around my waist, and I liked how natural it felt.

“I’ll come with you,” I said. “Steph went to call and find out if the plane can come early to get her.”

“Okay. Yeah. Go for it, Liam. See if you find something because I sure didn’t,” Dan replied, shaking his head.

Liam wrapped his fingers around my hand and squeezed it gently. It was early evening, closing in on dinner, and I didn't even care. This latest event gave me something to really think about as to whether or not I should stay on the island.

"If this doesn't convince you to take off tomorrow I don't know what would." He grimaced, watching my reaction. "Just when I was making headway."

Another blood curdling scream rang through the air, and I cringed at the thought of what was tormenting her.

"I don't think we'll be able to get much sleep tonight, let alone poor Chelsea. She's disturbed in a way that I don't think is normal, even with a broken leg..." I whispered.

"I know. Did you see the look in her eyes?" he asked, connecting his gaze to mine.

"Yeah. I think it'll haunt me for a long time. Do you really think it could be that she's going into shock and that's what's causing everything?"

"It's the most logical explanation," his voice was unsure. "But I have no idea."

We walked to the row of shower tents and began searching the ground behind them. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. There was a large indent in the muddy soil, probably where she was sitting, but the only footprints led to and from the camp. There was nothing leading back into the woods. We looked up into the trees, and it didn't look like she'd attempted to climb the trees and then fell.

"Dan said she was too far out of it to even tell him what happened," he said, checking the tree line before coming back to stand by me.

"This is just so bizarre. Steph said there wasn't anything in her file that might give us clues to the mental part of it," I said.

Chelsea's cries had turned to whimpers as we made it back to the campfire, and Steph was sitting next to her, holding her hand.

"I think the pain meds are starting to work," Steph confirmed.

Brady was sitting on the log bench, holding his head in his hands. I hadn't really talked with him, or anyone for that matter, since I got here and so I went to sit next to him.

"You okay?" I asked.

Brady looked up at me and shook his head. "No. Not really. Between the guy we're holding for the police and this, I'm ready to go back home. I was here last year and not one single person even got a scrape. I thought this was an easy way to complete what the judge wanted me to."

So much for trying to act like we all had the same reasons for being here.

"I'm sure after tomorrow everything will start to get better." I told him, hoping I'd believe it too.

"I heard you're leaving on the flight out," Brady said.

I shrugged my shoulders, propping my palms up in the air. "Haven't decided yet."

"What's there to decide?" he asked, his hazel eyes boring into mine. "If I could leave, I'd be on the next flight out of here."

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"In Arizona at a Foster home. When I get back I probably won't even be going back to the one I left. I've been in like nine in the last two years. That's what I get for not being a cute baby," he mumbled, smiling, trying to play off the pain.

I knew exactly what it was like to feel unwanted, and no amount of joking or diverting attention from the problem ever made it feel better. I felt Liam's eyes watching me as I spoke to Brady and a charge ran through me.

“Hey, I’m Parker,” a guy reached out to shake my hand. What a difference a day makes, or Liam makes. They’re all so civil now. I tried not to laugh.

“Nice to meet you,” I replied.

“Pretty freaky, huh?” He shook his head and whistled. “I didn’t even know legs could do that.”

“They can’t. That’s the problem,” Brady replied, slapping Parker on the back.

“True. So you’re leaving this bit of paradise?” Parker ran his fingers through his blond hair, smiling at me.

“Not sure yet.”

“Can you believe it?” Brady responded, eyeing Parker. “I’d be the first in line to get out of here.”

Parker waved his hands in an indifferent state and looked over at Chelsea.

“So why are you here again if you can leave whenever you want?” Brady questioned, narrowing his eyes at me.

“I’m gonna be eighteen in a few days. It’s not mandated by anyone or anything that I’m here. It’s just a cruel stepparent who sent me here. And, if you don’t remember, I had a couple of you try to jump me so that bought me a pretty quick exit if I wanted.” I furrowed my brow at them and noticed Steph speaking with Liam; yet he was still looking intently at me.

“Don’t lump me in with those dudes,” Parker complained. “I might not always choose the right path, but I’d never touch someone who didn’t want it. If I had been there, I would’ve done what Liam did, no doubt.”

I had no idea if that was true or not and since several of the guys were there and did nothing, I found it doubtful, but whatever.

I looked over at Liam, Dan, Dave, and Caleb as they maneuvered Chelsea on a board to take her to the yurt. I wasn't sure what they were going to do with the man who was currently stationed in there, but I was sure they'd come up with something until the plane arrived.

"What was all the screaming about?" Justin asked. He was sauntering over with Cory, and my pulse quickened as my stomach revolted against the protein bars from earlier. Justin was nice to me earlier, but I knew what he was capable of, or what his fingers were capable of. Liam was still walking toward the yurt with Chelsea so his back was turned to me. If I was still this worried about being alone, maybe I should leave the island tomorrow.

Justin gave me a brief smile and sat next to Parker. Justin looked like he had been sleeping.

"Chelsea broke her leg or something," Brady replied. He certainly was chatty.

Cory came over and stood in front of me. I'd run into him the night before during dinner. He seemed really shy and his character didn't seem to align with all the others. There wasn't a false bravado, and it was difficult for me to imagine him doing anything out of line, but looks can be deceiving I suppose. Steph walked over to us and looked mildly relieved.

"I spoke to the airline, and they'll be here tomorrow around ten in the morning. They moved it up a few hours to accommodate Chelsea as best they could. They didn't want to attempt it with the tail end of the storm leaving tonight. I guess thunder and lightning is in the cards for us again." She smiled at me and widened her eyes in exasperation.

"Great." I walked closer to see how she was coping. I gave her a quick hug, and we began walking toward the yurt when I saw Liam escorting the man from the yurt. My heartbeat quickened seeing Liam in

such control over someone, and I dropped my gaze. I couldn't believe some of the thoughts that were popping into mind up here.

"I wonder where he's taking him?" I asked Steph. Dan was following closely behind Liam as the man shuffled to where Liam directed.

"Probably one of the larger tents. Dan has a pretty big one," she said. "Things sure have taken a turn for the worse."

I looked up at her, and I could tell she was beginning to worry about being up here. The last few days were taking a toll on everyone and here I was contemplating whether or not to stay.

"Are you headed out tomorrow?" she asked.

"I don't know." I sighed. "I was telling Liam if I went back it would only be to grab my stuff. But showing up even a couple days before I'm eighteen has me worried."

"It's that bad, huh?" she pressed her lips together and shook her head. "I'm sorry you've got that junk to deal with."

"We've all got our things and being up here reminds me that my situation could be a lot worse. I hate to admit it."

"It's definitely giving me a different perspective about the field of psychology." Her forehead creased as she watched Liam and Dan put the intruder in the tent. "I'm surprised at how restrained Liam's being toward that guy."

"It's probably because the police will be up here soon," I said, laughing.

"You're getting to know his style pretty quickly." She smiled. "If you ever need to talk to someone about your situation, you know you can always come to me."

"Thanks."

Liam walked over to us and gave me a hug.

“Steph fill you in the plane’s flight time?” his expression saddened.

“She did.” I sighed. “But I’m still not sure.”

“I completely understand, and it’s not like I wouldn’t see you around campus.”

The casualness of his statement stung, and I’m sure he didn’t mean it to. I didn’t want to just wave at him between classes.

“You’re flushing,” Steph teased.

“I’m just anxious,” I lied.

I saw Brady, Cory, Justin, and Parker walking over toward us and my stomach tightened. What was with my nerves? This wasn’t healthy.

“We still on for tomorrow’s rock climbing?” Justin asked.

“We are,” Liam confirmed. “The weather’s supposed to clear up by morning. We’ll shoot for a noon start time after chores are finished and the plane departs. It’s a pretty tame spot so we should have plenty of time.” I felt Liam’s eyes scanning me for a reaction, undoubtedly hoping to secure some sort of clue as to whether or not I might be around to attend.

Marty, one of the CLs, was climbing down from the tree platform with what looked like dinner and my stomach didn’t respond positively at all. What sounded good was to crawl in my sleeping bag and start over tomorrow.

“Just making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches tonight,” he yelled to the group. “We’re a little behind with everything we’ve had to take care of.”

Steph and the group of guys took off toward Marty, and Liam softly tugged on my shirt hem.

“I’ve got something to tell you,” he murmured, his eyes connecting with mine. There was no denying the attraction we were feeling for one another. Even the slightest touch was filled with a charge I had never

experienced before with anyone else. I took a step toward him, and he wrapped his arms around my hips. My breath caught, as I went to answer, and the pull between us continued to grow as he held me.

“I’ve got night-duty tonight.”

I didn’t respond. The thought terrified me.

“I’ve gotta watch Tom,” he repeated. His eyes darkening as he brought his lips close to mine.

“Tom?” I inquired, knowing full well who he was referring to even though I’d never heard his name. I just wanted time to come up with something to say that didn’t make me sound like a needy lunatic.

“You have been kind of slacking off on guard duty,” I replied, smiling at him.

His lips broke into a grin, obviously relieved by my response.

“Steph will bunk with you tonight, though,” he offered.

“That’ll be cool, probably even better than the alternative.”

He frowned briefly before pulling me in and placing a quick kiss on my hair.

“You’re a terrible actress,” he said, releasing me.

I took an exaggerated bow and gestured toward the table where all of the sandwiches were being prepared.

After we polished off dinner, I watched Liam glide over to the tent where he traded shifts with Dan to watch the captive. My mood immediately soured once he left the area.

“What an odd set of circumstances,” I murmured to Steph.

“Tell me about it.”

“I have a confession. I’d be totally cool with turning in now. I know it’s not even dark yet, but I’m exhausted. I need to turn off my brain,” I suggested.

Her hand brushed over my arm, rubbing it quickly. “I’m with you on that one.”

We tossed our garbage in the bear proof containers that the other CLs would take care of and scooted off to my tent.

I unzipped the door and immediately noticed a carved, wooden raven placed on my pillow. I froze and Steph ran right into the back of me, pushing me into the tent headfirst.

“Jeez, hasn’t anyone taught you proper door etiquette,” she teased, helping me back up.

“Sorry, I...”

“What’s wrong?” she interrupted, looking around the tent when her eyes landed on the raven.

It was only the size of my palm, but I had no idea what it was doing there.

“I don’t know why someone would’ve put that here,” I whispered.

She leaned over and picked it up, analyzing it closely. “It looks like someone whittled it recently. I bet Liam did it for you.”

The ice-cold terror that was running through my veins immediately turned to spectacular warmth. He must have remembered what I had told him about my father teaching me to whittle.

“Any idea why he chose a raven?” I asked. I know I didn’t tell him that was one of my favorite Poe pieces.

“Ravens hold a lot of power in the legends around here,” she replied, placing it in my hand.

My fingers ran up and down the grooves of the wood as I admired the trouble Liam went through to create this for me. It was quite thoughtful.

I pulled on my sweats and slid into the sleeping bag, offering up any of the books I had to Steph. She had brought over a couple that she had, and

I decided on a romance since I was already on cloud nine with the whittled raven under my pillow. I couldn't wait to tell Liam my answer tomorrow morning before the plane arrived.

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Chapter Ten

The morning came quicker than I expected, and I was ecstatic with the thought of getting to see Liam again and to tell him what my answer was about staying on the island. Unfortunately, I didn't wake quite early enough to get a warm shower — a mistake I wouldn't repeat twice. I quickly dressed and searched the grounds for him, but I couldn't find him anywhere. I trudged back to my tent, waking Steph up to find out if she knew where he might be.

“He's probably on the beach,” she groaned. “He likes to get a workout in before everyone is up and about.”

So that's how he looks so fine!

“Can you take me there? I've never been to the beach.”

“You owe me,” she shot me a scowl and sat up in the sleeping bag. She reached for a coat and slipped on her boots. “I'll take you there and once you spot him, I'll take off. I don't want to be around for whatever it is you think you've got to tell him. I'm pretty sure I know how happy he'll be.” She flashed me a grin, and I pulled on her arms to get her moving quicker.

“I'll go grab a rifle and be right back.” She winked. “Gotta love the woods.”

Steph walked with me until we were in sight of Liam. I walked along the rocky beach, avoiding puddles on my way to tell him my answer. I was nervous about the choice I had made but it felt right.

My eyes scanned the fir trees, finally landing on him. My stomach muscles bunched at the sight of him. His lean, muscular body was impressive even from this vantage point. He was leaning against one of the fir trees, staring toward the shore. He didn't see me yet, which was nice as I tried to take in every ounce of his goodness.

He was wearing dark jeans that were loose-fitting and hung low, wrapping around his hips. It was impossible not to notice the tight fit of the white t-shirt he had on. His shoulders were so broad and muscular that my mind kept imagining my hands running along his toned muscles. It didn't really look like much of a workout outfit but who knows.

Oh shoot! He turned to wave at me and caught me ogling. So much for playing it cool.

"Hey, Emma," he yelled, waving me over. His smile was out-of-this-world gorgeous.

I gave him a quick wave and focused on the last stretch of rocky terrain to distract myself. I heard footsteps coming over to me and looked up to see Liam flashing his sexy, lopsided grin. He stood in front of me and extended his hand.

"Want some help?" He arched his brow.

I grabbed his hand and his fingers laced through mine as he hauled me up the last stretch of rugged ground. My hair was whipping in all directions as the breeze off the water picked up, and I used my free hand to anchor the mess that was erupting in all directions. This wasn't the best look for someone who had naturally wavy hair.

“I have something to tell you,” I told him as we walked over to the fir trees.

“Hopefully it’s good news,” he said softly, pulling me under the canopy of conifers with him.

He smoothed my hair back from my face, his caramel eyes burning into mine.

“I’ve been thinking about whether or not to go back home,” I began.

“I don’t want you to leave,” he interrupted. He wore a solemn expression as his words lingered in the air.

I looked away quickly and started to worry about my decision. I had the chance to leave this place now, but it had to be today. If I didn’t get on the plane, I’d have to wait weeks before the next one arrived. But really, what was waiting for me back home?

I looked up at Liam who was staring at me waiting for my answer. His eyes softened as he took me in. My lips parted slightly to tell him what I’d chosen, but he spoke first.

“Would this change your mind?” He slid his hand around my waist and brought me closer. His other hand gently clutched my face, his lips dangerously close to mine. Warmth flowed through my veins as he pressed his body against me. All of the things about him that I had spent my time dreaming about, I was now feeling.

I wanted to be kissed so badly. Pleading with him silently I felt his fingers coil through my hair as his lips found mine. His mouth parted slowly, dipping to mine as the shock of the kiss radiated through me. I wrapped my arms around his neck, letting my fingers run through his hair. My pulse quickened with every shift of his mouth as the softness of his lips explored mine.

My breath caught as his mouth left mine, but his lips never left my skin. He slid down my jaw kissing my throat softly, gliding his way down my collarbone sending an entire wave of chills through me. My hands moved down his neck, collecting his shirt in my hands as he tightened his grip around me.

My breath was becoming more difficult to control with every passing moment as his lips found their way back to mine, giving me one more kiss before he released me. His breath graced my throat as his lips hovered so close to my flesh.

“Tell me. What’s your answer?” he whispered against my ear.

“I had already made up my mind before this,” I whispered.

“And?” his eyes narrowed, grinning at me.

“I think you know,” I crooned, grabbing his shirt, pulling him back to me.

Our lips connected, as I wrapped my arms around his neck, bringing him closer to me. His fingers brushed through my hair, sending more shivery delights down my spine. My hands slid down his arms and settled along his hips as he pressed into me, making my legs feel absolutely useless. His lips broke from mine, and he softly nuzzled his chin against the crook of my neck.

“I’m so happy you’re staying here. I promise to make it an experience worth remembering,” he rasped, his breath scattering across my neck, creating a craving for him deep inside. I could feel his heartbeat pounding against his chest as I laid my head against it, exhaling slowly.

“It’s going to be hard to keep my hands off you,” I murmured, snuggling my cheek into him, smelling the fresh scent of soap and sea, “especially knowing the warm shower only lasts for a few minutes.”

I felt his body tremble, as he squeezed me tighter. “I think the only way I’m going to survive with you around now is to take lots of cold ones.”

I laughed and felt his arms slowly release from me. I could’ve stayed in his arms all day and been completely satisfied, but we needed to get back to camp in case we could help with anything.

“Are you ready?” he asked. His caramel eyes locked onto mine, sending one last flutter through me.

“No.” I laughed. “But I guess the plane will be coming soon. How was night-duty?”

He grabbed the rifle that was propped against the tree that I hadn’t even noticed until now and strapped it over his shoulder and reached out for my hand.

“It was okay. He didn’t fall asleep for hours and he uttered things in his sleep, but I couldn’t figure out what he was saying.”

“I’ll be so glad when he’s off this island,” I muttered.

When we got back to camp, the place was bustling with activity, and it looked like everyone had a task.

“This is how the camp is supposed to be running,” he bent down and whispered in my ear.

I saw Darryl and Sam, two of the campers I hadn’t really spoken with, hauling wood to the woodpile. Another two guys were taking down Chelsea’s tent and folding everything away.

“Who are those two again?” I asked pointing in the direction of Chelsea’s tent.

“The tall one is Vince and the other one is Fulton,” he answered. “Are you surveying your options now that you’re staying?”

“Ha-ha!” I rolled my eyes, smiling at him.

“It’s going to be incredible having you here.” Liam waved at Steph who was walking over to us.

“Chelsea’s no better today than she was yesterday,” she said, twisting her lips in confusion. Her hands were on her hips and the look in her eyes was nothing like when I woke her up. She seemed frightened and anxious.

“The plane should be here soon, right?” I asked.

“Any minute. I was going to head there with Dan and Caleb.”

“Great. We’ll come with you.” I offered.

“Awesome. The more hands the better to carry the rest of the supplies,” she said.

“I’m gonna go talk to Dan and Caleb about our climbing trip this afternoon.” He turned to me. “You’re coming, aren’t you?”

I nodded, smiling as I saw the eagerness build behind his eyes.

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Ugh,” Steph said. “I hate anything to do with heights.”

“I’m not a fan either,” I whispered as Liam walked off.

Steph’s eyes got huge and grimaced. “You’d do that for him, even though you’re scared of heights?”

“It’s good to conquer fears and all that,” I quirked my brow at her, “especially at the hands of Liam.”

She rolled her eyes and laughed.

“Wanna help me get Chelsea squared away for the guys to haul her to the plane?”

“Sure.”

We walked toward the yurt, and I opened the door to find Chelsea, eyes open staring directly in front of her. She was still on the wooden board and probably couldn’t even move if she wanted to, judging by her injury.

“Hey, Chelsea. You get to go home.” I said softly, walking over to her.

Her eyes wore a dull, darkened expression, and I wasn't sure if she actually heard me.

“Steph gathered all of your items this morning, and they'll be on the plane with you. The doctors will fix you up as soon as you land,” I continued, hoping that she'd show some sign she was hearing me.

The door sprung open and Dan, Caleb, Liam, and Cory came inside, ready to carry her out to the landing strip.

“I heard the plane landing,” Liam said, glancing at me.

“Awesome,” I replied, turning my attention back to Chelsea who still didn't even blink.

The guys picked Chelsea up and carried her out with Steph and I following them outside.

I could hear the guys talking to her gently as bumps in the ground made for a rocky ride for her, but she still never acknowledged anyone. When we reached the plane, an officer and a pilot greeted us.

The officer helped to maneuver Chelsea into a section of the plane that had been rigged up for someone who needed to be flat by removing two seats. As soon as she was situated the officer turned to Liam and Dan, nodding.

“Wanna show me where Tom is?” the officer directed.

“We've got him tied up in a tent.”

“He has quite a record, mostly harassment charges, but we'll see what he has to say.”

“He was definitely threatening Emma,” Liam spoke up. “It sounded like he wanted to cause harm, not just harass.”

“It’s a fine line in the eyes of the justice system,” the officer replied. He gave Liam a card. “You can call me if you want to find out more about the case as it moves along.”

“Thanks, officer.”

Not really wanting to see our captive one last time, I walked back to my tent to get ready for rock climbing. It was actually turning into a nice day temperature wise. It was already in the low sixties so it might even reach the low seventies by the time we’re climbing.

“Meet us by the campfire when you’re ready,” Liam said through the tent. “Dan and Justin already took off to start their session.”

“It’ll only be a few minutes and I’ll be there.” I coiled my hair into a bun and fastened it down with a few clips. My nerves began to get the better of me as I thought about what it was that I was actually planning on doing today. My hands began to get clammy, and I wiped them on my pants, only to have the dampness immediately resurface.

The group was already gathered around Caleb and Liam. The equipment was displayed on the ground with several sets of colorful rope catching my eye.

“Okay so where we’re headed is considered an easy climb. Maybe by the end of our time here, you’ll be able to traverse an intermediate climb but for now we’ll be sticking with easy boulders. The rocks I’ve picked are fairly steep, but there are large hand and foot holds, along with already pre-placed anchors from past years. Each of you will have a partner that is an experienced climber so Dan, Caleb, and I will spot you,” Liam said.

I quickly glanced around the group and realized I was the fifth wheel.

“I’ll be climbing with Cory and you,” Liam said, reading my mind. My face was so transparent!

“Dan’s with Justin and Caleb will be climbing with Parker.”

“Okay,” I replied.

“All of the equipment has been checked, but now it’s your turn to look at everything and ensure all is good to go. Now all of you, except for Emma, have been climbing before, correct?” Caleb inquired.

Cory and Parker shouted yes and picked up the ropes and clips as Caleb and Liam wandered around, explaining what they should be looking for. I picked up the orange and blue rope and it looked fine to me. Liam finished with Cory and stood behind me, reaching his arms around me.

“So you want to check your rope for any tears, rips, or frays,” he said, resting his arms on my shoulders as he used his fingers to guide mine up and down the rope. I found myself leaning back into him as I examined the rope not finding anything but a perfectly intact specimen.

“And the clips need to have this quick release and lock in place like this,” he said, as I felt the steadiness of his breathing.

“Everyone good to go?” Caleb questioned, spinning around the group and everyone nodded in unison. Caleb’s gaze skipped over to Liam who was still resting his arms over my shoulders and laughed.

“All right. We’ve got about a twenty minute hike to get to the boulders and then we can have some fun,” Caleb shouted.

Liam released me and secured my backpack straps over my shoulders and then strung the rope and climbing harness around my shoulder, and we were off.

We hiked up a pretty steep incline, which made the trip feel like far more than twenty minutes.

“About five minutes and we’re there,” Caleb hollered to the group. He was in the front, leading the way, with Liam coming up behind us all. They were both, of course, armed, and it struck me funny that the entire

time I'd been on the ground I'd never actually seen a brown bear besides the one when I was flying in. I think I heard one once, but that was about it.

As we turned a corner, a massive group of boulders jetted out in front of us. They looked far taller than I had imagined, but I was determined to scale them. I wasn't going to be the girl who couldn't accomplish this in front of all these guys. Besides, this was one of those bucket list things my dad had that he never got to experience so in a way I was doing it for him.

"You're awfully quiet," Liam said in a hushed tone.

I turned around to look at him and nodded. "Just a little nervous. I think standing here staring will only make it worse on me. The sooner I start..." my voice trailed off.

"I'm on it," Liam said. "We'll go first."

My heart plummeted. I wasn't thinking of going that quickly. I mean I didn't want to go last, but I didn't necessarily want to go first. Liam caught my deer in headlights look and laughed.

Dropping off his bag, he started scanning the area and looked over at Caleb.

"Aren't Dan and Justin supposed to be here?" Liam questioned, circling the area.

"I don't see their stuff," Caleb muttered, "but yeah."

"It was this spot they knew to meet us at?" Liam asked.

Everyone spread out as Liam and Corey began walking to the base of the largest boulder. I could see what Liam had been talking about with the larger crevices, spaced pretty frequently, but it didn't make my heart rate lessen any. I didn't think I'd be able to calm down until I was done with it.

Liam began jogging to the far end of the boulder and scanned it, shielding his eyes with his hands when I realized he thought something

wasn't right.

"Caleb," Liam yelled.

My hands were no longer damp. They were slippery as I leaned my head back to look at the height of the boulders. If anything went wrong, I doubted there'd be any walking away from it. I glanced over at Liam and noticed how agitated and worried he looked. I glanced at Cory and Parker who were watching them both as well.

"Look at that," Liam yelled and pointed up the rock.

Unable to see what they were talking about, I walked over to where they were standing, with Cory and Parker right on my heels.

"What do you think's going on?" Cory asked.

I stood next to Liam and he glanced at me with an expression I couldn't place.

"What's up?" I asked.

"They were here," he murmured. "But now they're not."

"What do you mean?" I asked, following his gaze and finger as he pointed up the wall of stone at least thirty feet high.

There in front of us attached to the boulders were two dangling climbing systems with no one harnessed to either. My eyes immediately fell to the ground in front of us, unsure of what to do next.

Chapter Eleven

Liam and Caleb began hollering frantically, and I felt completely helpless as silence of the woods was returned shout after shout.

“I don’t understand,” I whispered, noticing Liam staring at Caleb.

“They’re not here,” Caleb said quietly.

“It doesn’t look like they fell,” I replied, noticing the dirt looked untouched except for a couple of footprints.

“I’m gonna go up. I don’t think there’s a way in the world they could have reached the top with the way their equipment is set up, but I’ll make sure they’re not stranded,” Liam said solemnly.

“I don’t understand. How could they just vanish?” I asking, looking at Liam.

“It could’ve been a bear attack,” Caleb said.

“But there’s no blood or bear tracks,” Liam said. “And it would be impossible with where they were on the cliff to have gotten snatched. Bears are clever, but they certainly can’t scale a sheer rock mountainside.”

The thought of Liam going up the boulder panicked me as I saw the ropes dangling without their owners. But I couldn’t see the top of the boulder from where I was at, and if Dan and Justin did happen to be up there, we needed to know.

“Be careful,” I whispered.

Liam grabbed a small bag of chalk that he fastened onto his belt and flashed me a smile before he turned back to face the boulder. As Liam began the ascent his body looked like a machine as every muscle contracted with every movement. He'd slide the front of his foot into a crack, reaching up with his hand to another ledge, pulling and adjusting his rope as he ascended the rock.

It was incredible watching Liam use his legs as he climbed up the boulder with such ease. Every so often he would dip his hands into the chalk bag before reaching for another protrusion to grab onto. It was beautiful watching his graceful movements as he scaled the remaining surface, but my heart started thumping as his hands grabbed the final peak of the rock, and he vanished over the top.

"Do you think they're up there?" I asked Caleb.

He looked back at me and shook his head. "I don't."

He slid his thumb under the backpack strap surrounding his shoulder and frowned as he scanned the footprints that led to the boulder but nowhere else. "This is really bizarre."

I looked behind me and Cory was drinking a sports drink, sitting on the top of a rock. His eyes were filled with apprehension. It was slowly sinking into each one of us that something was seriously wrong.

"So it's not like they're somewhere having a lunch break?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"There's no way they'd be able to get up or down like that," Parker said, standing beside me.

Where was Liam? Why wasn't he back over the side, coming down.

"Is there a lot of surface to cover up there?" I asked Caleb.

"A fair amount."

When I thought I couldn't take it any longer I saw Liam appear. He waved at us, acknowledging he was about to descend.

Liam began lowering himself down the rope, hopping from one section to the next at times, followed by slow movements and adjusting of the rope. Every movement of Liam's was slow and deliberate, even when he appeared to be gliding down a little quicker. His body looked as if it was built for this as he was rappelling down the boulder.

"You look nervous," Cory muttered.

"Definitely that," I replied, thrilled when Liam placed both feet on the ground.

"What's the word?" Caleb shouted as Liam unharnessed himself.

"Nothing good," Liam said walking over to us. "And nothing that makes sense."

He had grabbed both of the dangling ropes on his descent and was holding them up for Caleb to check out as he continued to examine the ends.

"This wasn't an accident," Liam said.

"What are you talking about?" Caleb asked, his voice hoarse as he attempted to hold back the emotion we were all experiencing.

"Look at this," Liam said. His index finger flicked the end of the ropes for Caleb.

"It looks tampered with," Caleb muttered.

"It doesn't make sense, but that's what happened. Look. You can see where someone sliced through each rope partially, knowing the added weight would break the remaining fibers," Liam said, shaking his head.

"So do you think someone cut the ropes and they both fell to the ground?" Caleb questioned, scanning the dirt once more. "I don't see any evidence of that."

“I know that’s because there isn’t any,” Liam mumbled, nervously running his hands through his hair.

I began getting even more lightheaded and brought my hands up to my forehead. I looked over at Liam who was usually unshakeable and saw darkness slowly begin to unfold.

“We’ve gotta get out of here and call for help,” Liam whispered. “It looks to me like someone might have been on top of the boulder, waiting.”

“How?” I asked, but no one was listening. We all seemed to be functioning on autopilot.

“There’s some evidence that someone else was rappelling down at some point, but after that I have no idea what happened,” Liam said, coming over to me.

I felt his hand slide along my shoulder, pushing me gently down the trail. Our trek back was a complete blur. It felt like it was only minutes before we arrived back at the camp. Steph was directing Paul on what his trail duty would be for the next day when she stopped to greet us. Her expression changed quickly when she looked in Liam’s eyes and then to mine.

“Call for help,” Liam directed. “Dan and Justin are missing. Their equipment looks tampered with. We need to get a search going.”

I heard Steph’s soft gasp as she ran to the yurt and felt my own tears finally begin to surface now that I was in the safety of the camp. I looked over at Liam who just kept shaking his head. The other campers were completely surrounding us now, the shock running through each of them.

“What happened?” Marty asked, running up behind Caleb.

“Their ropes...” Caleb’s voice broke off.

“Both of them?” Marty’s eyes narrowed on Caleb.

Dave grabbed one of the ropes and examined it.

“Yeah. We need to talk, privately,” Liam said, walking over to them.

Steph came running toward us yelling and shaking her head. None of us could understand her, but her face was filled with dread as she approached us.

“The satellite phone is missing,” she mumbled.

“What?” Liam asked the question all of us were thinking. There was no way we could have heard her correctly.

She shook her head and brought her hands up to her face. “The phone is gone.”

“All right. Get everyone back in their tents. We’re going to tear up this camp until we find it,” Liam instructed.

I caught Liam’s glance and he gave me a nod, not because he was telling me to go back to my tent, but because I was asking him if I should. My mind froze on the images of Dan and Justin mid-air, falling and there was nothing I could do to shake them out of my head.

I looked over at Steph who looked completely at a loss, and I walked over to her, grabbing her hand.

“Let’s go regroup and then help the guys,” I told her.

She slowly nodded her head, as she wiped away the tears, and we took off for my tent. I unzipped my tent door and climbed in, holding the flap for Steph to walk through.

“I don’t understand what’s going on,” she whispered.

“Liam thinks the ropes were cut deliberately,” I said in a hushed voice.

“Oh no. Are you serious?” she asked.

I nodded my head and turned around to face my sleeping bag, and my heart plummeted when I saw two more black ravens placed on my pillow, with a note underneath.

I bent down to my pillow, reaching under the two whittled ravens and yanked the piece of paper out from underneath. My hands were trembling as I unfolded it.

“Steph,” my voice trembled. “I don’t think that raven was from Liam.”

“What are you—” her words gave away to a scream as she fell to the floor.

“We’re going to be fine,” I whispered. “It’s going to be fine.”

She was in complete meltdown mode and there was nothing I could do. I was just drawn to the note.

I heard Liam come in the tent, trying to catch his breath.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

“Ravens,” were the only words that Steph could speak.

I looked down at the letter I held, reading aloud each pieced together word that was pasted on the paper.

*An unseen evil.
You may be doubting.
But all disaster
Is this nameless evil.
You will be haunted
Until your soul is still.
And then nevermore*

When my eyes landed on the last word, my hands began shaking as I reached into my bag to grab my Edgar Allen Poe book. I dropped the paper and flipped to the *Raven* and sure enough the words from this letter had been taken from the poem — from my book.

“What’s going on?” Liam asked.

“Someone planted two more ravens,” I whispered.

“I’m not following. What do you mean more?” His eyes locked onto mine, catching my elbow.

“There was one last night on my pillow, but Steph thought it was from you, like something you made for me or something.” I sighed. “I was going to thank you for it this morning on the beach, but I got distracted.”

Liam picked up the letter and began scanning it.

“We’re not going to find the phone, are we?” Steph’s voice was completely deflated.

We didn’t answer her.

“Is this a poem from your book?” Liam asked, squinting his eyes at the pasted words.

“Not directly. When I saw the word nevermore, I knew he must have gathered the words from the Raven poem. Once I turned to it in my book that’s when I saw all of the holes from where he had cut the words out.”

“I guess we know why Chelsea was so terrified,” Steph murmured. “Whoever’s been leaving these must’ve done something to really freak her out.”

“Besides breaking her leg? Yeah. I think we can count on that.”

“I don’t want to cause alarm with everyone, but we need a meeting to review everything,” Liam said.

“Do you think it’s one of the campers?” I asked, helping Steph back up.

“It makes the most sense. I’m gonna go talk with Marty and Caleb, see what they’ve found and figure out what we want to do. Stay here and I’ll come back for you guys.” He looked at me and then at Steph.

“I’d rather come with you,” I said, glancing at Steph, who didn’t seem to care if she came or went at this point.

“Sure.” He held out his hand, which I grasped onto and used my other hand to haul Steph out with us, letting go once she made it outside.

Liam stuffed the paper into his jeans and pulled me closer. He slowly slid his arms around my back as I felt my body crumble into his. I looked over at Steph who looked like she was on the verge of a major freakout, and I wasn’t sure that I was really the person to help her divert it, but I had to try.

“We’re going to be okay,” I whispered.

“They won’t come for weeks,” her voice caught.

“There could be a logical explanation.” My breath trembled, and I cursed myself for my lack of acting skills.

“They’re not scheduled for weeks,” she repeated, staring at the tent not even blinking. “Weeks.”

Liam’s arms released me slowly as I felt able to stand on my own again. We started back to the campfire, and Marty and Caleb were discussing things intently when we arrived.

“I filled him in on the ropes,” Caleb said.

“Well, unfortunately there’s some more developments,” Liam said, glancing at me.

All the campers were still in their tents and where we were standing seemed as good of place to regroup as anywhere. Liam explained the poem based off of one of my books and the raven carvings. Both Caleb and Marty looked as if they were as shocked as we had been, but there was something unsettling brewing between us all.

“So do you think it’s one of the campers?” Caleb whispered.

“I’m leaning that way,” Liam said.

“Who’s to say it’s a camper and not a CL?” Steph blurted out.

Caleb’s expression darkened, and he took a step forward toward her.

“Don’t even go there, Steph. You can’t even imagine what I just experienced back there.”

“I’m sure whoever is doing this is hoping that we’ll become fractured, and it looks like that’s already happening,” I said, grabbing Liam’s hand. He gently squeezed it.

“Who’s to say it’s not our handyman?” Marty said, ignoring my statement. He crossed his arms in front of him and glanced at our hands.

“Listen, we don’t need to start doing this right now. Maybe these things aren’t related,” Liam said. I could tell he wasn’t even convinced of the words that left his lips.

“Let’s keep searching through the tents and go from there,” I said, glancing at Steph who seemed to be shrinking into herself.

“Yeah. Just get on with it,” Marty grumbled.

We searched tent after tent, coming up with absolutely nothing except terrified expressions and many more questions than we had answers for. When we got to Justin’s tent we all looked around slowly wondering what we might find. It felt wrong to go through someone’s personal effects, but it had to be done.

Justin’s tent was neatly organized. He had his bags on the far side of the tent, and then several piles of clothes folded tidily at the end of his sleeping bag. Caleb looked through a pile of magazines, and I just stood there scanning along the floor when my eyes fell on a tube of something underneath the sleeping bag.

“What’s that?” I asked, pointing to the brightly colored tube peaking out.

Marty walked over and flipped up the sleeping bag, revealing a tube of glue.

“Well, that doesn’t make sense,” I mumbled. “Is there any reason why he’d need glue?”

“Not really,” Steph said, grabbing it from Marty and twisting off the lid. “It looks like it’s been used too.”

“You don’t think he set this up, do you?” Caleb asked.

“Which part?” I questioned.

“All of it,” he offered.

“It doesn’t add up. Why would he leave a poem for Emma, off himself, and then ask a bear to strategically move his body?” Steph glared at Caleb.

“Maybe…” Caleb stopped himself, glancing at Liam.

“Listen before we start wasting our time with conspiracy theories, let’s just get the group together and let them know what we need to do going forward,” I said.

“And what’s that?” Caleb arched his brow.

“I have no idea,” I replied. “But I’m sure you’ll come up with something by the time you start talking to them.”

“I don’t think anyone should ever go anywhere alone. Whether it’s to the bathroom, to their tent. I think everyone should double up in tents as well,” Steph said quietly.

“I agree,” I said, stepping out of Justin’s tent.

“All right. I’ll have everyone meet us at the campfire,” Marty said, meeting me outside the tent.

Liam came over and stood next to me, his eyes connecting with mine, and I saw a flicker of fear that I’d never seen before. My stomach tightened, and without hesitation I buried my face into his chest.

“You’re gonna be okay,” he murmured, his lips close to my ear.

Marty began moving swiftly to all of the tents to fill them in on the meeting time.

I exhaled slowly, breaking free from Liam. I looked around the campground, wondering if we were being watched.

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Chapter Twelve

“We need to go find them,” Brady said. He was sitting next to Mark, one of the guys I flew in with, and the entire group froze.

I looked at Marty who was a bit speechless.

“Everything we do needs to be mapped out first. We can’t afford any more surprises,” Marty answered, looking over at me.

Steph was sitting next to me and was pretty much out of it, so I stood up quickly and went over to help Marty field any questions. He grimaced and gave me a quick thank you.

“If it’s just an accident what’s the big deal?” Mark questioned.

“We’re not so sure it was,” I said, finding my voice.

“What do you mean?” a guy yelled. I couldn’t remember his name and looked at Steph, hoping for some help.

“Paul, we need everyone to stay calm so we can discuss things in a normal manner,” she replied monotone and then hunched back over.

“There are a couple of things that have made consider another possibility. It looks as if the ropes were tampered with. However, the problem that arises with that observation is that not only did the climbing group look at one another’s equipment, each climber checked their own. It’s odd that two damaged ropes would’ve gotten past everyone,” I said.

“What if Justin or Dan did it? That would make sense if they did it on their way up. Maybe Justin was tired of being here,” Parker said. His brown hair was completely tangled, and he had dark circles under his eyes.

“Do you have any reason to believe Justin would do that?” I questioned.

Parker started coughing into his flannel sleeve, and I wondered why he sounded so bad.

“No. None at all,” Parker said, deflated.

“And where would the bodies be? We would’ve found them at the bottom of the boulder or at least drag marks if a brown bear found them first,” I replied.

Parker nodded, his eyes glassing over.

“The other thing that points to someone else being involved was a poem I received on my pillow, along with carved, wooden ravens. I received one yesterday and two today,” I said, scanning the group for a reaction.

“Why didn’t we find out about the raven yesterday then?” Vince asked. He was in the same clothes as the day before, but his red hair was wet. He was sitting next to Fulton, who looked a little worse for wear. Fulton was holding his head in his hand and looked really uninterested and exhausted. His brown eyes were constantly fighting to stay awake.

“I actually thought it was a gift. When I returned to my tent there were two more along with a note.”

“What was in the note?” Vince continued.

“It was kind of like a haunted poem,” I said, not wanting to give too much detail.

“And you guys didn’t find the phone,” Vince stated rather than asked.

“Right,” Marty confirmed. “What needs to be done is to cut the number of tents by half so everyone will be rooming with someone else. There will never be a time when someone is by themselves. Never.”

“How do we know the person’s still even around?” Darryl questioned, crossing his arms in front of him. He still had the leather gloves on from when he was hauling wood earlier. His brown hair was tucked under a hat and he looked less than pleasant.

“We don’t. But we can’t take a chance on anything until the next plane is scheduled to come back,” Marty answered.

“And when is that?” Darryl asked.

“Two weeks,” Steph said.

“At the rate we’re going, there won’t be anyone left in two weeks,” Fulton muttered, only loud enough for me to hear. He was sitting on the log bench next to where I was standing. He refused to look up at me. Instead, he just threw pieces of bark into the fire that he was ripping off from the bench.

“Okay, guys so let’s get all the tents taken down that we won’t be using and move the ones that we’ll be staying in closer to one another,” Marty said, pointing next to the yurt.

The group began tearing down the tents right away, and I walked over to Steph and sat down. Her hands were folded in her lap and I placed mine on top of them.

“Is there anything I can do to make you feel better?” I asked.

“No,” she whispered, looking away from me.

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“The plane is only coming in two weeks if I call them for supplies. It wasn’t firm on the schedule because they actually dumped off enough today to last for over a month.”

“Well, maybe when they don’t hear from you, they’ll get concerned and send a plane anyway,” I said, hopeful.

“Unless the person who has the phone plans on answering any incoming calls,” she said, turning back to look at me. “I mean look at what the person did to Chelsea. She left alive, but she was broken. As a person she was gone. Her bones might heal, but her mind might never be fixed. And what if there’s more than one? I mean we’ve already gotten one of them lifted off the island. What if there’s an entire group of them.”

“Steph, we can’t start thinking like this. We need to stay focused and strong so we can gain the upper hand over whoever is doing this.”

Liam, David, and Caleb were talking toward us slowly. Liam looked mentally exhausted as he came over to sit next to me. David and Caleb went to talk with Marty.

“You don’t look so hot, cuz,” Liam said, reaching across me to grab Steph’s hand.

“She’s not doing so great,” I admitted on her behalf.

“I don’t think this is going to end well,” she said, looking at me and then Liam.

“We need to stay positive,” I said.

“Steph, we can’t afford to have you thinking like that,” he seconded. “We’ll always be in each other’s sight. We’ll make it out.”

Liam brought his hand back from Steph and stood up, watching all of the guys dismantling the extra tents.

“Let’s go take down your tent, and get you moved into mine,” I said, linking her hands in mine and tugging on her.

Liam led the way, and we got everything out of Steph’s tent and placed it where we were going to move my tent to. I also emptied my tent so that we could dismantle and then haul it to the next section.

The camp's energy intensified as the afternoon turned to evening. The sun was still up, but we knew in only a matter of hours we'd be facing our first night knowing someone might be out to cause us harm. It was also decided that it wouldn't make sense to go on a search and rescue with so little daylight.

No one was really hungry, but we needed to eat and Steph made that her mission. I was just relieved she found something to put her energy in besides thinking the worst. I noticed her up in the tree, standing on the platform scanning the campground and beyond. She had something hanging around her neck, but I didn't know what until I saw her reach for it and hold it up to her eyes, binoculars.

Steph turned slowly as she canvassed the entire area, pausing here and there to adjust the focus but then finally putting the binoculars down again, letting them hang around her neck. She was reaching into one of the containers when she slammed the lid shut and let out a scream. My heart started racing as Liam jumped up and began running, along with the other CLs, to the tree. He quickly scaled the steps, reaching Steph and flipping open the lid and then closing it.

Dave scaled the platform and was speaking with Liam, and then he wrapped his arm around Steph's shoulders and helped her down the steps. I jogged over to the tree and hugged her. Tears streamed down her face endlessly, and she held onto me, almost crushing me. I wanted to help her and make whatever she saw go away, but I couldn't. And there was a part of me that wanted to see what it was she saw. I looked at Dave, who was rubbing Steph's back to calm her down.

"Can you take her to the yurt and stay with her for a few minutes?" I asked. "I want to go talk to Liam."

"Sure."

She reluctantly let go of me, but then attached herself onto Dave.

I quickly climbed the nailed in pieces of wood and saw Liam squatting near the container.

“Hey, what did she find?” I asked softly.

He looked up at me and shook his head. “I think this is bad. Really bad. Whoever is doing this isn’t just trying to off us. They are trying to torture us on the way out.”

I walked over to the container and opened it. There was a dead raven, with a Polaroid attached. The picture was of Chelsea, screaming. Her eyes were wide and filled with fear and her mouth was in a large oval. The only thing that gave any sort of clue as to what she encountered was of a black, gloved hand holding a hammer.

“I’m starting to think it might be someone within the camp,” I muttered.

He nodded. “I know. It would make the most sense.”

Liam reached in the container and pulled out the bird and the picture, along with some of the brown paper lunch sacks and trash bags. He placed the picture in a lunch sack and wrapped the raven in a garbage bag.

“I didn’t even know these cameras were still around,” I sighed. “The amount of thought this person has put into this is something I can’t even fathom. Should we do another search? If we weren’t looking for an old looking camera the last time, I doubt we’d notice it.”

Liam sat down on the platform and pulled me down into him. I scooted in between his legs and leaned my head against his chest. I felt him press his lips against my scalp just breathing in and out as he held me.

“It wouldn’t hurt,” he replied at long last. “But I think even if it was someone in the camp, they’re probably smart enough to be hiding these

things out in the woods. I bet you wish you'd taken the plane out of here now."

I felt him slowly release me, and I shifted so I could look into his eyes.

"Not if it meant leaving you behind and going back home," I whispered. "Every day that I've been away from my stepdad, I've realized more and more the damage he's been causing," I stopped talking. Now wasn't the time to go down this path.

"It must be bad if you think this is a better option," he grimaced, rubbing my back.

"Well, it's at least different," I said, trying to force a joke.

"I want you to experience life away from your stepdad. I don't know everything that he's done and I can't even imagine having a mother who didn't seem to care, but you're better than all that and an entire life is waiting for you."

"I appreciate it," I said, smiling. "I really do."

"There were a few times I almost lost sight of it myself and once that happens it's easy to go to some pretty dark places."

"You know, maybe my father didn't give my mom and Kroy the money to pay them off to keep me, but to buy me freedom from them?"

"I'm sure that's exactly what he did, babe," he whispered. Hearing him call me babe, created a sensation I wasn't expecting, but I enjoyed the closeness it implied.

"We should probably get dinner down to everyone," I said, breaking free, remembering I needed to go check on Steph.

I stood up and opened a box of freeze-dried stroganoff packets and grabbed enough for everyone. I stuck them in a trash bag and watched as Liam backed down the steps with the trash bag that contained the raven to

dispose of. I followed quickly behind and was thankful once my feet touched the ground.

“This certainly is the hard way of doing everything,” I grumbled, heaving the bag of meal pouches over my shoulder as I walked to the campfire.

“What did you pick out for us?” Caleb asked, attempting to create a sense of normalcy that seemed impossible to achieve.

“Stroganoff,” I replied.

“Nothing like meat in pouches,” he said.

“No doubt,” I said, leaving the bag next to him “Think you can handle heating the water for everyone? I’m gonna go check on Steph.”

He nodded and waved as he grabbed a couple of kettles that he began filling with water from one of our water containers.

I opened the door to the yurt to find Steph sleeping, and Dave reading a magazine next to the door. He got up quickly and met me outside.

“How’s she doing?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Not well at all. I think she was finally starting to get a grasp of things when that happened.”

“Agreed,” I replied. “Caleb’s starting the dinners for everyone. I’m gonna go grab my sleeping bag and stuff and just plan on sleeping in here with her. Do you mind waiting another minute or so while I go get it?”

“Not at all.”

Dinner went without a hitch. Even though I told Caleb I didn’t want dinner, he still made a pouch of the stroganoff for me and I picked at it more than I thought I would. Steph didn’t touch hers at all. We all sat around the campfire until dark, mostly quiet, but sometimes a burst of talking would erupt only to quiet down again as the weight of the day burdened us all.

When we all couldn't take the exhaustion any more, we trundled back to our respective tents, except I planned on sleeping in the yurt with Steph since that's where our sleeping bags were, and it felt marginally more secure than our tent. Liam grabbed his sleeping bag and pillow and met us inside the yurt.

Instead of a night filled with talking and laughter, it was filled with silence and dread until we all could escape into our dreams before the next nightmare began.

I woke up to heavy pounding on the yurt's door, and Dave yelling on the other side of it. I quickly reached for the flashlight that I'd tucked under my pillow and turned it on, but Liam had already beat me up. He was at the door with a lantern blazing. I glanced behind me at Steph who was sitting upright, holding the edge of her sleeping bag tightly.

"What's up?" Liam asked. His pajama bottoms were hanging on him and he was leaning against the doorframe.

"There's been another incident," Caleb answered. Dave was standing next to him, holding a flashlight. Both were armed.

"How could that be?" I questioned, grabbing a sweatshirt to slip over my head as I slid on my shoes.

Steph was instantly by my side, and I wasn't really sure if that was a good thing or not.

Liam slipped on his boots and turned to look at me. I could tell he wanted to tell me to stay, but he recognized that I wouldn't. He grabbed his rifle, and motioned for us to come.

Steph wrapped her fingers around my hand, and we followed Liam out the door, none of us saying a word.

Dave and Caleb walked cautiously through the tents, and we trailed behind them, winding our way to the lineup of washroom and shower tents.

They stopped in front of the washroom tent that was unzipped, and shined their flashlights through to the back. I craned my neck to see what the light was exposing, scared at what I might find when all that was in front of me was a huge gash in the back of the tent fabric and a single leather boot, tipped on its side. My heart was thumping with fear as I realized the hole was large enough to pull a body through the back of the tent, without ever leaving a trail.

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Chapter Thirteen

“Who was it, and why didn’t they have a partner with them?” Liam demanded, his eyes blazing even in the darkness.

“It was Darryl, and he did,” Dave said. “Sam’s missing too.”

Caleb shined his light along the tents. “It looks like someone dragged whoever was standing outside the bathroom that way in front of the showers. I’m not sure, which one he took first. Possibly whoever was using the restroom?”

“Damn it.” Liam glanced at Steph and me before stepping in the tent.

“Maybe, whoever was out here heard the commotion and unzipped the tent and the assailant came back around and grabbed him too,” Steph offered. I was stunned at her sudden amount of control and calmness.

“Could be. The options are endless. If there are two somebodies doing this that could also explain it,” Caleb said grimly.

“What’s going on?” Cory asked, walking up behind us with Brady.

“Darryl and Sam went missing,” Steph said.

“You’ve gotta be joking,” Brady said, his eyes wide. “We need to go find them.”

“Absolutely no way is that happening. Not in the dark. We’re at a complete disadvantage, and that’s probably what the guy wants us to do,”

Liam said, stepping out of the tent.

“We can’t just leave them out there somewhere to die,” Brady protested.

Liam, Caleb and Dave all shot glances at one another. I knew what they were thinking. We probably wouldn’t be able to find Sam or Darryl.

“As soon as the sun’s up we’ll search for them, but not a second before,” Liam said. “Let’s wake everyone up and meet in the yurt. We’ve got a lot to talk about.”

“Let’s go take a look at our tent,” I whispered to Liam, and he nodded as we all walked back toward the yurt.

On our walk back, we tapped on the tents softly and asked everyone to meet us in the yurt. It was apparent the victims were being picked off the island one by one. When we got to our tent, I didn’t even need to open the door to see what was waiting for us, or maybe just me. I felt my soul chill with the eerie gift that had been left for me again.

Two more carved ravens were propped against the exterior of the door, not on my pillow. Whoever left them thought we were sleeping in the tent so at least they didn’t know we were in the yurt. That possibly excluded most of the campers from being the person or people behind this, unless someone from the camp was just trying to trick us. I heard Liam’s presence behind me as he exhaled loudly. He placed his hand around my hip and guided me forward. We didn’t even bother to pick them up.

“What’s going on?” Paul asked as he rubbed his eyes groggily, walking up the steps to the yurt.

“Sam’s missing,” Cory said quietly. “And Darryl.”

“What?” Paul stopped moving and Steph crashed into him.

“They’re missing. Now keep moving,” Steph replied.

Once everyone was settled, Liam closed the door and sat next to it. I scanned the crowd, and it looked like the news had already made its way completely around to everyone. I walked to one of the cots and sat down.

“What are we gonna do? We can’t just do nothing and wait to be picked off one at a time,” Mark yelled.

“We won’t be picked off one at a time,” Caleb replied calmly. “Tomorrow morning we’ll begin the search. Chores and learning sessions will be called off indefinitely until we solve what’s going on here.”

Liam began speaking from the back of the tent, his eyes canvassing every person inside of it as if one might be a possible suspect. “We’re dividing into two groups of seven. We’ll begin searching on the trails that we began clearing last week and will regroup back at the camp by three in the afternoon.”

“What if we don’t want to go? It sounds like a deathtrap,” Paul muttered, not looking up at anyone.

“You wanna stay here and wait for someone to come grab you? Have at it!” Mark said, shaking his head.

“Whoever it is probably expects us to go searching for everyone.” Paul threw his hands in the air and glared at Mark. “We’re probably just falling right into his hands.”

“We’re screwed either way we cut it. Two people went missing on a hike, and two people went missing in the camp. Whoever it is will get us no matter what,” Vince said.

“You really think that?” Mark asked, raising his brow. “Maybe you’re so certain because it’s you. You’re the only one fully clothed. The rest of us are in pajamas. It wouldn’t have been hard for you to do what you had to do.”

Vince's face turned red as he hopped up off the floor, ready to lunge at Mark. Liam stood up quickly and walked over to Vince, towering over him to ensure that he wouldn't make a move, while Dave quickly moved next to Mark. The tension in the air was growing by the second, and I saw no end in sight, especially with the lack of help coming.

"Mark has a point," Fulton mumbled. He pulled his knit cap over his brows and crossed his arms.

"I totally understand that we're all panicking, but it's not going to help our chances. We need to work as a group. We don't have the luxury to allow our imagination to take over," I said, hoping that somehow they'd put their testosterone in check and listen to me.

"If we are in any way fractured, that will be our downfall," Steph continued.

I could feel the uneasy tension slowly begin to dissipate, but the fear still ran through the air.

"I also don't think two people should be sleeping at a time," Steph said. "I think there should be sleeping shifts in each tent."

"I think we each should have a rifle," Fulton said, and several of the campers began nodding their heads in agreement.

"We can't do that," Caleb said, shaking his head. "But we can give you some of the machetes we use to knock down the tall grasses. We have enough to go around."

A shudder moved through my spine as I thought about what his words implied. My eyes scooted from one person to the next as I watched them swallow the news, and it didn't take long before the objections began.

"So great. If it turns out to be someone in the camp we're giving them an easy weapon so one of us can get hacked up," Vince argued, crossing his arms in front of him.

“You’d rather we’re all unarmed?” Brady asked, standing up quickly. “I don’t want to die, and I’ll do anything it takes to survive.”

“I’ll go get the supplies out of the locked shed,” Liam said, pushing his hands into his pocket and pulling out a set of keys.

Murmurs began softly churning through the tent as everyone analyzed their options. Liam walked to the door, with Caleb right behind him, and turned around to glance at me. My stomach instantly knotted at the thought of him going outside. I hopped up and made my way through the maze of bodies sitting and standing on the floor. It didn’t matter to me that they would be armed. Whoever we were dealing with had made us all targets, and the only way we could stop being victims was to fight back.

“You’ll need help carrying everything,” I offered, looking at Liam.

His lips broke into a smile and he shook his head at me. “You wouldn’t take no for an answer anyway, would you?” he whispered, opening the door.

“Not a chance,” I whispered back, feeling the chill of the night air as I walked underneath his arm.

Liam closed the door once Caleb was outside. The stars in the sky were blazing for the first time since I’d arrived, and I thought about how isolated we really were.

“What do you make of all that in there?” Caleb asked.

“I think it’s gonna be a big problem as time goes on, and they realize help might not be coming as fast as we need it.” Liam scowled, reaching out for me to grab his hand.

“Do you think it’s someone in the camp?” I asked.

“It would be hard for me to believe that any of them could do this and not be caught somehow. Everyone’s been where they were supposed to be,” Caleb replied.

I followed them behind the yurt, my pulse racing with every step as we headed to the shed that housed all of the work tools.

“Not trying to sound like a horrible person, but do you really think it’s a great idea to hand out machetes to everyone?” I asked.

“Not at all.” Liam laughed. “But I think we have no choice.”

Caleb flashed his light on the padlock of the shed, and Liam inserted his key, giving it a twist. He opened the wooden door to reveal a tidy lineup of chainsaws, weed eaters, and other equipment I didn’t recognize. Along the wall hung several rows of screwdrivers, hammers, and blades. We all walked inside hurriedly as if standing outside in the dark would bring something else evil our way.

“We’re missing a hammer,” Liam said quietly, pointing at a vacant spot on the pegboard.

“How could they get in here?” Caleb asked, narrowing his eyes on Liam. “There are only a couple of keys to the shed.”

“You don’t really think it was the one used on Chelsea, do you.” My mouth felt like cotton as I tried to compute everything that was going on.

“I think it could be,” Liam said “We have so many types and brands, I doubt I’d recognize it one way or the other, but it makes sense.”

“Why’s the lock not busted?” I asked.

“I don’t have a clue unless one of us left it unlocked, and someone snuck in quickly. Let’s hurry and grab everything and get back to the yurt,” Liam said.

Liam handed me as many sheathed machetes and knives as I could carry, with Caleb and Liam grabbing the rest. Caleb left the shed first, and I followed behind. Liam plopped the knives on the ground and secured the padlock. He picked up the knives, and we jogged quickly to the yurt, surprised to find a rather calm group of people waiting for us.

We spread the assortment out on a table, and I immediately began feeling queasy. The thought of any one of us having to use one of these was absolutely horrifying. Steph came up behind me, and she still seemed far more stable than earlier.

“Whoever we’re dealing with has a mind that’s really warped. I don’t even know what to make of it,” Steph said. Her hand slowly ran down one of the large blades and I glanced at her. Her eyes were unfocused and no longer seemed to hold the person I had met only a few days ago.

“I know,” I agreed, nodding my head. “It’s driving us to match him in insanity, I think.”

“Okay, so come up and grab a weapon you feel comfortable with, and let’s hope none of us ever have to use it,” Liam said.

Instantly the group descended on the table, picking up machetes and knives and placing them back down before analyzing the next one.

Once everyone had their weapon of choice, the group slowly disbanded into pairs as I heard each of them deciding who would get the first and second watch for what was left of the night.

I glanced over at Liam who appeared exhausted. He opened his arms up as if inviting me in. He was only a few feet away from me, and I couldn’t resist his offer. I wasn’t sure how I’d kept my composure for so long, but inside I felt like my strength was dwindling.

“Hey, baby,” Liam murmured. “You’re holding up really well.”

“It’s just a figment of your imagination mixed with some strong denial about the situation we’re facing on my end,” I said, craning my neck to look into his eyes. “It’ll wear off pretty soon.” I tried to smile, but my lips stopped cooperating. He squeezed me tightly, and I rested my head on his chest, watching as everyone began leaving the yurt for the long night ahead.

“Steph doesn’t seem herself,” I whispered.

He shook his head and looked over at his cousin who was still standing at the table where the machetes and smaller knives had been spread out. She was staring at the wall with a blank expression, and I was worried we were losing her.

“It’s gonna be tough on us all, and whatever traumas we’ve had in our past will probably come back to haunt us the longer we’re out here,” he said softly, freeing me so that he could look me in the eyes.

I furrowed my brow at him and craned my neck to the side as I tried to figure out where that bit of news came from, which finally produced a glimpse of a smile.

“Had to take Psych 101 in my first year of college. I just didn’t expect to need it out here though.” He attempted a smile and pulled me back into his chest for which I was grateful.

“Any other tidbits of information on how to stay calm and not run through the trees and over a cliff would be welcome,” I told him, tapping his chest lightly with my fingers.

“Is that the direction you’re headed?” he asked.

“Not yet. No. Someday soon? Maybe,” I replied sarcastically.

Steph walked over to us and looked like she was about to fall asleep standing up.

“How about you sleep first and we’ll both be on watch,” I offered, looking at Steph. I moved away from Liam and began organizing Steph’s sleeping bag and everything back on the cot.

She nodded, and her lips twisted in a grateful gesture as she dove into the bag and pulled a pillow over her head.

The talking outside the tent turned to a light murmur as everyone situated themselves back into their tents. It was after midnight, and it felt

like it would be forever until the sun came back to us, which only created more urgency to find whoever was doing this later today. I didn't want to face another night like tonight.

I crawled into my sleeping bag when Liam came over and sat next to me. The sleeping bag wasn't warming me up at all, and I began shivering as I looked over at him.

"We can zip our bags together," he began. "That might warm you up."

I nodded my head and gestured for him to grab his bag. I looked over at Steph who still had her head underneath the pillow, and I began worrying that I might end up like that as well, unable to cope.

Liam stood over me and reached out his hand. I grabbed it and he hauled me up, allowing my sleeping bag to slump back to the floor.

"My god, your hands are like ice," he said, quickly grabbing both bags and zipping them together to make one large bag.

Since we were the ones on watch, we decided to sit up and let the bag wrap around us. We leaned against one of the chests that housed the files and medicines, and my mind began to relax. The heat from Liam's body warmed me up, allowing the shivering to slowly stop. I leaned my head on his upper arm and slid my hands around his.

"I'm so sorry I convinced you to stay up here," Liam began. "I never imagined that—"

"It's not your fault. I wanted to stay. The thought of never really having to see my stepfather again was what made me stay. I wanted to be here with you, but I also knew if I stayed here, I'd only see him and my mom long enough to grab my things and head to Oregon."

"And here I thought I was the only reason," he teased.

"Nope. You can stop letting it go to your head now," I joked.

“Please don’t feel like you have to tell me, but I’d like to know about what happened with your family,” he said.

I lifted my head and turned my body only slightly to look at him. The sleeping bag confined my movements more than I realized. His caramel eyes locked on mine, and I knew I’d be safe telling him some of the stuff from my family.

“There are so many things, and I think over time they’ve just added up. When my mom first married Kroy, I was pretty young and didn’t go around their place much. But I remember the first time staying overnight, they locked me in the bedroom from the outside in. It may not seem like a big deal, but when you’re seven, and in a new place, it’s really scary. It didn’t matter what I said to him, he wouldn’t let me out of there. I had to go to the bathroom, and even that didn’t matter. My mom never intervened, and in hindsight, I’m sure she knew, but she enjoyed tormenting me as well.”

Liam squeezed my hand gently.

“The next morning he finally unlocked the door, and of course things were a mess. He grabbed me and shoved me into the bathroom and told me to clean up. I remember crying for my father and my mom came into the bathroom, telling me I was spoiled, and now she knows why she never had me over. So much of it was a blur. I remember going to the refrigerator and anything I looked at had Kroy’s initials written on it, and they’d chase me away so I wouldn’t eat it. Little did I know when I landed there after my dad’s death the same issues would only be multiplied.”

“Did you tell your dad when this first happened?” he asked softly.

I leaned my head back and groaned a little. “No and I should have. My dad knew something was up, but I don’t think he ever thought they were neglecting me, and then the older I got, the less I saw them, and the more foolish I felt for not telling my dad in the first place. It started a really

weird cycle. There was one time I went there because my mom was being super nice over the phone, begging me to come over, and I completely fell for it. I wanted her love so much, I'd believe anything.

When I got there it turned out Kroy had taken off, and she just wanted someone to sob to and take care of the house for her. At thirteen, I would do anything for her to like me so I did whatever she told me. Unfortunately, Kroy came back while I was still there and told me if I ever told my father any of it, he'd make my life even more miserable, which at thirteen seemed terrifying. I realized I was just her fill-in until Kroy got back. The entire time I was there all she had me do was work. I cooked for her, cleaned for her, did the laundry, brought her all of the meals..." my voice broke off.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered.

"She didn't love me. I don't think she ever did. The entire time I did do stuff for her, she'd still just scream and yell at me." I sighed.

"One of the parts I can kind of laugh about now was that when I'd go to eat something she'd tell me I couldn't because it was Kroy's, and he'd want it when he came back. It was really bizarre. Imagine opening up a fridge and having everything marked as Kroy's butter or Kroy's eggs. Seeing a thirty-five year old man, marking his own food and everything else in the house is really weird. They are just really crazy or delusional or something. Anyway, they took off and left me at the house. I kept thinking they were going to come back, but they didn't. The next morning I realized I needed my dad to come get me, and of course I didn't tell him. I made up some excuse for my mom being gone. I always wanted to believe she was a better person than she was."

"She sounds like a really weak person," Liam whispered. "Pathetic, actually."

“She is. I actually thought once she got the money from my dad that she might leave Kroy. I wanted to believe she was only in the relationship so she didn’t have to work, or whatever her fantasy was, and that she’d escape once she had a chance to have her own safety net. But I guessed wrong. The first thing she did was get plastic surgery and buy some new clothes. Anyways it goes on and on, and once I began living there as a teen, it just got worse. He enjoys telling me I killed my father. My mom tells me that I’m the reason my dad divorced her, and I caused her to become like she is. I’ve worked through a lot because I started talking to a therapist, but stuff still surfaces. It brings out a side of me that isn’t really me. I never feel angry unless I’m around them.” A lump began to form in the back of my throat, and I realized it wasn’t because of some of the stories I revealed. It was because I’ve never told anyone but my therapist before now. Granted I didn’t tell him everything, but it was a start and it felt freeing.

“I’d like to show him what’s up.” Liam kissed the top of my head and pulled me closer.

“And I’d like to act like I’m a better person than that, but it would be kind of fun to watch.” I smiled and found myself drifting to sleep as Liam held me tightly.

Chapter Fourteen

I woke up and Liam was already wide awake along with Steph, going through the campers' files. His gaze met mine and held an intensity that caused something deep inside to be ignited. Sharing with him about my family last night opened me up in a way that I'd never dreamed.

"What are you up to?" I asked, trying to shake off the feelings that wanted to take over. I looked over at Steph, and she had a flicker of energy running behind her eyes that I recognized from when I first met her. Maybe the sleep had helped.

"Just going over the files we've got on campers to see if there are any patterns or things that look suspicious," she replied, sighing and sliding more papers out of a folder.

She was still dressed in her sweats, and her hair was completely a mess. Matching mine, I'm sure. Liam, of course, looked absolutely amazing and made me want to place a bag over my head. But if a relationship can begin in the woods when I looked like this more times than not, the odds might be in my favor.

"And?" I asked.

"Nothing at all that we can find," Liam said, whistling as he blew out air.

I got out of the sleeping bag and realizing how cold it was, quickly grabbed it to haul with me as I peered at what they were looking at.

“I think we’re dealing with someone outside of the camp. Unless it was Dan who planned something, but my gut doesn’t want to believe that,” Liam said. “And I’m not sure we should be going into the woods to find out either, but the groups we’re in should help keep us safe.”

“I hope it’s no one from here, like Dan or Justin. But it’s so odd because they know so much about our setup,” I said.

“True. But I don’t think anything that’s happened is something that a good casing of the place couldn’t provide, and then it wouldn’t have to be an insider,” he said, rubbing his fingers along his brow bone.

“Are we gonna go check out that place you found Tom?” I asked.

Liam stood up from the table and stretched, nodding. “I think we should. I doubt we’ll find anything there, but ya never know.”

“Okay,” I replied, glancing down at the table, noticing my own folder spread out. I glanced up at Liam who caught my stare as it left my folder.

“You were just in the pile,” he said, before I even had a chance to speak. But the truth was I didn’t blame them, even if they had wanted to check over my file again.

“I understand,” I replied, pushing back the embarrassment for being here in the first place.

“Sorry,” he whispered once more.

“The thought of a shower is terrifying now, but I really need one. It’s like the only sense of reality I have now,” I said, attempting to lighten the mood.

“Well, it’s daylight so I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Steph said, surprisingly dismissive of my fears. “Besides, I’ll stand on the front side, and Liam can

stand on the back, and we'll do the same for each other.”

She gathered the folders back up and slid them back in to the cabinet.

“Let’s get going,” she said.

After we were all showered and ready, the camp was just starting to wake up, and within thirty minutes I knew we’d be on the trails searching for any sign of what had happened. Steph was back inside the yurt, and I motioned for Liam to meet me on the deck out front and he nodded.

Closing the door behind him, he rubbed his hands up and down my arms, in an attempt to warm me up.

“I think the goose bumps are a constant state now and have nothing to do with being cold.” I said, scrunching my nose at him. “Do you think Steph is okay?”

“She’s really flipping between being okay and not, but I think that’s normal.”

I nodded. “It’s hard to know what’s considered worrisome or not under the circumstances.”

He pursed his lips and nodded his head in agreement.

“I wanted to thank you for last night,” I said.

“I didn’t do anything.” He tilted his head slightly, his expression bewildered.

“You did more than you know. I’ve never spoken to anyone about that stuff.”

“I know there’s more you’re not telling me and whenever you feel the need, I’ll be here.” His thumb touched my lower lip, and I smiled, letting my gaze fall to the deck we were standing on. How did he know that?

“Thank you,” I murmured. The craving for him was heating up the insides of my body, and as if he could read my mind, he reached for me.

“Emma,” he breathed quietly but gruffly, as his fingers wrapped around my elbows. I looked at him through my lashes as his mouth parted only inches away from mine. “If we had met at another time and in a different place, I’d already have made you mine.”

A ripple of happiness shot through my body, and a smile wrapped around my lips at his proclamation, and I didn’t even understand why. His hands slid down my arms, catching me by the hips. I felt Liam’s firm and powerful body press against me, and I wanted more.

The hint of possessiveness was a complete turn on as his lips fell to mine. His fingers left my hips and coiled through my hair bringing me in closer. The sensation of his mouth searching mine, as he cradled my head in his hands created a sensation that ripped through me, and I didn’t want it to end.

My hands caressed his neck, letting my fingers wrap around his hair as I kissed him harder. Everything about him was pulling me in deeper and deeper into his world regardless of where I was standing and what I was facing. His hands moved down my spine restlessly as we slowly broke free.

“You’re what I needed right now in my life,” I whispered.

He smiled and his eyes lit up as he interlocked his hand in mine. “Well let’s get this worked out so we have a chance to see what we could really be.”

My heart fluttered as I thought about the possibility of spending my first year at college with this perfect specimen of a man, and then it plummeted with the realization I may not even get there.

Marty was walking toward the deck, waving at us. “Are you guys ready to head out soon? I’ve got our group ready to go over by the

campfire.”

“Yeah. My group will take the northern trail, and you guys can take the southern,” Liam said. “If there’s anything out of the ordinary, we’ve got those orange markers we can use. We’ll just hope that whoever is out there doesn’t pull out the stakes before we can all check it out together. We’ll grab Steph and meet you over there. ”

“Sounds like a plan,” Marty said and turned toward the covered, stone fire pit.

I nodded, dropping Liam’s hand and opening the yurt’s door to find the clear, vinyl window pulled out the back of the yurt. My eyes immediately fell to my pillow where another raven was placed. I leaned on the doorframe, and Liam watched as my legs buckled underneath me, scooping me up before I hit the ground.

“She’s not inside and there’s another raven,” I said, my voice trembling. “We need to find her now.”

“Marty get everyone. Let’s go,” Liam shouted.

He made sure I could stand and went in the yurt and grabbed his rifle.

The sensation of wanting to curl into a ball vanished quickly, knowing time wasn’t on our side. I ran inside the yurt and grabbed the machete and pepper spray and ran back outside. Liam was already behind the back of the yurt where the window was tossed on the ground. There was no sign of her. I saw a small trail leading back away through the woods, but it looked too narrow for anything larger than a rabbit.

Liam started tracking something that I didn’t recognize in a different direction, and I followed closely behind him as the group began to congregate and stare at the window on the ground.

“Whoever it was took her this way,” he yelled, taking off in the direction of the smokehouse.

“We should have a CL and three campers stay behind,” he hollered, as he surged forward.

I chased after him through the woods as fast as I could with tree limb after tree limb hitting and slapping my face raw. Images of Steph began flashing through my mind, and the guilt began flooding through me. It never occurred to me she was vulnerable in the yurt. I never should have asked Liam to come out on the deck.

Liam was hollering Steph’s name as he dodged under the branches with ease. The crunching of everyone’s footsteps behind me gave way to heavy breathing as we continued at Liam’s frenzied pace. I ran until my lungs burned, and Liam was farther and farther away. My heart was pounding inside my chest, and I couldn’t go any longer, and I wasn’t alone. Dave, Vince, and Fulton slowed next to me, propping their hands on their knees gasping for air as the other CLs and campers continued by us. I turned to look down the trail, gauging how far we’d come as I tried to steady my breathing.

“Emma,” Liam voice boomed through the air. “Stay where you are.”

I turned quickly looking back up the trail to see Liam jogging down to me, shaking his head. He was holding something, but I couldn’t tell what it was. Everyone had stopped running and began walking back toward me, glancing nervously behind them.

We had reached the edge of the forest, which gave way to the rocky alpine that bordered the area we were staying in. My heart was still pounding, but it wasn’t because of the activity. Liam no longer had his rifle strapped onto his shoulder. Instead he was carrying it. His expression was grave as he reached me.

“Continue walking down the trail,” he said quietly. “Remain calm.”

I glanced around and watched the CLs giving the same orders to the rest of us as we slowly began our descent back down the trail.

“There’s a mother brown bear with her two cubs, and she’s not the only family on the plateau,” Liam whispered, walking backward down the trail more than forward as he continued to scan our surroundings.

“Liam, what’s in your hand,” I asked, my voice trembling.

He held it up for me and that’s when I saw it. A tattered piece of Steph’s flannel shirt was intertwined among his fingertips.

“She’s not with the bears, is she?” I asked, not wanting to know the answer as the lump was forming in the back of my throat.

“No. Not that I could see,” he replied. His expression was stone, but I detected a slight tremble as he spoke about his cousin.

Our group began tightening up in formation as we hiked back down the trail. It had been cleared only the week before, but it still had several areas of brush that had to be dodged. I didn’t understand what to make of anything any longer. Were we really just buying time before the inevitable?

Every so often one of the campers would slice some of the vegetation that was in the way, and I’d tense up each time I heard the blade whoosh through the air.

“Are we gonna go back up that way?” I asked.

He shook his head, and I caught my breath only momentarily before a shot rang into the air.

Chapter Fifteen

Liam stopped immediately. His facial expression completely fell as he grabbed my elbow and pulled me next to him as our eyes darted from CL to camper to CL.

“Shit. It’s back at the camp,” Liam said, his voice just under a yell. “Do not run for the camp. Stay with me at a calm pace.”

Liam didn’t let go of my arm the entire time we cautiously walked down the trail. He scanned up the trail and down the trail, looking for any evidence of the bears following us, or killers waiting for us.

By the time we stopped just short of the outskirts of camp my heart was pounding so hard my ears hurt. I understood Steph’s vacant expression now. She had lost hope and wanted out, but there was no way to get out. She understood that and I finally did too. I scanned our group quickly, realizing I didn’t even know which guys had stayed behind. Seeing Caleb, Dave, Mark, Brady, Paul, Vince, and Fulton, I tried to place who was missing. I looked back at Vince and saw him staring behind Caleb. I followed his gaze, but didn’t see anything. Maybe I was just imagining things. Vince was probably just in shock like the rest of us.

“We need to find Cory, Parker, Luke and Marty,” Liam said in a hushed voice to everyone, letting go of my elbow. “That’s who we’d left behind.”

I looked over at Caleb whose eyes were completely guarded, and I watched Vince who was next to him, tighten his grip on the machete, but his hand was trembling. None of us knew what to expect, or what we'd find inside the confines of the camp, but the only way to know was to start looking.

Liam took the first step toward the camp, and we all followed closely behind. My eyes zipped from one structure to the next. The shed looked like I last saw it, still locked. The yurt's window had been replaced. I could smell the smoke of the fire. But I saw no one.

"Marty," Liam called. "Hey, Marty."

"Luke?" Brady said, scanning inside an open tent.

My skin began crawling with the realization that all I had to do was check to see if anything had been left behind for me. Then we'd know.

"Let's check inside the yurt," I told Liam, catching a flicker of doubt in his eyes.

"Okay. Let me go in first," he muttered.

I followed him to the yurt, climbing the steps slowly and quietly. Liam flung open the door, ready to fire if needed but there was no one inside. My eyes dipped to my pillow where the raven had been placed, but no new ravens had been left.

"Let's go check the other tent," I said quietly, forcing the terror back down my throat. "Then we'll know whether we can expect to find them... or not."

We made it down the stairs and over to the tent we had originally planned on overnighting in. Liam gave the zipper a fast tug, and I poked my head inside. There were no new ravens. Maybe Marty and the guys were just out as a group together and ran into a bear or something.

I heard Caleb shout Liam's name, and my heart dropped at the sound, knowing I was obviously being delusional. We couldn't be that lucky. I took a deep breath in and let it out slowly as Liam zipped the tent back up.

"Think he's by the campfire," Liam said. "Let's go."

We wandered through the maze of tents in the direction of the fire pit to find the group congregated around Caleb. There was a low murmur running like an electrical current through everyone. I already knew the answer before I even saw them.

The fire was smoking heavily, and I pushed back the tears, wishing I could blame them on the air not the fear running through me. The crowd parted as we arrived to expose Caleb, holding four ravens and another note. There was an extra rifle lying on the ground — Marty's. Was he able to wound the person or was it used against him? My eyes canvassed everything, looking for any signs, and there were none. There were no signs of a struggle and no signs of blood. Maybe it had been a warning shot from Marty, alerting us that something was going down. But why wouldn't he have been able to stop it then? My mind was on a continual loop, but Caleb's voice broke me free.

"This is for you," Caleb said, pushing the note to me.

I looked up at Liam whose face was impossible to read and nodded to him to grab it for me.

"How do you know it's for me?" I asked.

"You'll see soon enough," Caleb whispered, dropping his gaze to the ground.

"Shit," Liam hissed. He was holding the paper so tightly his fingernails turned white as he read it.

I grabbed it from him and recognized the pasted words from the last note, except this time my name was used with single letters he pasted up top.

*Emma,
I remember peering into your soul,
Dreaming of the answer,
I heard you,
The darkness
Startled me,
Thrilled me
The demons sent me for you
And you opened the door*

My hands trembled as I realized it was me that this person wanted. Whoever it was, wanted me. Everyone else was to send a message, to terrorize me.

I looked up at Liam, opening my mouth but I had no voice. I scanned the note one last time and walked to the fire pit, releasing it into the flames. I watched the edges of the paper ignite as I thought about what I needed to do. What we all needed to do.

“We won’t become like the others,” I whispered, the tears coating my eyes.

“So we’ve all been through hell because someone’s been after you?” Brady said, his voice full of anger. “People are dying because of you. Why didn’t they just come and get you?”

“Enough,” Caleb said. “We don’t know that anyone has died.”

“Oh, please. Isn’t it obvious? I’m not gonna keep playing like everything’s going to work out just fine, because judging by my calculations, it’s not,” Brady said.

“Keep your voice down,” Fulton whispered, grabbing Brady’s shirt collar, pulling Brady toward him. “If we’re being watched, we can’t afford to have whoever it is hear. Got it?” Fulton’s eyes were blazing to match his voice as he shoved Brady away.

“We’ve gotta get this shit figured out, dude,” Vince whispered, rubbing his temples with his fingers. “This can’t be happening.”

“Our little princess apparently does have baggage,” Brady seethed, slowly walking toward me.

I glanced at Liam and saw the fury building deep inside of him. I hoped Brady wouldn’t do anything stupid because it didn’t look like Liam was going to have the patience for it.

“When did Steph say the next plane was coming? Two weeks?” Vince asked.

I nodded, knowing now wasn’t the time to say that was no guarantee. I watched the movements of everyone in the group stiffen as Brady kept coming toward me. This wasn’t going to end well.

“She’s here if you want her. I’ll help you get her, if you’ll leave me alone,” Brady hollered into the air, and before I could stop anything Liam had tackled Brady to the ground. Punch after punch landing on him.

“You think that shit’s funny?” Liam growled. Caleb and Dave were attempting to haul Liam off of Brady, but Liam’s strength was proving to be too great.

I ran over to him and bent down.

“It’s enough. It’s enough,” I whispered to Liam. “It’s okay.”

I glanced down at Brady whose bottom lip was split open and his cheekbone was already red. Liam stopped as soon as he heard my voice and stood up quickly.

“We’re all human, not animals and no one is going to be sacrificed on my watch,” Liam snarled, adjusting his shirt.

Caleb reached his hand down to Brady who accepted it, and he stood back up, stepping away from the group.

The group was fracturing, and if we didn’t get a plan in place for survival, none of us would be leaving here. I glanced around the camp, trying to understand where the person could be hiding. I scanned up the trees to the platforms and over to the brush, looking for anything that would give me a clue.

Liam walked over and grabbed Marty’s rifle.

“Liam, can I talk to you in the yurt?” I asked.

He nodded and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. The tears quickly evaporated as anger filled me instead.

“We’ll get this figured out,” Caleb said from behind, as I walked with Liam to the yurt.

I pulled on the door and walked into the yurt, letting out a long breath.

“Whoever this is wants me, but they are obviously going to pick off every single person until they get to me,” I said.

“If they wanted to pick you off first, they would’ve,” Liam agreed. “They want to watch you suffer before...”

I nodded. “I’m sure whoever is doing this expects that we’ll stay together as a group. Normally, I’d say that’s a good idea, but I think we should split up and stay away from the camp. I’d rather take my chances with the bears.”

Liam let out a huge sigh as he sat on the desk, leaning back. He didn't say anything for a while. He just stared at the floor.

"Four were taken out this time. Four. We're going to have no one left. Whoever's doing this is either getting impatient or bold and neither will lead to good things."

Liam bit his lip and began nodding as he slowly connected his gaze with mine. "You're right. It's an unexpected move and possibly our only chance."

"I want to find whoever is doing this before they find me," I said, bending over and picking up the ravens. "I think we need to split into three groups. You and me in one group to take care of what needs to be taken care of, and Dave and Caleb in two others. We only have five campers left."

"I think you're right. I think it's the only way," he agreed.

"I want to find Steph. I want to find the others," my voice broke off.

"So do I," Liam said sliding off the table. "Let's go tell everyone our plans. Have you shot a rifle before?"

"I even have my hunter's safety badge from when I was twelve," I said, laughing.

"You just keep getting more perfect," he whispered, smiling.

"If you think this is perfection, you're as equally messed up as me," I said.

"Probably am," he said as we walked out of the yurt, Steph's raven in hand.

We explained the plan to the others and since nothing else was working, they agreed we should give it a try. All we could focus on from here on out was survival, surviving until a plane decided to come for us.

Everyone began quickly gathering the supplies needed for the short term. We could always come back to the base camp to grab something, but

for now the most important things were food, shelter, and a way to stay warm. I was in the yurt with Liam rolling up our sleeping bags tightly as he packed up the daypacks that we'd be hauling with us. I rounded up all the ravens and stuffed them in the bag.

“We need to get the phone back,” Liam said. “I bet once we find the place the person's staying, we'll get the phone.”

“And hopefully Steph,” I whispered, grabbing the pack that Liam gave me.

“You're gonna take Marty's rifle with you,” he said, helping me to secure everything around me.

“All right.”

“Let's get going,” he replied, giving me one last check before we left the yurt.

I closed the door and took a deep breath in, hoping we'd made the right decision.

Chapter Sixteen

“Here it is,” Liam whispered.

I’d been following Liam for several hours and even though we’d taken breaks every so often, I was exhausted. Our first goal was to check out the place where he’d found Tom and here we were, only I didn’t see anything.

“Where should I be looking?” I asked quietly, scanning in front of me and next to me.

“It’s through the trees over there to the right,” he said in a hushed tone. “But it doesn’t look like anyone’s been back since we came and grabbed Tom.”

My heart fell a little. The entire hike up here, I’d been hoping we’d find Steph. I knew it was doubtful, but it was what helped me walk through the burn and fatigue of my muscles.

“I’m still hopeful,” I whispered and Liam nodded.

He grabbed my hand and helped me through the dense vegetation. I finally made it to the shack he was talking about. The place looked in worse shape than the smokehouse that Liam had shown me only a few days earlier.

“He was staying in here?” I asked bewildered. “It doesn’t even look like it would be safe to open the door.”

We walked to the shack and Liam pushed the door in, exposing a cot and a rolled up sleeping bag. I bet if Liam laid down here, his head would touch one wall, and his feet the other. It was that tiny.

“This is really creepy,” I said, peeking my head in.

“We never should have stayed once we found Tom,” Liam said, shaking his head.

“We can’t start second guessing everything,” I said to him, thinking about the decisions I’d made. “Imagine the downward spiral I could do with that one.”

“True,” he said, exhaling loudly. “I guess we can safely say Steph’s not here.”

His voice cracked slightly, and I reached over and grabbed his arm, squeezing it gently.

“Something tells me she’s still alive and in all honesty, she’s the only one I’ve thought that about,” I told him, catching the heaviness in his eyes.

“I only hope it’s not just wishful thinking,” he said softly.

Against my better judgment, I stepped inside the tiny box of a shelter and looked around. My stomach growled, and I shoved my fist into my belly to quiet it down when it occurred to me.

“Did you see any food or cooking items when you found him?” I questioned, kicking the cot to look under it.

He shook his head. “No, actually.”

“I bet the reason for that is that he was close enough to the other people.”

“That makes sense,” Liam said, examining the area I had kicked around.

“I think we’re closer than we realize. It’s only a matter of time.” I said, nodding my head as I looked around one last time before I left the shack.

“My guess is that they used the other place to store all of the food and stuff. It’s gotta be around here,” I persisted.

I followed Liam back to the trail, watching his deliberate movements as he we searched for any sign of where to look next.

A sudden movement in the bushes made me freeze.

“Liam to my left,” I hissed.

Liam whirled around quickly and spotted exactly what I was talking about.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “It’s a female black-tailed deer. She’s watching you. Can you see her?”

I shook my head, extending my neck to try to get a glimpse of something nice for a change.

“Move forward a tad,” Liam whispered.

I took a slow step, which allowed me to see the doe’s beautiful eyes. I hadn’t ever been this close to a deer before. She was magnificent, and it gave me the extra reminder I needed about life’s goodness. There were wonderful things out there waiting for us. We just needed to get off this island. The deer blinked at me and bounced off in the other direction, leaving shimmering leaves in her absence.

“That was incredible,” I whispered.

“I had hoped to show you things like that around the island,” he said, pressing his lips into a thin line.

I stepped over to him and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Well, just seeing her for a few moments did wonders for my spirit. Onward I guess.”

We continued up the tiny trail when Liam spotted another structure. He stopped and gestured for me to come check it out. It was only about a hundred feet away and my stomach began tightening into knots. This had to be it.

Similar to the other shack, the side of the building was pieced together with all kinds of wood. But on this one there were some green, painted pieces mixed in with the dark brown I was used to seeing. Liam half-turned, looking at me anxiously.

The wind began to pick up around us and I felt a sudden charge. I wanted to find her. I felt she was alive and inside the very building we were staring at.

“Let’s make this happen,” I whispered.

Liam began hauling through the trees, and I did everything I could to keep up. Neither of us worried about the noise we were making. We just wanted to get to Steph.

He reached the shack first, but I was close behind, panting and attempting to catch my breath. I was most definitely notifying whoever was inside of our presence. The slats between the pieces of wood and siding were easily to see through, but my eyes hadn’t caught anyone or anything inside the building as we walked up to the door.

There was a defined path leading up to the front door and my pulse zipped through me at the thought of what we’d find on the other side of the door.

Liam’s fingers’ wrapped around the knob, yanking open the door, which created a high-pitched squeak as the old metal rubbed against itself. The empty room, cobwebs and dust that greeted us told me everything I needed to know.

The tears cascaded down my face as I stepped into the empty shack. Steph had never been inside. No one had been here for a long time. The room began spinning and the feeling of absolute desperation scared me beyond anything I'd ever felt before. The unyielding amount of doom that continued to crash into my soul was unstoppable. I had reached my end. This was it.

Liam rushed to my side, holding my head to his chest.

"It's gonna be okay," he whispered.

"What if it's not?" I asked. "What if—"

"I know there's nothing I can say to calm you. But we will get off this island alive," he interrupted. "But you've been holding it together quite well this entire time."

His hands let go of my head, and I stepped back. Looking into his brown eyes that were rimmed with wetness, I knew then I had to be strong for him just as he'd been strong for me.

"Let's find a place to crash and get setup so we can rest before we start all over again in the early morning," he said, leading me out of the shack.

We hiked for about twenty minutes and found a place that had a decent amount of shelter to set up camp. Not that there was much of a camp to set up. Liam had grabbed a single tent and popped it up for both of us to squeeze into. Neither of us could sleep so we talked for hours, but every conversation led right back to Steph, and my heart ached even more by the time the stars appeared.

"I don't think I can take much more of this," I murmured, looking into the beautiful night sky.

"I know, babe," Liam said, hugging me. "But we've gotta fight until the end."

“That’s what my dad always told me,” I whispered, feeling the tears surface once more.

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Chapter Seventeen

I woke up to Liam squeezing me tightly, his body pressed against me as one of his long legs was shoved in between mine. It felt so amazing to be in his arms, to be held by him all night. I was actually glad we were forced to fit into this tiny tent. I loved feeling the warmth of his breath as it scattered along my hair. I only wished the circumstances were different.

We had zipped our sleeping bags together to make one again, and it helped against the cold temperatures, but I still didn't want to get up or out of the tent because it would only signal that we had to start everything over again.

"How are you doing?" he murmured, sliding his legs out from mine.

"I hope someday we get the chance to do this for other reasons." I sighed.

"Me too."

He slowly began unzipping the sleeping bags, and I felt the chill as it worked its way down. I rolled my hair tie off my wrist and wrapped my hair into a ponytail, securing it firmly before I stood up.

"We'll head east today and canvas that area," Liam said, digging a sweatshirt out of a backpack.

"Sounds good," I replied.

I started to roll up the sleeping bags again. I had gotten pretty good at making them compact for carrying and wanted to help in any way I could. The more time I had to allow the latest note to sink in, the worse I felt about everything. After tying the bags up, I went over to my backpack and grabbed a water canteen and sat down on a rock

Liam had dumped several packets of trail mix onto a large leaf and brought it over to share.

“Happy almost birthday,” he said.

I looked up at him and smiled. I couldn’t believe my birthday was coming up. I always imagined a lot of different ways to bring it in and being stuck in the middle of an island in Alaska certainly wasn’t one of them.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“It’s the least I could do.” He winked at me, and I could tell we were both at the point of exhaustion no matter how hard we tried to hide it.

“This certainly seems like it will be an eighteenth to remember. Here’s hopin’, I live to see it,” I said, clanking my water bottle with his, trying to make a joke.

“Here’s hopin’,” he repeated.

He sat down next to me and slipped his arm around my waist. I leaned my head against his arm and took a deep breath in.

“I think we’re close to her and everyone,” I said. “I think we’ll find them.”

He nodded. “I do too.”

I slowly chewed on some of the almost-birthday granola, knowing I should eat more, but I wasn’t even remotely hungry.

“Make sure you eat all of that. I’m worried with as much as we’ve been on the move that your body is getting too fatigued,” he said softly.

“We both need our strength.”

“I wish you were telling me that for a different reason,” I grumbled.

He laughed, picking a dried cranberry out of the trail mix and popping it in his mouth, right when we heard a gunshot, followed by another one and another one.

My heart skipped a beat.

That was our signal if something went wrong between our two groups.

“It didn’t sound that far away,” he whispered, grabbing his rifle.

“I wonder what happened,” I said, feeling the dryness creep into my mouth again. “Why would they be so close?”

“Let’s go,” he whispered.

I grabbed my rifle and looked back at our makeshift camp.

“We’ll come back for everything after we find out what went wrong,” he said, and we took off toward the booms.

I ran side by side with Liam, dodging the branches and mounds that continually surfaced. The brisk wind chapped my cheeks until Liam finally started to slow down.

“He’s supposed to shoot another one off,” Liam said. “If he doesn’t then we’re not going any farther.”

I shook my head, waiting alongside with Liam. His breathing shifted anxiously, as silence filled the air versus another boom. He started shaking his head.

“We need to get out of here. Something’s not right. They should’ve fired another shot.”

My heart started pounding with the thought that we were on the run again, falling into another trap. Liam’s eyes scanned mine for a response, and I blinked back the tears.

“Let’s take off then,” I said quietly.

He nodded and just as he turned around another shot was fired.

“Thank god,” I murmured, taking off after him.

“They’re only a couple minutes away,” he yelled as we continued on.

We were right next to a rocky cliff when we saw the group. I scanned everyone quickly, searching for anyone who might be missing.

“What happened?” Liam asked.

“We had an accident,” Caleb said, his gaze went over the cliff.

“Oh no,” Liam said, walking closer to the edge.

“Mark went over the cliff. He slipped,” Dave said, shaking his head.

I looked around the few campers who were left, and all of their expressions were grave and defeated. If it wasn’t someone else chasing us down, it was nature playing a cruel joke.

Liam moved along the edge, scanning the area below.

My pulse quickened as I watched the tiny pebbles release over the side from Liam’s boots.

“Stand back,” I told him.

He looked up at me and smiled slightly. “I’ve got this.”

I peered over the edge to see if I could spot anyone.

“He wouldn’t have survived the fall,” Liam said ominously.

“He was trying to avoid that,” Caleb said, pointing at a gnarly looking contraption.

“It’s a snare,” Liam said, running his finger along the wire. “There are probably more scattered in this area.”

I looked at the primitive setup, wondering what would really be caught in it. It didn’t look big enough for bear, although I don’t really know how big it would need to be for one either.

“When is it going to end? Maybe Mark was lucky,” Fulton mumbled.

Unfortunately, I was close to agreeing with Fulton, and that’s not usually how my mind worked.

“Have you found anything?” Liam asked, getting everything under control again.

Caleb shook his head, swinging his rifle over his other shoulder.

“We think the other shack is around where we found Tom. I’m hoping it leads to something soon,” Liam said. “We’ve gotta get back before anyone finds our stuff.”

I tensed as Dave swung a machete around some grass. “Probably a good idea.”

“Stay away from the rocks, maybe move the group back toward the woods,” Liam suggested. “I’m sorry about Mark. I really am.”

Fulton shot me a severe look and frowned as he walked behind me to join the others. I felt the glares of the remaining campers piercing into my back. I was definitely the one everyone was blaming and I understood why.

I didn’t look behind me or say anything to anyone as we left. There was nothing left to say. They were in this situation because of me.

Liam gently grabbed my wrist and pulled me out of their line of sight.

“If they fire any more shots, we’re not coming for them,” Liam murmured. “They’re too unpredictable. I didn’t like how they were looking at you, and I think they’d like to take their frustrations out on someone. And I can guarantee it’s not going to be you.”

“You think it’s that bad?” I asked, already knowing the answer. I had felt it after all.

We were near the area that we had camped the night before when a piercing, shrill scream rang through the air.

“Did you hear that?” Liam asked.

“I did,” I whispered. “She’s got to be near. It was her voice. I know it.”

She let out another eerie cry as loud as the last, and we took off, running quickly through the woods.

This time we were close.

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Chapter Eighteen

The shack was off in the distance, but I could see enough of the trail leading up to it to know that this place was active. Someone was living inside. The building was probably no larger than a small bedroom, but more than adequate for a few people. The dense vegetation made any movement obvious even to the untrained eye.

I looked over at Liam as he scanned the woods surrounding the building. It would be difficult to come up quietly with the amount of trees and vegetation, but I wasn't sure we could wait until we saw the person or persons leave, either. We didn't have the luxury of time, and I think Liam was thinking about that as well.

"Wanna try now or wait?" I whispered, feeling my anxiety grow as I thought about Steph's screams.

He turned to face me and grabbed my hand. "I want to go in there by myself first. I think I can make it pretty quietly up to the shack."

"No. I'm not letting you go there alone. Whatever plan we come up with, needs to include us both," I said quietly, removing my hand from his with a scowl.

Another shrill scream came from the shack sending a wave of nausea through me.

"I think he's going to leave again," I whispered.

Liam nodded. “We can’t assume there’s only one person holding her hostage.”

“No. You’re right,” I said, as the goose bumps speckled my flesh.

“Let’s slowly begin to make our way over there,” he said, pointing to an area of newer growth that was dense enough to hide us, but would allow us to see the door.

“Got it,” I said, knowing once he began clearing the way, my only goal was to keep quiet and as close to his heels as possible.

With every branch that he held up or out for me, I tried to duck without rubbing against it, allowing him to replace it as if we’d never been there. It was a time consuming process, but I think it was that level of caution that had kept us alive so far.

We made it to the vegetative fortress and sat down after Liam figured out where we would be able to see clearly. He grabbed my rifle and slowly placed it down in front of me, careful not to disturb any branches. He sat behind me and placed his rifle next to him, pointing to the left. I felt his warm breath against the back of my neck, but couldn’t hear him at all.

I had just let my eyes dip to a berry that was dangling in front of me when I saw the front door open out of the corner out of my eye. My breathing stopped and so did Liam’s. The person looked to be male, but it was impossible to know for sure because whoever it was wore a black ski mask, a baggy black shirt and jeans.

The person closed the door and stood in front of the shack, looking in both directions and then straight out in front. He bent over toward the ground as if doing some sort of weird stretching like I’d seen in yoga, and then he straightened back up. He didn’t look to be armed, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t a weapon or two strapped somewhere.

He began jogging in place for a few seconds, finally taking off down the trail that led away from the shack, which meant he'd probably jog right by where we were sitting.

He got into a rhythm of the run and I watched, unable to breath, as the jogger ran by us without giving a look in our direction.

Maybe the bears would get him, and make it easy for us.

We gave it about five more minutes and didn't hear the sound of shoes against the ground before we slowly stood up and snuck over to the shack. The building had been recently pieced together, probably from remnants of the other structures that had been sprinkled around the area. The pieces of wood that acted like siding had many gaps in between, and I tilted my head to try to look inside as Liam opened the door.

The shack looked exactly as I had expected it to with bare walls and floors. Steph was tied to a chair, unconscious and slumped over, in the center of the room. Liam ran to her, checking for a pulse and nodded at me. "She's still alive."

I immediately began searching for the satellite phone. It had to be here. There was a makeshift table to my right, littered with papers, maps, and photos. There was a cot to the left and then two large Rubbermaid storage containers where food was probably kept.

I ran to the table first, lifting and shuffling everything around, trying to find the mammoth phone that didn't seem like it would be easily hidden. Coming up empty-handed, I ran to the first container and threw off the lid, finding nothing but packaged food. I dug through it quickly, realizing it wasn't there either.

Liam was cutting off the ropes from Steph's wrists and ankles, and her body fell forward. He quickly grabbed her before she hit the wooden floor and picked her up.

“Put her on the cot,” I said, searching through the next container, finding more food and a few things that made my heart ache. There were shreds of clothing that were braided together. I recognized the fabrics from what the victims had been wearing. Whoever was doing this was really sick.

“No phone in this one, either,” I hissed. “I know it’s here.”

We were so close and yet so much depended on that phone.

I glanced at Steph and then at the cot she was on.

“Lift her up again. I’ll check under the covers and the cot,” I said.

He scooped her body into his arms, and I ran my hands beneath the sheets and blankets, cringing at the thought that my skin was touching anything of this monster’s.

“Nothing on top of the cot,” I whispered, lifting the cot up. “Damn it.”

There was nothing under the cot either. Liam placed Steph back on the cot, and I kept searching every inch of the place when my eyes landed on a plank in the floor that looked disturbed. A flutter of excitement ran through my belly, and I ran toward it. I pried the piece of wood from the floor with my fingers and saw lots of interesting things that didn’t include the phone.

“What do you see?” Liam asked.

“Check it out,” I said, pointing at a box of syringes and a small, plastic box that contained rows of vials.

Oh, my Word!

My fingers ran over the tops of the vials as I realized we were one step closer to finding out how the person had been doing it. I wrapped my fingers around the small box and handed it to Liam, and I grabbed the cardboard box of syringes and quickly placed the plank back where I got it.

“No phone still,” I said, unable to hide my disappointment.

“We’ll find it. Just keep finding the hiding places and we’ll be do fine,” Liam said, patting my shoulder.

“He’s been drugging everyone,” I whispered, shaking my head.

“That’s how he was able to do it so quickly and quietly.”

My pulse began quickening at the thought of one of the syringes being poked into my flesh if he got back before we were gone. Shaking it off, I continued to scan the floor for more loose boards.

“We’ve gotta get out of here, phone or not,” I muttered, resigned to the fact that it might not work out how I’d hoped. “The guy might be back soon.”

“Agreed.”

Liam was studying one of the bottles of liquid.

“Thinking what I’m thinking?” I asked.

He nodded, grabbing a syringe. He stuck the needle’s point into the rubber stopper and slowly pulled on the plunger rod, filling up the syringe with the clear liquid. He repeated the process several more times, and placed the caps on the syringes. I grabbed two and stuck them in the back pocket of my jeans just in case.

He grabbed the remaining glass bottles and smashed them against the floor near the containers and slid them over the shattered glass. He opened the plastic container and tossed the boxes inside, closing it quickly.

“What do you think he did with them after the shot and they woke up?” he asked.

“If they woke up,” I murmured.

“True,” Liam said, examining the vials.

A groggy moan surfaced from the cot, and we ran over to Steph. She curled herself into a fetal position, keeping her eyes closed.

“Steph,” Liam said softly. “I’m here and so is Emma. We came to get you. You’re gonna be okay.”

Her eyes opened slowly, tracking everything around the room but not looking at us.

“He’s coming back,” she whispered, her lips trembling. “He’s coming back. He always does.”

“Have you seen the phone?” Liam asked, shoving his arms under her to scoop her up.

She gave him a blank look and then looked at me. Her eyes widening with terror.

“It’s you he’s coming for,” she whispered. “It’s a trap. Your eighteenth birthday.”

I looked at Liam as he held her close to his chest. What was she talking about?

“We don’t have time to worry about the phone,” I said, running to the door.

“We’ve gotta get out of here now,” Liam muttered.

“An inheritance. He’s coming for us all,” she uttered once more.

I peered through the gaps around the door and didn’t see anyone. I opened the door, craning my neck slowly, not seeing any evidence of the person we’d seen earlier.

“Let’s go,” I whispered.

Steph began quietly sobbing against Liam’s chest as we stepped outside. Her shirt already had strips missing and my heart sunk. What did he do to her? What was he going to do to her?

“Shh,” Liam comforted Steph. “We’re going to be okay.”

We took no more than two steps out of the house when a guy ran directly toward Liam with an exposed syringe. I screamed a warning to

Liam, as I lunged at the guy who I recognized from earlier, dressed in all black.

The anger and adrenaline that pounded through me allowed me to push him against the wall with one quick movement, his head thudding against the siding. He was stunned enough to allow an opening and the one chance I needed. His hand holding the syringe began to wave around frantically as he attempted to lodge the point into me, but I reached around and grabbed one of my own syringes out of my back pocket.

“I’m right behind you,” Liam yelled.

I bit the cap off in one quick gesture and jabbed the point into the exposed portion of the kidnapper’s neck, releasing the poison as I pushed on the plunger. Liam jabbed one of his syringes in the other side of the guy’s neck for extra security and pushed down slowly as the guy’s body began to relax.

My pulse was racing, and I looked behind me at Steph who was sitting on the ground, staring at the tall grass and nothing more. Everything went into slow motion as I removed my fingers from the syringe that was still sticking out of the guy’s neck.

“We’re gonna be okay,” I whispered, watching the syringe the guy tried to stab me with, fall out of his hand. “Right?”

I looked at Liam and back at Steph. “I’m so sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Liam whispered, shaking his head.

“If I’d never come here, none of this would’ve happened,” I whispered, trying to hold back my tears as I saw Steph still staring off in the distance at nothing in particular.

I reached over to the black, knit ski mask and lifted it off his head revealing the identity of the murderer. I already knew who it was, but I

wanted to see him for myself. It was my stepfather.

My body began quivering and Liam grabbed me before I collapsed. As he held me tightly, I looked next to the body of my stepfather and saw a piece of plastic sticking out from underneath him.

“I think I see the phone,” I mumbled, my throat and lips completely dry and impossible to wet.

“What, baby?” he whispered.

“The phone. I think he had it with him or has it, I mean,” I said, gently pushing away from Liam.

I approached Kroy and reached for the shiny, piece of plastic and sure enough, it was the corner of the phone. His body fell on its side as I yanked on the phone getting it to release from his belt.

I held the phone with my hands trembling, unable to even function. I looked at Liam, and his kind brown eyes swept over me as he gently pulled the satellite phone from my hands.

“I’ll make the call,” he said, smiling at me.

I looked at him and nodded. I didn’t think I’d be able to find my voice. I looked behind Liam at Steph who was now looking at us and I ran over to her, kneeling in front of her.

She grabbed my hands and pulled them to her lap as the first of many shared tears began.

I heard Liam talking on the phone, and time seemed to have no value any longer. I had no idea how long he was on the phone, or how long it took us to hike back to the camp, or how long it took for the Coast Guard helicopter to arrive. All that mattered was that it was over and we were alive.

I looked out the helicopter window pressing my forehead against the glass. I looked down at the ReBoot brochure that had started it all, and

Liam gently laced his fingers through mine.

The Coast Guard had been able to verify what little we had managed to tell them over the phone, but it turned out it was my stepfather who was the new owner of the ReBoot camp. Apparently, if I had died before my eighteenth birthday, my inheritance would have gone automatically to Kroy and my mother. He had set this whole thing up. It was hard to believe this type of evilness existed in the world.

I felt the tears surface again and glanced at Liam.

“We’re okay now,” he mouthed to me rather than fight with the noise of the chopper.

“I don’t think I want to do forestry anymore,” I yelled back and a couple of the National Guard guys smiled at me.

Liam squeezed my hand, and I looked at the brochure one more time before tucking it in my bag.

It was over, but now it was up to us to let our lives begin.

Chapter Nineteen

One month later...

My phone buzzed and I looked down. Seeing Liam's name pop up made me the most excited I'd been since the Coast Guard arrived on the island. My stomach fluttered in a million different directions as I looked over at my roommate's empty bed. She had promised me that she wouldn't be back until tomorrow, and I didn't even know what I thought I was going to do with that information, but I was beyond hopeful.

My phone buzzed again. He was only a block away! I ran over to the mirror and gathered my hair into a loose ponytail, dabbed on some mascara and lip gloss and ran down the hall.

I pushed the button for the elevator, and realized it didn't have the same level of urgency that I had and ditched it for the stairwell. I shoved the door open and flew down the three flights of stairs. It felt like every single step I made had a hop attached to it. I had been counting the days until he got here. I'm sure my roommate thought I was crazy, but I didn't care. I may have sounded a little obsessed, but she had no idea what we'd just been through.

I did kind of tell her, but the more I spoke the weirder it sounded. The media had gotten a hold of the story, and the first couple weeks were crazy, so at least she knew I wasn't lying. But it was an odd first introduction.

My stomach went from flutters of excitement to anxiety by the time I ran through the lobby and busted through the doors. What if it was too hard for him to separate everything from me? I'd understand. After all, none of this would have happened if it hadn't been for me showing up at the wonderful camp. And to think, I thought the other campers' were going to be the problem.

A rush of shivers ran down my spine as my mind flashed back to Steph in the makeshift cabin, tied up. If I couldn't shake the images, how would Liam be able to? I hoped our relationship wasn't only meant to last on the island, but I had thought a lot about that possibility over the last couple weeks.

Spotting a truck make its way through a four way stop, I almost jumped out of my skin as I saw him stick his hand out the open window on the passenger's side and wave. I started hopping up and down, not caring how ridiculous I looked to the other students who were wandering around campus.

His friend pulled the truck over to the curb, and Liam threw the door open and jumped out before the truck had even stopped. I ran as fast as I could as he opened his arms wide for me, and I dove into them with such a force that I almost made us both land on the ground.

Liam started laughing and spinning me around as I held on tight, feeling his grip tightening around me with every spin. I couldn't stop kissing every square inch of him that I could reach while I held on tightly. I

wanted to speak, but was afraid tears would take over, and for once I wanted him to see me not looking like a wreck.

“Baby, it feels so good to have you in my arms again,” he whispered. I heard the truck door close and looked over Liam’s shoulder as his friend made his way over to us.

My legs were completely wrapped around Liam’s waist, and I had no plans to remove them or jump out of his arms regardless of who I was supposed to meet.

“I’m Nick.”

“Nice to meet you, Nick. I’m Emma,” I said, sticking up my hand over Liam’s shoulder to wave. He seemed nice enough, but I just wanted Liam to myself. It had been four very long weeks, with only text, email, and phone to get me through.

“I just had to meet the chick that Liam wouldn’t shut up about for the last several weeks,” Nick said, winking at me. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him remember someone’s name for more than a day, let alone for this long.”

I liked Nick more than I knew!

“Enough, Nick,” Liam warned.

Nick stood crossing his arms in front of him. He wore dark shorts that were baggy and low, with a gray thermal underneath his t-shirt. But his blue eyes caught my attention. They were very warm and completely full of mischief. He began walking so that he would be in Liam’s line of sight, but then I couldn’t see him anymore.

I took a deep breath in, smelling the same goodness I remembered in Alaska.

“Do you have any friends?” Nick asked me, laughing.

I felt Liam's arms tighten around me and knew he was flashing a look at Nick that only made him laugh harder.

"I'm gonna take off. I just had to say hi," Nick said, walking back around Liam toward the truck.

"It was nice to meet you and even nicer to hear that Liam could remember my name," I said, laughing as I slowly released my legs from Liam's waist and slid down to earth.

"Your name's the only one worth remembering," Liam whispered, as we watched Nick climb in his truck and drive off.

"That was smooth, babe," I giggled, looking into the caramel eyes that made me feel safer with him than with anyone else in the world.

"Wanna come check out my spectacular dorm room?" I asked, almost unable to stop staring at his lips as he began to answer. God I'd missed those!

"Whatever you want to show me, babe," he replied, letting go of me slightly, placing a quick kiss on my forehead.

Not really wanting to leave Liam's embrace I begrudgingly turned around and faced the old, brick building that I'd be calling home for the year. There were a few girls huddled on the grass, gossiping and laughing, enjoying the wonderful fall weather, and I knew how lucky I was to be here with Liam.

"How's Steph doing?" I asked. We had traded lots of texts back and forth, but I knew I'd get a straighter story from Liam.

"She's doing better than I probably would have," he replied. "I'm amazed at that girl's strength. I always knew my cousin was strong but I certainly didn't know she was like that."

His eyes glistened and he dropped his gaze down to me. "Just like you. I knew there was something special about you, but I never imagined

you were such a badass,” he murmured. “My mom always told me to look for a strong woman to marry someday and I think I found her.”

“I don’t know if you’re trying to sweep me off my feet or something, but I already arranged for my roommate to be gone for the night,” I said, breaking away.

“Did you now?” his voice low, as he pulled me back into his arms, gently nuzzling my cheek. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since the day I met you.”

His combination of strength and softness was devastatingly addictive.

“Me neither,” I gasped breathlessly as he slid his lips up my neck.

Clapping and cheering erupted from the group of girls who were sitting on the lawn.

“That’s what I’m looking for right there! That look in a man’s eyes,” she yelled and all of her friends started laughing. “Don’t let him go.”

“I never would,” I hollered back, unable to hide my grin.

His eyes held a brightness that I had never seen before, and it created a desire between us that I couldn’t wait to explore.

“I better take you inside before anyone else tries to claim you,” I teased.

“I’m already taken,” he whispered, sliding his arm around my shoulder as we walked up the steps to the dorm. I glanced over at the group of girls and the one who spoke gave me a wink and my smile only grew.

He let go of me and opened the door to the lobby.

“I have an entire punch card of meals to use up before fall quarter starts. Are you hungry?” I joked.

“Only for you,” he growled.

“I had no idea you were this smooth back in Alaska,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him. “If I didn’t know better I’d say you’re a player.”

“You just bring it out of me,” he said, throwing his hands in the air innocently. “It probably only works on you.”

“Who said it’s working?” I grinned, pressing the elevator button.

“Just a hunch,” he said, sliding his arms around my waist, nestling his chin into the crook of my neck.

The elevator opened up, and we both stepped in and as I pressed floor three a guy stepped in the elevator. Darn! I liked where this elevator ride had been going.

“Liam,” the guy said. “Good to see ya, man.”

My eyes darted to Liam who looked severely uncomfortable as he glanced at the hitchhiker and then over at me.

“Don’t act like you don’t remember me,” he joked, smiling.

“Nah, Nathan. I remember you,” Liam said, his expression completely void of anything we had been experiencing only minutes earlier. “How’ve you been?”

“Better than you it sounds like,” Nathan replied, glancing over at me.

“This is my girlfriend,” Liam said, and the introduction suddenly nullified everything else that was going on in the elevator between these two. Liam called me his girlfriend. Attempting to play it a little cool, I just nodded at Nathan and wrapped my arm around Liam’s again and waited for the elevator to let us out on our floor, which it did within seconds.

“Nice to see ya, man,” Nathan said. “Hope to see ya around.”

“Yeah See ya,” Liam said, almost pulling me off the elevator.

“Girlfriend, huh?” I asked, as we walked to my room.

“I kind of assumed,” he said, suddenly sheepish.

“I love it,” I said, unlocking the door to my room. “Who was that guy? There seemed to be a creepy vibe?”

“Just a dude who was down the hall at the dorm from last year,” he said, dismissing the weirdness, but I knew there was more.

I pushed the door open to reveal our tiny dorm room. My bed was directly in front of us, with a small chest of drawers and shelves that I had hung with double-sided tape that I secretly hoped wouldn't come tumbling down on me in the middle of the night. The label promised it wouldn't, but it just didn't compute.

“This is exactly how I imagined you,” Liam said, smiling as he closed the door behind us. “It's perfectly fitting.”

“What does that mean?” I said, folding my arms suddenly taking stock in everything I had placed around the tiny space. It looked pretty nondescript to me.

“Your desk is completely organized and rather than makeup in every spare corner, you have books. Your bedspread is completely bright and cheery, and you've got a teddy bear sticking out of a backpack that I think you probably tried to hide,” he said, grinning widely.

“Whatever. I'm proud of Henry,” I said, snatching him out of the bag I tried to hide him in and tossed him on the bed.

As I turned from my expert bear toss, Liam cupped my chin gently and brought his mouth over to mine. Our open mouths became one as he slid his lips across mine. My desire for him grew more and more frantic with every deepened kiss as the gentle rhythm of his mouth pressing on mine took me to another world.

“You're so beautiful,” he murmured, as his lips traveled along my jaw toward my neck.

I bent my head back, directing his lips down my throat as I felt the lushness of his lips against my skin. My breathing became more ragged as he continued placing kisses along my collarbone, before scooping me in his arms.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“For what?” he asked hoarsely.

“Still wanting to see me,” I replied.

His hands dropped to his side, and he took a step back from me.

“Why wouldn’t I?” he asked, bewildered.

“Because of everything back—”

“Don’t ever say that. I love you, Emma. I have since the island.”

My world began spinning and my knees began to weaken before Liam swept me to the bed with him, hugging me tightly.

“I love you too,” I whispered.

He continued to hold me, and I could feel his heartbeat racing with the same desire I was experiencing.

“I feel closer to you than I have to anyone, but I feel like there’s still so much I need to know about you,” I said quietly, turning to face him as I propped my head on my elbow. “You mentioned you may never go back to where you grew up when we were back on the island and you never said anymore.”

He was quiet and looked away.

“I don’t want anything to ruin what we might have,” he said quietly.

“Babe, with everything we’ve already been through, I don’t think a little past baggage will be what messes with us,” I offered. “You know more about me than anyone and I’d like to be able to say the same. Steph mentioned that you didn’t always have it easy, but she wouldn’t elaborate.”

She told me it was something you needed to tell me, not her. So I've waited and still don't know anything."

"I'll tell you everything. I promise," he murmured, his lips grazing my ear. "Just not now."

He slowly turned me on my back, leaning over me. "But I promise, I'll tell you about my family and everything else..." his voice broke off as he pressed his forehead against mine. "It's just not every day that you can beg a roommate to disappear," he teased.

My lips began quivering with desire as he hovered his mouth over mine and everything was quickly forgotten as his lips found mine, introducing me to a world that I'd never experienced before and never wanted to end.

E pilogue

Caleb, Dave, Brady, Paul, Vince and Fulton were all found alive. The Coast Guard located them within twenty-four hours of picking us up. During the police investigation, we learned that some of the bodies had been recovered and some were still missing. Mark was the last fatality on the island and the only one that was an accident. Chelsea was still heavily sedated and couldn't remember what exactly had happened, but Kroy being overly pompous, left a journal where he detailed every action. Tom, the guy who attacked Chelsea, was an old college friend of Kroy's and was paid a hefty sum to participate. And Kroy, well they found parts of him right where we told the Coast Guard we'd left him, but the bears got to him first.

The best news was that my mother accidentally confessed and was charged as an accomplice for the murder of eight people. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't happy about it. People tend to think they're far more clever

when they're drunk and being that was her favorite state, she sealed her fate.

T H E E N D

Excerpt from
Lonely Souls (Witch Avenue Series #1)

Chapter 1

“Mom!” I hollered more for my benefit than hers.

I wasn't in earshot yet, but I loved the way my voice carried into the wind off the sea. The constant sloshing of the waves guided me to the rocky beach where my mom was collecting her thoughts and anything else that might catch her fancy. It was a pleasant night with only the moon's warm glow lighting my way on the very uneven path that weaved through the overgrown blackberries and tall beach grass. Doing my best to dodge the prick of the thorns, I carefully managed to stay on the trail. I didn't need to be all scarred up for my upcoming celebrations.

This little stretch of beach was hard to get to and rarely frequented by anyone, which was why we loved it. The beach wasn't what most people pictured when they thought of a beach. The beaches along Washington's coast, more often than not, had tiny rocks and pebbles in place of sand and many boulders and downed logs that made for awfully fine seating, not places to spread out on a beach towel and soak up the rays.

The makeshift trail finally ended, allowing me to spot my mom's pile of things. I hoped she was ready to leave. It was getting a little chilly, and I hadn't prepared to be here long. We had a crockpot full of chili waiting for us both, but she wanted me to meet her here at our special spot, so she could tell me something. I had no idea what it was that she wanted to tell me, but since so much was going on in my life right now it could be about anything. I just graduated from high school. My eighteenth birthday was almost here. Our huge summer solstice celebration, Litha was fast approaching, along with the big event, my acceptance into the Witch Avenue Coven on the same day.

"Mom?" I yelled, as I trudged my way over to her bag, looking around the empty beach.

Only the crashing of waves answered.

I didn't see her anywhere.

"Mom?" I tried again, battling down the worry that wanted to make its way into my consciousness.

Realizing my voice was no match for the roar of the waves, I started walking toward one of the larger boulders, in case she was sitting where I just couldn't see her. The pebbles were loose, creating an extra treacherous journey since I was only in flip-flops. Poor planning on my part, but I didn't think that I'd have to hunt her down. She could be sidetracked so easily.

Finally making it to the mammoth piece of black rock, I became annoyed when I saw she wasn't there. I wasn't in any way prepared to be marching up and down the beach looking for her. I grabbed my cellphone out of my pocket and dialed her number as I went back toward her pile of things to sit. Maybe I should stay put, and she'd return soon enough. As the phone rang on my end, I got closer to my mom's pile and heard her bag ringing. Darn! She didn't take it with her—odd. That was always a rule of

hers when hiking or at the beach. We carried our phones with us at all times.

I squatted down to see what she brought with her, hoping an item might lead me in the right direction to find her. If she were gathering plants, then I'd know better where to go. I opened up her bag and panic set in immediately. The shirt she was wearing when she left our house was stuffed in her bag, wrapped around the shoes she was wearing. This made no sense. Her wallet and jewelry were in this bag. She wouldn't just leave all this stuff for a stranger to steal. Something was wrong. Jumping up, the insides of the bag dispersed onto the beach, but I didn't care.

"Mom!" I screamed, kicking off my flip-flops so that I could run up the hill closest to me.

Reaching the top of the hill, I scanned the grassy area quickly seeing nothing. Spinning around, I looked back toward the rocky beach. From this vantage point, I was able to see everything and nothing. My heart started pounding as I began dialing 9-1-1.

"911, what is your emergency?" The operator answered.

"My mom. She's missing," I cried into the phone, dread spreading everywhere.

"Calm down, ma'am. Where are you located?"

Calm down? I'm not hyper, just scared!

"I'm at the beach just off of Snoqualmie Avenue, down the trail," I replied

"Is your mother in the water? How long has she been missing?"

"I don't know!" I screamed into the phone. "Please just send help."

Okay, now I'm panicking! I can't calm down. My mom isn't where she's supposed to be.

"Ma'am, help is on the way. What is your name?"

“Triss,” I replied, as I ran back down the hill to search the beach or the water, or anywhere but where I was.

Could my mom be in the water? I didn’t even think of that. She wouldn’t be in the water, would she?

“And what is your mother’s name?” the operator asked blandly.

“Veronica Spires,” my voice panted with the exertion.

“Where are they? When will they get here? She needs help!”

I reached the edge of the water. The waves were lapping against my bare feet. Looking out toward the sea, I saw nothing but water and rocks illuminated by the moon’s light. There was no way she would be out there. She never went into the water without someone with her. Oh, my God, where could she be?

The police sirens, off in the distance, were becoming louder by the second. Help was on the way but not nearly soon enough.

“Veronica! Mom! Veronica!” I kept hollering. “Where are you?”

“Ma’am, help has arrived. They’re making their way down the trail. I’m going to stay on the phone until they reach you.”

My body crumpled. Falling on my knees, the tears began pouring down my face. This couldn’t be happening. I turned off my phone. The police were almost to the beach, and I didn’t need the operator to hear my cries. The police chatter of CB radios began rolling through the air mixed with the barks of the K-9 units.

This was a nightmare. There was no way this could be happening. My eyes darted back to the hilltop that I had just left. A man was standing on the hill, watching me, with the darkness working in his favor.

“Hey,” I yelled, looking at him, trying to see any sort of distinguishing features. He froze in place.

I jumped back to my feet, with my jeans soaked from where I had been sitting. I started running up to the hill, and the stranger took off.

“Miss!” a policeman yelled.

“Someone was watching me!” I cried, not stopping my run. “They might have my mom!”

I reached the top of the hill in a flash, and there was no one to be seen.

A policeman came up right behind me.

“Are you, Triss?” His voice was gentle, probably used to dealing with lunatics, not sure which way they were headed in any given situation. “I’m Officer White.”

“Yes, my mom. She’s not here.” The tears started again. “I was supposed to meet her and all that’s here are her things. I can’t find her. Clothes, wallet, jewelry are all that’s here.” I took a deep breath. “Then there was a guy, I think staring at me.”

“Where at?” he asked immediately.

“Right here,” I replied. “He was standing right here. I think it was a guy. That’s why I came this way. It’s so dark it’s hard to tell. I was sitting on the beach right before you got here and noticed the person.”

“Where are your mother’s things, Triss?” he asked, scanning the area and coming up with the same thing as me, nothing. There was no one here.

I pointed over to the beach, completely defeated.

He nodded and looked briefly at the ground for any sign of tracks besides mine; he then turned to the officers at the base of the hill and signaled for them to wait.

We walked back down the hill, and Officer White explained to the others the situation. I had no idea how he got so much from my few

sentences. He pointed at the two officers who were in control of the German shepherds, and he motioned for me to come with them to where my mom's belongings had been dumped by my carelessness.

"Triss, we are going to allow our K-9 members, Sunny and Brandy, to smell some of your mother's items, okay?" Officer White asked, looking intensely into my eyes. He had to be well over six feet tall and commanded the attention of anyone who looked in his direction.

All I could do was nod. It felt like if I even opened my mouth to breathe, I would break down again.

One of the female officers, who had her hair pulled back in a severe ponytail, came over to me and touched my shoulder softly. She quieted her chattering CB on her belt.

"Is there someone we can call for you?" she asked.

"My aunt," I muttered, staring off over the darkened sound again, my eyes filling with tears.

One of the other female officers gave commands to Sunny and Brandy and off they went in the direction of the hill. The very same hill I had just come from with Officer White. They were racing off into the distance with the humans following right behind. My mom had been in that area. The dogs caught her scent.

It seemed like hours, but Aunt Vieta finally arrived. Her eyes wide with horror from the scene she witnessed in the parking lot. I couldn't even begin to count how many police and search and rescue arrived. There were divers already out in the ocean, and everywhere I turned, there was activity.

I had shutdown. I was merely operating on autopilot. Aunt Vieta started running toward me and scooped me into her arms.

"We'll find her, Triss. We'll find her," she kept mumbling into my ear, but it did little to comfort me.

“I know we will,” I nodded in agreement.

She released me and stood back looking at me.

“Here, I thought you might be freezing.” She shoved a coat into my arms that she had tied around her waist.

“Officer White’s over there,” I said, pointing toward his direction. He was busy getting updates from the teams that had spread in various directions. “He’d be the best person to fill you in. I don’t think I could.”

I appreciated my aunt’s presence, but I would rather just sit on the beach listening to everyone’s updates, hoping I would find something out that would bring my mom back immediately. Instead, I was bombarded with statistics about the longer the victim was missing how exponentially the odds of finding them decreased. I doubt that was for me to hear, but I did. And those words would forever haunt me.

“The waters are getting a little rough. We’ll start again in the morning,” were the first of many sentences that etched a place in my mind, creating a level of despair I didn’t think possible.

Excerpt from
Awakening (The Watchers Trilogy #1)

CHAPTER 1

The screams shattered my sleep. My heart was pounding seventy miles an hour. I felt for my fleece blanket to throw off, since I seemed to be stuck to my sheets with gallons of sweat. I looked around my blackened room, with only the red glow of the alarm clock displaying 2:00 am to comfort me. My heart sank as I lost the battle for another night's sleep. I heard the gentle snore of my bulldog, Matilda, rattling through the air. She was used to my screams by now. I promised myself with a little whisper that I was safe. It was only a nightmare — another nightmare. That was all it was. It couldn't possibly be real, that kind of terror. The dreams were coming closer together now, and worse yet they seemed to lead to nowhere but sleep deprivation.

I commanded myself to take deep, steady breaths to stay calm. Still shaky from the last images that had blasted into my brain, I tried to rid myself of the awful scene replaying over and over in my mind — my death. The mere thought of the attacks made me want to hide from the world in my closet. The black, swirling creatures were coming at me and through me from every direction. Their mouths open, displaying several sets of teeth with blood dripping from their lips, waiting for me to make a mistake. This

was not a world I recognized. How could my mind even create such deadly monsters? The elements of realism spooked me beyond belief. I grabbed a tissue from my nightstand and wiped the dampness from my forehead, unsure of how much longer I could keep this up. Every night and every dream seemed different. They all had similar storylines, to a degree. Sometimes the unfamiliar characters reappeared to haunt me over and over again. It just depended on the night. Part of me felt as if I should know these people or at least the events that kept taking place. Why else would they keep reappearing? However, the events were so fantastical, the thought that I should recognize them made me feel even crazier for thinking it.

Fully awake now and completely disappointed in the prospect of another long and drawn out day without sleep, I trudged to the window and opened my heavy, red velvet curtains to expose the serenity of a dark outside world. The snow was slowly floating down leaving a beautiful pattern on the sidewalk, illuminated only by the streetlight. The sight brought a shiver to my bones. Even though a minute ago I'd had to wipe the wet heat of fear from my body. I couldn't keep chasing and being chased like this. I couldn't go on thinking my life was in danger every time I closed my eyes. I needed rest. I needed sleep. Lack of sleep was making things worse. I was sure of it.

“What is all of this telling me? I don't even know the people in my dreams!” I whined to Matilda.

She responded with her usual snorts and snores, sprawling out even more on my mattress now that I had left a larger area for her enjoyment. I flipped on my nightstand light, which cast its familiar glow, as I attempted to move back into bed without displacing Matilda. A sigh escaped as I grabbed my latest book, which was ready and waiting for another night like all the others.

I opened the book to the third chapter as my mind attempted to identify the people in my dream. Seeing crumpled remnants of humans discarded all over was never something that I could get used to regardless of whether it was a nightmare or not. I was getting used to seeing the swirls appear to attack me, but I was also intrigued by the thought of trying to figure out the identity of the random strangers who appeared time and time again. Sometimes they were the same people. Other times, a completely new set would make an entrance. I always avoided looking into their eyes because, during one of my very first nightmares, all I saw was the dull glow of death staring right back at me. I couldn't stomach it twice, and somehow my subconscious self knew to never look them in the eyes, whoever they were.

Thankfully, the latest batch of characters had seemed kind — as if I knew them from somewhere although that wasn't possible. I'm sure they must have made an appearance in other dreams. I just don't remember them. One stood out in particular. He was trying to save me, but it was too late. The black, soulless swirls got me. My nightmares had never gotten to that point before. Never did I know the conclusion to these nightmarish adventures before tonight.

This time, I saw how it ended. I didn't make it. It wasn't a painful process. I didn't feel tortured. It seemed like I should have felt the attack. I didn't. What I was left with were horrible feelings of despair and loneliness wrapping their way through every aspect of my life. My soul felt like an empty cavern as I saw myself being blown away into the wind. I remembered looking back at the strangers on the ground. They were looking up towards the sky at me as I left to wherever bodiless souls go. The one guy who was so memorable was staring back at me, tears streaming down his face. He was the one who tried to save me. He'd risked

his own life against the monsters for me. He was only a minute too late. My heart now longed for him, this figment of my imagination. I didn't know why.

I couldn't shake the images this time. They were too haunting, too real. And now I was going crazy believing that these things had some sort of significance. Lack of sleep was finally catching up with my fragile state of mind.

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CHAPTER 2

The Grizzly Bear Lodge was packed as usual for this time of night. The lifts had just shut down at 3 pm. I glanced around the restaurant as everyone trickled in, partially undressing from their long day of romancing the powder. The pub was ideally situated at the base of Whistler Mountain, capitalizing on location rather than menu selection, but I enjoyed working here. It felt like home or as close to that as I could feel. I tried to shake off my long disastrous night of sleep while preparing for my shift. The images of my demise kept creeping into my thoughts. What was worse was that those images were virtually impossible. Yet, they plagued me, creating a pit in my stomach. I tried shaking the feelings of despair that kept trying to interfere with my ability to get back to my routine.

Outside the snow was falling and the night barely beginning. It was early in the season, only the upper half of the mountain was open, but it was enough to kick off the ski season in Whistler. There were the usual suspects scattered around the pub; the guys in their twenties, who had been taking nips from their flasks all day on the mountain in between runs, attempting to quickly get their server's attention for more beer. Then there were the tables with the wives and girlfriends done up all cute, eagerly awaiting their other halves. Their actions only highlighted the fact that they had spent the day at the spa not the slopes. And, of course, there were the locals chatting up the bartender and grabbing the latest news on the hockey game.

This was the best part of my job — the people watching. Unfortunately, at times, it could also be the worst part of my job. There were days when it emphasized how alone I really was. As I puzzled over this fact, I quickly grabbed the next round of drinks from the bar and went to the corner table to deliver their long awaited goods. I had taken over the table from Karen who had to leave the pub rather quickly. It was unusual for her, and I hoped everything was okay. I made a mental note to give her a call when I got home.

I scooted between the wooden chairs that were being shuffled around as the restaurant filled up with people. The sound they made on the well-worn wood floors gave me warning that tonight was going to be busy. Exactly what I needed to keep my mind occupied.

The antique snowshoes that were balancing so delicately on the wall snagged my ponytail as I tried to make my way through the tables, and thankfully, no one saw as I fought with the decorations. Once I became unsnarled from the décor, I made my way to the table waiting for their drinks.

I saw a man with dark golden hair gently nuzzling a woman's neck with his nose. She was thoroughly enjoying his affection. It was as if they were literally one unit. It made me chuckle. I'm not sure exactly why — maybe it was because it was a bit like my bulldog's reaction to me when I got home from work. Or maybe it was my standard reaction when I longed for something I couldn't have, or more appropriately, that I'd never had — except in my dreams.

Regardless, when I appeared with the drinks, they both looked up at me and I was immediately jolted out of my doldrums. Their eyes were the most brilliant green that I'd ever seen, like emeralds filled with dark black centers, outlined with striking jets of yellow. It made my blood freeze. They

felt so familiar I almost gasped aloud but caught myself. My arms became weak, but I somehow managed to keep the tray steady. I stared in silence not sure what had come over me as I tried to regain my composure.

I gazed at both of them again and realized they had the same look in their nearly identical eyes. The shapes were different, hers more almond-like, his deeper set, but nonetheless the expression and color were the same. My heart started beating too fast for its own good, and suddenly I was alive, a feeling I hadn't felt for a long time, if ever. I placed my hand over the rat's nest in my hair thanks to the snowshoe fiasco, trying to smooth it down, attempting anything to try to look somewhat presentable around these unusually perfect creatures.

My fingertips zinged with electricity as I grabbed the coasters and placed them in front of the couple. I tried to hide the smile that was blooming across my face as I placed the napkins on the table. I caught that they, too, were taking me in. Strangely, they didn't seem the least bit unnerved by my reaction to them. Maybe I was doing a better job of hiding my emotions than I thought. I doubted that though.

That's when I noticed I had three drinks for the table but only two people awaiting them. I nervously looked at the woman as I tried so very hard to speak, but no words would come out of my mouth. I grabbed the mug of hot, steaming mulled cider and placed it in front of her as carefully as possible without spilling. My hands were shaking, and I couldn't fathom what was happening. This woman was the most ethereal, enchanting person I had ever seen; besides the person sitting next to her that is. She was otherworldly. That wasn't possible though. I was losing my mind. Lack of sleep now threatened my sanity. However, I couldn't shrug off their familiarity, knowing if I had never seen them here in Whistler before that left only one option that didn't seem plausible.

Wonderful feelings drifted over me, wrapping every part of my body in a loving embrace. I didn't want to look away and I didn't want to lose these feelings, yet I had to control myself. This was way too bizarre.

An eternity seemed to go by as I was drinking in everything about this couple, but in actuality it was only a mere second. My life stood still. After I glided the Blue Sapphire martini to the man without a drop spilled, I spun around and headed back to the safety of the bar register. Glancing back at them, I noticed they continued to stare at me, smiling as if they knew something was about to take place. I shoved my dull brown hair behind my ear so I could get one last peek at them.

That's when I noticed that I had left the tray and the third drink on the table. Rather than go there again, I sprinted to the bathroom. Not knowing what was happening to me, I needed a moment to get myself together. I swung open the bathroom door and the wooden sleigh crashed against the door with a loud thud...another piece of décor out to get me. Everything in the Grizzly was placed with such great intention, which usually comforted me, but now it all seemed to get in my way. I needed to get to the sink and figure things out. I hoped I wasn't getting the flu. Maybe I had caught whatever it was that made Karen go home for the night. Any sort of bug compounded with my body's lack of sleep might explain why I was feeling so strangely tonight.

As I splashed water over my face, I couldn't stop thinking about the two people I had encountered. What was it about them that made me feel this way and yearn for them? It was a euphoric sense that flooded over me. As I stood and looked in the mirror, I saw my reflection. I wished I hadn't splashed all my makeup off, especially since I would be serving them for the rest of the night, the golden gods. My bedraggled expression now

matched my mussed up hair. My store-bought brown hair looked especially lousy at a time like this. It made me wish I'd kept my natural auburn color.

I stared at the reflection of my eyes in the mirror wishing I could repair the mascara that had dribbled down my cheek. Realizing there was no hope, I wiped it off completely. The dark brown eyes staring back at me would never have light in them instead of that trademark blankness. Not remembering much of my childhood always made me feel so alone; no siblings, no parents, only newspaper clippings. So not engaging with life had become my comfort. My protection. When too much personal interaction started, that was my cue to exit the situation. That's how I had come to Whistler.

I heard laughing behind me and turned to see two bubbly ski bunnies bundled in cashmere coming through the door, obviously enjoying the evening. I tried not to roll my eyes and just flashed them a smile. I grabbed the dangling paper towel, did one last wipe of my cheeks, and left the restroom.

The pub was really hustling now. I could hear the clanking of beer mugs and the chatter an octave higher. Buckets of beer, the nightly special, were parading from one table to the next like a revolving door. The lighting went down a shade, and the stone fireplace in the far corner began roaring right on time. I saw the newest group sitting in my section and quickly went over to take their drink order. As I wrote down the drink names being rattled off, I cautiously glanced at the couple I had left so feverishly and noticed my coworker Jen had graciously removed the tray and placed the third drink on a coaster in front of the empty chair. There was still no one sitting there. I was secretly relieved. I didn't need another perfect human adding to the complexity of my emotional meltdown. I somehow knew I

wasn't coming down with the flu. There was something about those people that lured me in.

"Miss," I heard a man at another table shout, "can we add a starter of poutine to our order?"

"Of course! I'll put that right in." My smile returned to my face, I took a deep breath and continued on with my busy night. I was nothing if not a creature of habit.

As I was entering the poutine order into the computer, a wave of ice-cold electrifying air penetrated me to my core. It was as if my bones would shatter with the slightest movement. I looked over at the front entrance expecting it to be open, but it wasn't. I quickly looked around to gauge everyone else's reaction, knowing I couldn't trust my own with my sleep deprivation. Nobody seemed to notice. Why was I the only one feeling like an electrocuted ice-cube? Then, right before me, I saw the third person sitting at my favorite table. He had arrived. I didn't know how he got there, and I didn't even care. I stiffened while taking him in, and I knew he was the one throwing off the jolts of electricity. The couple was looking at me again, but not the newcomer. It was as if they were evaluating me, my reaction. Silly as it seemed, that's what they had to be doing. But for what reason?

From behind, I could tell that the new guy was really well-dressed. He sat so still, almost like a statue. It struck me kind of funny, but in a good way. He, too, had golden brown hair. His looked less than perfect, a little more disheveled than his friends or relatives or whoever was with him at the table. I liked it. There was a blowzy, rugged look about him. If he looked half as good as he did from the back, I couldn't wait to see him from the front. Not that I had a shot, but at least, I could admire.

Promising myself that I wouldn't again lose my cool, I let the excitement ripple through me at the thought of getting to meet him. I knew what I was feeling was in my head. There was no way other people could make you feel this way.

I spun around and quickly marched to the bar. As I waited for the next order to come up, I excitedly embraced this new feeling of energy and exhilaration that was beginning to creep up on me.

"Hey, Ana," the bartender spoke, interrupting my thoughts, "Order's up."

"Thanks, Ben." I quickly grabbed the gravy and cheese covered fries otherwise known as poutine, and trudged over to the table to drop it off so I could mosey over to my object of fascination.

"Is there anything else you need or are you all set?" I asked the poutine eaters, unable to hide my grin. They nodded their heads and off I went.

Finally, I was about to arrive at the table of life. The euphoria was beginning to rise as I saw a glow radiating from the table. Prismatic colors were dancing off the walls around them. Recognizing another side effect of my sleep deprivation, hallucinations, I kept moving toward them. I had to meet the new guy. It was like a magnet pulling me over to him. I was certain that the others at his table noticed, but I didn't even care. I went to the bar, grabbed some silverware as an excuse, and walked to their table.

"Is there anything else I can get right now for you guys or are you doing ok?"

When the newcomer looked up at me for the first time, my heart began racing. He had the same hypnotizing eyes as the others. Only that was merely the beginning. His skin was an exquisite shade of ivory, showing slightly that he had missed a day of shaving. His features were so

striking that they almost matched his startling eyes, which were outlined with such thick lashes that it made them stand out even more than the other two at the table. He had a familiarity about him that I couldn't place. Secretly wondering if he could have been in one of my dreams, I did my best to keep at bay the foolishness that was creeping in at such a preposterous notion. I wanted to clear the room and sit in front of him and do nothing but literally stare at the exquisite being in front of me.

I glanced at the couple to get my mind elsewhere only that didn't work out so well. I still felt the charge. However, this time I was certain it was coming directly from him. He continued to gaze at me when suddenly I realized that he was talking. His lips were moving, but I had no idea what he was saying. His voice was the most soothing and comforting sound, like a song. *I had to get control of myself!* This was not the Ana I had grown to know and love. I should be staring coldly at him, barely giving him the time of day.

"I'm so sorry," I said, dragging strength from an unknown place within, "I need you to repeat what you said."

I could feel myself start to blush and went with it. I obviously couldn't be in control of myself around these people and gave up. It's not like I would ever see them again. Plus, I wasn't known for being the most eloquent person anyway.

"Hey, no sweat. We were hoping for a pitcher of Whistler Ale and three glasses." He smiled at me as if he were half relieved — as if he were in on a secret I wasn't privy to. I did my best to try to place him from my dreams or around Whistler but fell flat. I was certain I recognized excitement in his voice, but that didn't make any sense either. Beer wasn't that exciting, and I surely wasn't either. It must have to do with whatever

they were speaking about before I arrived at their table, just an interrupted conversation I had wandered into.

“Sounds good. I’ll bring those right out.” I spun around and went to the bar, excited by this new communication and secretly hoping that they would be at the restaurant during my entire shift.

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