

ROCK AND A HARD PLACE



ANDREA BRAMHALL

PROLOGUE

JAYDEN HARRIS FLIPPED UP THE collar of her fleece, rubbed her hands together, and ducked inside the cavernous mess tent easily capable of seating a hundred people at a time. Coffee and a spot of lunch sounded like a good plan, then a little more sleep before she had to get everything ready for her group to head out of Everest base camp at midnight on the start of their summit bid.

She checked her watch. 11:35 a.m. Okay, maybe it was a little early for lunch. But she couldn't help but smile when she noticed the date on the chronograph: April 25, 2015. Three years. Damn, the time had gone so fast.

A gust of wind through the open door tugged at her hair. She quickly gripped the long, dirty-blond curls that whipped about her face and secured them with a band at the nape of her neck.

"Hey," a familiar voice called.

Jayden turned and smiled when Rebecca stepped in line next to her, but Rebecca didn't smile back.

"What's wrong?" Jayden asked.

"Pain in the arse Pete wants to go out and drill his self-rescue skills again."

"That's not a bad thing, babe." She suppressed a groan of mutual frustration. So much for her afternoon of relaxation, but on the mountain safety always came first. A nervous climber meant a dangerous one. If an afternoon of skill drills put Pete at ease, it could save more than just his own life down the road.

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“Yeah, I know,” she replied with a heavy sigh. “I just wanted to spend the rest of today with you, that’s all.”

Jayden’s smile widened. “I know the feeling, but we can always celebrate our anniversary when we get back.”

This time Rebecca did smile as she stepped onto her tiptoes to close the six-inch height difference between them and kissed Jayden’s cheek. Her eyes twinkled with a seductive mischief when she stepped back and whispered, “I’m going to hold you to that,” before pressing her lips firmly against Jayden’s.

When Rebecca finally pulled back, she took the coffee mug from Jayden’s hand, took a long swig, then handed it back. “Thanks.” She sighed and ran a hand through her shoulder-length brown hair. “You stay here and finish your coffee. I’ll take him out this time.”

Jayden shook her head, loath to shirk her responsibility. She was the team leader and company owner; the safety of the clients was hers to ensure, not Rebecca’s. No matter how capable and experienced she was, the buck stopped with Jayden, and she knew it.

“Thanks, but I should really do it.”

Rebecca frowned. “Look, I don’t want to argue with you, *babe*.” She spat out the endearment like an insult. “Not today. But it really pisses me off when you do this.”

“Do what?”

“Treat me like I’m just another pretender on the mountain. I do know what I’m doing, you know?”

Jayden held her hands up in supplication. “I know that. I’m not trying to do that to you, I promise. It’s just that—”

“Yeah, I know. There’s only the great Jayden Harris who can teach anything to anyone about survival in the mountains.” She turned to leave the tent, but Jayden caught her arm before she could walk more than two steps away.

“That’s not fair, Becks. I have a responsibility to them.”

“What about your responsibility to me? Don’t I matter? I’m your girlfriend, your partner, I thought. Yet you continue to treat me like one of the other lackeys.”

“That’s not true.”

“Actually, yeah, it really is.”

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Jayden shook her head. So much for not wanting to fight today. She didn't want to do this again. Jayden knew that Pete was a capable climber, who carried the skills he needed well embedded in muscle memory. His insecurities were in his head. And Rebecca was a good, strong climber and a competent teacher. For all her worries about the elements of their unpredictable environment, Jayden was probably micromanaging.

Did Rebecca have a point? Was she treating her like some underling rather than the equal partners she professed they really were? She wouldn't insist like this if Rebecca were Fen, would she? Were the escalating problems in their relationship all her doing after all?

"Fine. I'll take a nap this afternoon while you take him out on the ice."

Rebecca's frown morphed into a triumphant grin as she slipped her arms around Jayden's waist, holding her close. "Thanks."

A shiver crawled up Jayden's spine, making the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She grimaced, trying to place the draft, and quickly turned about her, looking for an open tent flap. But there was nothing. She shook her head and ran a hand over the back of her neck.

"Becks?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"Be careful out there."

Rebecca wrinkled her nose again, her brown eyes dancing in the dim light of the mess tent, and her lips quirked into that cheeky, half-cocky, half-sexy grin that Jayden loved so much. "Always am, Jay. Always am."

Jayden watched her go, still unable to shake the feeling that something wasn't right. She felt itchy, restless. The peace she always felt in the mountains, even on the busiest peaks, was missing. She sipped her coffee and took a seat at one of the tables, determined to forget her uneasiness and focus instead on the challenge before them: guiding a group of first-timers to the summit of Everest.

Their route was well planned; ladders were lashed together to provide bridges across deadly crevasses, and ropes were bolted into the rock and ice to give them some protection up the exposed faces they needed to conquer as they went. Provisions were waiting for them at Camps One and Two, along with oxygen to help them all resist the effects of altitude sickness and the devastating result that was pulmonary oedema. Drowning in one's own bodily fluids while trying to breathe was not a pleasant way to die. But it

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was certainly one of the most common on the mountain. Yeah, it was risky. That's what made it exciting. It's what got the blood pumping. And they were ready for this. She was ready.

Nevertheless, she couldn't sit still. She downed the rest of her coffee and stepped outside. Row upon row of small yellow dome tents ran down one side of the encampment. Red ones ran in another direction, and a scattering of multicoloured ones dotted the rest of base camp. Each colour represented a different trekking company. The blue tents of her own Adventure Trekkers company were close to the middle of the encampment. A good, safe place in a safe camp. Not much about a tour up Everest could be classified as safe, but base camp was.

Was her uneasiness about the state of their relationship what had her on edge? She frowned. *I'll go and apologise to her again. Maybe we can make a plan to take some time off, go somewhere romantic, and see if we can sort everything out.* She checked her watch again to see if she had time to catch Rebecca before she set off with Pete. It was already 11:50 a.m. Probably too late, but she checked their tent anyway. It was empty. *Damn.*

The red, yellow, and blue triangles of the bunting around camp fluttered on the breeze as she decided how to use the restless energy. She was within two minutes of the medical tent, and picking up their first aid kits and medical supplies would save a job later.

"Hey, Jay," Jost Clabben said as she walked in.

"Hey, Doc. How's it going?"

"Quiet day today." He shrugged. "Lots of people have already headed out to the higher camps."

"I saw that. What was it—110 at Camp One tonight and 70 at Camp Two?"

"Yah. Crazy. This mountain gets busier and busier every year. I came out here for a quiet life, you know?" He laughed and clapped her on the shoulder.

"I hear ya, Doc. I'm not so much of a people person myself."

"You climbers, you never are. That's why you're crazy enough to go chasing all those summits."

She chuckled. "Truer words."

"So what can I do for you today?"

"First aid kits and basic med supplies, please. We're heading out tonight."

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“Ah, of course. I’ll just—what the hell...?”

The ground beneath her feet shook. No, it was more than that. It felt more like it was rocking, pitching from side to side like a boat rolling on a wave. First one, then a second, the pitch and fall growing as one moment slipped to another.

“Earthquake!” she shouted. The doctor’s eyes opened wide, and they both ran for the tent flap. But the grey sky above them shook, then Jayden realised it wasn’t the sky that was shaking. The ground beneath her quaked so violently, she struggled to keep her feet beneath her; she grabbed on to the doctor’s shoulder for stability. He, too, stumbled against the tremors and jostled against her. Just a little. Just enough to see it. She tapped him on the shoulder and pointed as words failed her.

A curtain of white tumbled down the mountainside. The worst nightmare of anyone on the mountains.

“Avalanche!” she yelled into the sonorous rumble that split the air.

Ice and snow and rock careened towards them with a speed and ferocity she could never have imagined. Base camp was days away from the summit, days of gruelling walking, climbing, and suffering, surely too far away for the angry torrent of ice to reach them, right? But what about those already on the way to Camps One and Two? And Rebecca?

“Oh God, Rebecca.” She didn’t know if she shouted the words or whispered them. She couldn’t hear it over the growing rumble splitting the sky like it had erupted from the bellows of the earth and shot straight up to the heavens. “She shouldn’t be out there. It should’ve been me. Oh God, please.”

The doctor tugged on her hand, his mouth open, his lips forming words she couldn’t hear.

She shook her head. “I should never have given in to her.” She tore her eyes away from Jost and glanced up at the sky. She’d never believed in God or heaven. It didn’t matter. She’d gladly sell her soul to trade places with Rebecca right now. “Please let her be okay.” But even as she pleaded, she knew the odds were against her. Really, it would take a miracle. The wall of ice charging at them was going to claim lives on the mountain today.

They stared in silent horror as the roar of hell grew louder, and it became terrifyingly clear that base camp was never going to be far enough away. Not by a long way. A tsunami of snow and rock rained down towards them.

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Rocks heavy enough to crush bones became missiles, hurtling towards them at the speed of a bullet.

They needed some sort of shelter against the oncoming avalanche. Canvas offered little protection...but it was the best they had. Without it, they'd be relying on luck alone in a billion-to-one shot at survival.

If they weren't buried alive and frozen to death.

So Jayden did the only thing she could think of: she pushed Jost in front of her, shoving him back into the medical tent behind them and down under one of the gurneys as far from the door as they could go. The ice was right on their heels.

She tried desperately not to think about Rebecca, out there, too far away to find even the limited protection a tent could offer. "I should never have let her go," she whispered.

The tent rocked under the force of the avalanche smashing against the fabric, tearing it apart under the pressure. The wall closest to the door gave way under the torrent; poles flattened, gurneys crushed, and the two nurses and a doctor sheltering under them were buried alive. Jayden raced forward, only to be held back by Jost.

"Wait!" he screamed into the thunderous noise that surrounded them.

Then, in an instant, the sound was gone.

An eerie silence filled the half-crushed tent as the last of the debris settled. Slowly, Jayden wiggled her fingers, flexed her toes and ankles, and pushed herself into a sitting position. Her eyes took in everything, but her brain couldn't comprehend what she was seeing. She couldn't grasp that there were nurses and doctors—people she knew—buried under the snow and ice in front of her.

A whimper brought it all rushing in.

She shoved Jost's hand from her shoulder and rushed towards the mound of debris. Careful not to climb on it, lest she stand on a person and crush them further, she started at the side, clawing through it with her bare hands, determined to release those she'd seen buried in there. They might have a chance at surviving if she could get them out of that frozen tomb.

She pushed at rocks that were too heavy for her to lift and nodded her thanks when Jost joined her in the effort. She scraped at snow and sharp shards of ice. Finally, she reached a hand, outstretched and gloved, with the strap of an ice axe wrapped around the wrist. She didn't recall seeing anyone

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dressed for the outdoors inside when the tent had collapsed, and the only explanation her mind could grasp was that someone out on the paths had been swept back in along with the rest of the debris.

She worked swiftly, freeing the form until she could drag it out of the hole and turn it over. Then she screamed.

“No!”

Rebecca’s head hung at a sickening angle, her throat severed in a jagged cut more than halfway through. Blood dripped from the ice axe hanging from her wrist. The brown eyes that had laughed at her concern less than half an hour ago were open and stared up at her, unseeing. They’d never see anything again.

CHAPTER 1

RHIAN PHILLIPS SPUN HER PEN on the desk while she waited for her colleagues to filter into the room and take their places. Her boss, Rachel Webster, would be there exactly on time for the meeting. She always was. And as always, Rhian tried to be there five minutes before. Not that it had curried any favours with the intimidating woman, but, still, it hadn't done her any harm either. Sometimes that was the best you could hope for in the cutthroat world that was marketing and advertising at Webster, Spencer, and Cline—London's leading advertising company—and when the managing partner was not only your boss but your stepmum. Impressions had to be made to the rest of the staff. Not to Rachel.

“Hey, Rhi. So what's this all about?” Joe Gert asked as the conference table and the twelve chairs around it slowly started to fill up. He was one of the senior account managers and had been her mentor when she'd first started.

Rhian shrugged. “No idea. I got the call to come up same as you and everyone else, Joe.”

“No insider scoop?”

Rhian snorted a quick laugh. “Fraid not.” If anything, Rhian was always the last in the know. Rachel didn't divulge anything so she couldn't be accused of giving her privileged information. Yet the rest of the staff shied away from her because they all suspected she knew more than they did or was reporting back to Rachel all the time. It was...irksome. Tiring. *Maybe it's time to spread my wings and move on*, she thought—not for the first time either. Trying to live up to Rachel's expectations and standards was just as exhausting as trying to ignore the stigma of non-existent nepotism from her workmates.

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“We’ve got good news and bad news, people.” Rachel straight-armed the door open and let it swing shut behind her with a loud bang. She blustered through the room to the head of the table and dropped a heavy stack of files onto the veneer-covered surface. “Where do you want me to start?”

She cast a slightly menacing look around the room. Her brown eyes looked so fierce that Rhian had always been just a little scared of her as she’d grown up—first spending weekends, school holidays, and special occasions with her dad and this woman, and then living with them permanently after her mum had died. Still, she wasn’t all bad. Rachel had been there for her when her dad hadn’t.

Rhian shook her head and snapped herself away from the hurt. Not going there again.

“Start us off with the bad news, Rach,” Joe said.

“Right-o. Joe’s going to be a daddy.”

“I said the bad news.” There was a grin on Joe’s lips.

“I know,” Rachel shot back and her expression dared him to dispute her. He sat quietly, his grin broadening. “It means the rest of us are going to have to work harder to make up for you being brain-dead from sleep deprivation and hormones.”

“I thought it was women who got hormones when they were pregnant?” Dave Roper sat at the far end of the table.

Rhian snorted, tucked her hair behind her ears, and started doodling on her pad. Her interest in the workplace banter had long since fizzled away to nothing. But she dutifully kept sneaking glances around the room, waiting for Rachel to get to the point.

Rachel pointed to Joe’s face and the sloppy grin there. He looked a little stupid and a lot happy. “Do I really need to say any more?” She waited for the titters around the table to subside. “Seriously, Joe, congrats. I know this is something you and Stacey have been trying at for a long time. I’m really happy for you.” She patted his hand. “You stupid idiot.”

Joe laughed loudly. “Thanks, boss.”

She dipped her head and cleared at him and cleared her throat. “So, on to the good news. Patagonia.” She met everyone’s gaze around the table. “Who can tell me about Patagonia?”

The silence around the room was deafening.

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“No one? Really?” Rachel asked incredulously. “Rhian?”

Rhian looked up, eyebrows raised in question. “Huh?”

“Are we distracting you?”

Rhian’s cheeks burned. “Sorry, I was just making some notes about something I have to do after the meeting.” She cleared her throat and hoped Rachel couldn’t see the crappy sketches of climbing knots all over the paper in front of her. “What did you ask me?”

The look on Rachel’s face said she knew Rhian was lying. “Patagonia.”

“What about it?”

“Seems no one here knows anything about it. Do you?”

“It’s the region of South America that bridges Chile and Argentina down the length of the Andes mountains to the southern tip,” Rhian said. “It’s the southernmost point of the world outside of Antarctica. It’s made up of glaciers, mountains, volcanoes, forest wilderness, marshes, lakes, desert, and steppes. It’s vast, it’s wild, and it’s desolate. The weather’s extreme, and the winds ferocious. And the glacier is one of the very few left on earth that is still expanding.”

“Thank you. What about the company?”

Rhian frowned again, as did everyone else at the table. “You mean the clothing company?”

Rachel nodded.

“They make some awesome outdoor equipment. I’ve got one of their down jackets. Brilliant. Why?”

Rachel slid files across the desk surface to everyone. “Patagonia, the company, has hired us to run a new marketing campaign. They want to grow their appeal to women. As we all know, when it comes to clothes, women spend more and more often than men do. Also, women are becoming increasingly active in extreme sports and the outdoors. This expansion makes a lot of sense. So they’re sponsoring a reality TV show that will be based in Patagonia, the country, and will feature their gear. The Argentinian tourist board is putting up the other half of the funds needed as a way to promote tourism in Patagonia.”

“Is this an existing TV show that they’re starting to sponsor?” Claire Sheffield, Dave Roper’s assistant, asked.

“It’s brand new, people.” Murmurs went around the table. Rachel ignored them and pointed to the files. “Page one,” she said, flipping open her own file and holding up the A4 page with the title *The Amazing Climb*.

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Rhian cocked her head to the side, opened the folder, and quickly scanned the first few pages as Rachel carried on talking. Her excitement and curiosity grew with each detail. *Oh my God. This is...brilliant.*

“The show will feature climbers from all over the world competing for a fantastic prize—”

“Which is?” Dave asked.

“Yet to be disclosed,” Rachel said. “And it will feature climbs and challenges in Patagonia—”

“Where and how many?” Claire asked.

“Yet to be disclosed,” Rachel said again.

“There are too many unknowns, Rach. I say it’s too risky for them,” Joe said.

“Riskier than you know, Joe. There are still lots of details to work out—which we will—and lots of things to be sorted—which we’ll take care of. But what you all need to know now is that we’ve been hired to produce this TV show.”

Rhian grinned. A climbing TV show in Patagonia. Heaven.

“Are you insane?” Claire, Joe, and Dave demanded at the same time.

“We’re a marketing firm,” Claire continued, “not a production company.”

“Yeah, we don’t do this kind of thing, Rachel,” Joe said. “We’re not geared up for it.”

“That’s not entirely true, Joe,” Rhian said. Rachel glanced at her but didn’t interrupt. Rhian wasn’t sure what that meant, but she’d had a point, so she was going to make it. “We do commercials and infomercials all the time. The idea of producing or creating in the medium isn’t a foreign notion for us.”

Rachel’s lips slid into a satisfied smirk as she offered Rhian a nod of approval. Rhian squared her shoulders and straightened her back.

Joe scoffed. “That’s not even in the same league as this kind of shit. You’re talking months of prep, months of filming—on location. You’re talking... Shit, I don’t even know half of what you’re talking about to pull off a project like this.”

“Sure you do. We break it down into chunks like we do with every big project we take on. We all have our strengths, Joe.” Rhian looked at him steadily, assessing his real concern about the project. It didn’t take much to

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figure it out. He was about to become a father. He didn't want to take on a huge project that might take him away from home.

One less for me to compete with, then.

The thought struck her out of the blue. Compete with? She didn't compete with these people. She just did her job and kept her head down. Why was she even thinking about competing with them to take this on?

"Yeah, we do have our strengths," Joe retorted. "In marketing and advertising, not TV production. Not in making films. Not in distributing them to the masses."

"We don't need to worry about that," Rachel said. "Patagonia has signed a deal with Amazon for the worldwide distribution of the show."

Dave whistled. "Nice."

"Exactly. This is going to be big, ladies and gentlemen. Massive. It's an opportunity for us to take the company in a new direction. To try something new, something exciting, something that will put Webster, Spencer, and Cline on the map in a whole new market. Media markets are changing at lightning pace out there, people. This is our chance to stake a claim in it."

The energy was rolling off Rachel in waves, and for the first time she could remember, it didn't make Rhian want to jump out of the way. She was being swept along with it. She was thinking about her colleagues as competition because she wanted this project. She wanted it to be hers. She wanted Patagonia, and she wanted the chance to show them she could do something they were all afraid to try.

"What's the format of the TV show?" Rhian asked.

"Sixteen contestants. Amateur climbers from all different backgrounds. International pool, not just UK climbers." Rachel's gaze locked on Rhian as though no one else in the room.

"Recruitment method?"

Rachel hitched her eyebrow. "Social media would probably be the best place to start."

Rhian scribbled some notes across her pad, the first time in a long while she'd used her pen in a meeting for something other than spinning it or doodling. "Timescale?"

"It's March now. Filming starts in a little over six months, and we have to get this together by then."

"Six?" Joe cried. "You've got to be joking. We'd need at least a year to do this. If we even could."

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“We’ve got six months,” Rachel said again. Her tone made it perfectly clear that there would be no negotiation on this. It was a done deal. Rachel had decided, and the steely look in her eyes told them all she would damn well pull it off by herself if they didn’t get on-board with it. Rhian had no doubt she could. She couldn’t remember a single thing Rachel had failed at once she put her mind to it. But this time, she wouldn’t have to. This time, Rhian was going to pull it off. *What was it she used to say when I was little? ‘Shoot for the moon, kid. Even if you miss, you’ll land amongst the stars.’*

“We can’t do this, Rachel,” Claire said from the other end of the table.

Rachel frowned and opened her mouth to speak—

“Yes, we can,” Rhian said. “We can do this if we work together as a team.” She pointed to the packets in front of them. “If we all take on different aspects of the project, there is nothing in it that we haven’t done before. On a smaller scale, granted. But we have done it all before.”

A crowd of scowling faces stared back at her. No doubt they were wondering just who the fuck she thought she was, talking to them like this. Trying to convince them. That was Rachel’s job. Rachel, who was currently sitting back in her chair, hands clasped behind her head, and watching Rhian like the cat that had got the cream. And the tuna. And the catnip. *What the hell’s going on with her?* Rhian shook her head to focus on the group, rather than Rachel. She didn’t have time to worry about that. She didn’t have time to worry about anything if they were going to pull this together.

“Joe,” she said, “you’ve had the most contact with crews doing infomercials and the like. I’ll need you to pull together the film crew. We need people who are capable of climbing the mountains with our contestants and guides too. They’ll be filming on ropes, across the glaciers, and camping side by side with everyone else.”

“Do not land us with any divas, or I swear to God the baby won’t be the only thing keeping you awake in six months’ time,” Rachel added as Joe stared at Rhian, his mouth hanging open. She held his gaze, but she could see Rachel grinning out of the corner of her eye. “Okay?” she asked with just a flicker of a glance to check in with Rachel. Was she really okay with her taking charge like this?

Joe also glanced at Rachel, obviously waiting for her to react. She didn’t.

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“Joe?” Rhian asked again, her voice a little softer. She licked her lips. She needed the team to agree, and Joe was the most senior team member in the room. If he went along with this, if he agreed with her, they all would. She knew it.

Joe sighed and scribbled some notes. “Got it.”

The thrill of victory skittered down her spine. She felt like whooping and dancing in her chair, but restrained herself. That kind of behaviour wouldn't help her cause any, no matter how much her inner self was running laps around the room and singing “The Eye of The Tiger”.

“Thank you,” she said in the most professional voice she could muster before turning to Dave. “Your expertise on branding, product placement, and selection will be invaluable.”

Dave smiled and nodded. “I can do that.”

“Every one of our contestants will need to be kitted out in Patagonia products. Their sales department should be able to tell which are the best ones for the task ahead and to start putting it all together.”

“Do they only produce clothes?”

“No,” Rhian said. “They do some awesome packs and sleeping bags too.”

Dave nodded.

“We'll need to showcase every product we possibly can,” Rachel added.

“Of course,” Dave said as though it went without saying. To his credit, Rhian agreed. He'd done this stuff long enough.

Claire and most of the others around the table were scribbling notes on their pads as fast as they could.

“Well, Rhian, since you seem to be taking charge of this project, you'll need to get started on the recruitment drive and find the right guide, as she'll have to host it too. But most importantly, find me the right contestants.”

“Me? You don't want to do that part?” Rhian was shocked. Contestants. Guides. The host! This show, and therefore their entire campaign, was going to live and die based on the people on camera. It didn't matter how beautiful the landscape was going to be or how good the products were if no one watched because the show turned out to be boring. “You want me to take on such a critical role? Why?”

The bigger question was why was she balking? She wanted this project, yet her natural inclination to fall into Rachel's shadow was once again

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asserting itself. That and the fact she'd never taken on such a major, project-defining role as this one. Nerves were a bitch.

"Because no one else here's even climbed a ladder much less a wall or a rock face," Rachel said.

"Hey!" Dave grouched. "I climbed a ladder to go into the loft the other day."

"You told me you fell off coming back down and nearly ended up at the bottom of the stairs," Rachel said.

Dave grinned sheepishly. "You don't forget anything, do you?"

"Never." Rachel wagged a finger at him before turning her attention back to Rhian. "So, Rhian, that makes you our resident climbing expert. You've been climbing rock faces and indoor walls as long as I've known you. I've listened to you talk about climbing until chalk dust was coming out of my ears, and I know you go off and join climbing tours every time you go on holiday. Wasn't it Alaska you just got back from?"

Rhian nodded. Just a couple of weeks ago, as a matter of fact.

"And Spain the time before that?"

She nodded again, slightly taken aback that Rachel remembered so many details. She always seemed so disinterested when Rhian was talking to her about it.

"Well, since you're the only one of us that knows the difference between a grade 5 and a grade 6 ice wall, that makes you the right person for this task." Rachel's eyes softened a little as she looked at her, and Rhian saw what she needed. Belief. Rachel believed she could do it.

"Shoot for the moon," she whispered under her breath. Rhian cleared her throat and met Rachel's gaze. "Okay."

Rachel's smile spread across her lips slowly. "Good." She waved her hand, palm up, for Rhian to continue.

Rhian swallowed. "Dave, we'll need to liaise about climbing and safety equipment—"

"Surely that's the health-and-safety guy's responsibility!" Dave protested.

Rhian lifted the packet Rachel had given them. She'd only scanned most of the contents, but she'd picked up more of the salient details than the rest of the team while they'd been arguing with Rachel. "The guide—who I'll recruit—will be in charge of health and safety on and off set," Rhian said, her cheeks burning. She was so unaccustomed to being the centre

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of attention, it made her uncomfortable. It was something she had to get over. "I'll be working with them directly. I'll have to, and so I'll have the requirements for you before long. I can probably work up a rudimentary list for you right now, to be honest, but there's enough to be going on with before we start on the shopping."

Dave scribbled on his pad with a nod.

"Thanks." She turned to look further down the table. "Mellissa, logistics? We'll need travel schedules for each of our applicants and then the contestants, film crew, and all equipment, vehicles in Patagonia, etc. You know the drill."

"I do," Mellissa said in a clipped, efficient voice. She'd been with the company since almost the beginning, working first as Rachel's assistant and then as Rhian's upon returning from maternity leave a few years back. Organisation and logistics were definitely her specialities.

"Martin, web design. Can you liaise with Dave about the rebranding?" She pointed to the file. "It looks like we'll need to give Patagonia's website a complete overhaul. The online shop they've got at the moment is looking a little dated and heavy. Pics need streamlining. The usual."

"No problem."

"It would also be a good idea for you to liaise with Rhian about the promotion and recruitment drive," Rachel said. "Social media will be a great way to get the message out for applications. Can you help her set that up?"

"With pleasure," Martin said.

Rhian ran through the rest of the file. Rachel had already broken the project down into the relevant tasks to get started with. All she had to do at this point was dole them out and make sure everyone was happy and ready to walk out of the room and start running with the project. They didn't have any time to waste.

"Okay, people, let's get this ball rolling," Rachel said when Rhian reached the end. "I want progress reports on my desk...and Rhian's...by Friday lunchtime." Everyone got up, shuffling their papers and scratching their heads. "Rhian, you got a minute?"

Rhian nodded and hung back in her seat while the rest of the team almost ran out the door.

"You okay?" Rachel asked.

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Rhian smiled. “Yeah. Thank you for the opportunity—”

Rachel waved her hand. “Don’t. You earned it. If you’d worked anywhere else, you’d have had the chance a long time ago. You know that, I know that, and now none of those idiots can dispute that. So don’t thank me for holding you back.” She smiled fondly at her. “In all honesty, I’ve been waiting for years for you to show me what you did in that meeting. That you want to be here. I needed to see that fire in your eyes, that excitement, and the desire to win. I’ve been waiting to see that you wanted more than just clocking in and clocking off, kiddo.” She sighed. “I was about ready to give up on you.”

The euphoric thrill of the meeting vanished, replaced by a feeling she was much more familiar with—that she never quite measured up, that she wasn’t good enough, that she was unworthy.

“I almost thought you were ready to up sticks and take off for pastures new.”

Rhian blinked but met her gaze. “I almost was.”

Rachel’s mouth twisted into a knowing half-smile. “Well, you were always brutally honest.”

“I wonder where I learnt that skill.”

“Touché,” Rachel conceded. “I’m glad you didn’t. When they first approached me about this project, I knew it was perfect for us. For you. I wanted this for a lot of reasons, but mostly, I wanted it because I knew you’d love it.”

“A gift? Not like you, Rach.”

Rachel lifted an eyebrow. “Am I such a wicked stepmother?”

Rhian chuckled. “Only when you wanted to be.”

“My, my, you have put on those training claws, haven’t you?”

“Sorry—”

“Don’t apologise.” Rachel’s fond gaze hardened. “You’ll need to grow more than training claws for this project, kiddo. If you apologise for the slightest thing, you’ll never get through it. So, on that note—” She opened the folder in front of her and pulled out a piece of paper before sliding it across the desk to Rhian. “This is a list of tour companies and guides in the area that Patagonia would be willing-slash-happy to work with.”

Rhian took the page and looked it over, giving herself a moment to adjust to Rachel’s typically whiplash-inducing change of pace. Very few names were on it. “Only three? Is this it?”

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Rachel nodded.

“Why so few? What’s the politics here?”

“Nothing political. Gender. These are the only women with good reputations who lead groups of climbers close by. They know the area and get people up and back safely. On an expedition like this, that’s important. We need to minimise the risks where we can.”

“I know. The inherent risks are great enough as it is.”

“Exactly.”

Rhian looked at the names again. “They’re really serious about appealing to the female market?”

“As a heart attack.”

Rhian let the corner of her lips slip into a small half-smile. “Looking at them and their stats online is all well and good, Rach. But I think I’m going to need to go and meet them before I commit to anyone.”

Rachel smiled. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.” She slid an envelope across the table to her. “You leave tomorrow afternoon. Returning in a week’s time. That should be enough time to meet with these three and make a decision. I’ll feed Rufus for you while you’re gone.” She grimaced even as she offered to feed Rhian’s podgy, ginger tomcat.

“What would you have done if I hadn’t agreed to this crazy scheme of yours?”

“I’d have thought of something.” Her eyes seemed deadly serious. “You fought for this. Are you telling me now that you don’t really want it?”

Rhian looked at the page in her hand and the envelope sitting where it had stopped on the wood. Patagonia—the place she’d longed to visit for years. The climbing, the adventure, the outdoors...and all while getting paid. Nah. This job was made for her. “I want it.”

“Good. Now, on that note, we’ve both got a lot of work to do. What’re you doing for dinner tonight?”

Rhian ran a hand over her face, then her fingers through her hair. “Probably a burger on my way home to pack.”

“Pft. Come to the house. I’ve got a lasagne defrosting for tonight.”

“Erm, no thanks.”

Rachel scowled at her. “He misses you, you know.”

Rhian clenched her teeth. “He made the choice, Rach. You know he did. He can’t pick and choose the parts of my life he has a hand in. If he

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can't accept me as I am, then he doesn't accept me at all. He threw me out of the house and told me not to come back until I wasn't a perverted freak anymore." She covered her hand over her mouth and held her breath a moment before she said, "I'm still a perverted freak, Rach. I'm still gay, and I'm still me, so why should I go back there?"

"Because he loves you, and he's sorry." Rachel's eyes were soft, brimming with tears.

"Then he needs to tell me that, don't you think?"

"How can he if you won't even talk to him? If you won't even let him show you he's trying?"

"Is he? Is he trying? Because I haven't seen or heard anything from him since."

"He's tried to call. At least half a dozen times."

"In five years. That doesn't even make every birthday and Christmas, Rachel."

"I know. But you haven't even picked up the phone whenever he's tried. And he's too proud to do any more, Rhi."

"Then he doesn't love me enough." Rhian slid the page through her fingers from one end to the other, then back again. Her eyes stung, but she refused to cry about it anymore. It was done. Her father had made his choice, and now they all had to live with it.

He couldn't accept that she was a lesbian, and no amount of badgering by Rachel was going to convince her that he'd changed his mind about that. Not after the things he said that night. Not after what he did. He was probably only making the token effort to keep Rachel off his back. He always called her a nagging harpy when she got on a roll. Well, that wasn't the kind of apology that would make up for what he did.

She had her pride too, and she refused to be someone she wasn't to keep him happy. It wasn't a sacrifice he'd made for her when he'd fallen in love with Rachel despite being married and having a family. He'd done what he wanted, been the man he was, and sod 'em all. Well, she was his daughter. So sod him.

"Every time you rebuff him it... Well, it's like another piece of him dies."

"And you think it doesn't kill me too? You think it doesn't rip my heart out a little more every time, knowing that my own father can't stand

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me? That he hates me because of something I can't change, that I can't do anything about?" She shook her head. "He made his choice and his feelings perfectly clear when he hit me and threw me out of the house." She lifted her hand towards her face but let it drop before she could touch the cheek her father had slapped. In the dead of night sometimes, she could still feel the way her flesh had burned under that blow. "I love him. Despite knowing that he hates everything about me, I still love him. But I can't trust a word that comes out of his mouth anymore."

Rachel's hand closed over her own, stilling her fingers. "It's okay, honey."
"I'm sorry if it's causing you problems with him."

Rachel barked out a harsh laugh as she wiped at her eyes. "Rhi, I'm big enough and ugly enough to take care of myself. And I'm more than capable of handling your twat of a father. Excuse the language."

Rhian sniggered. "Don't worry. I've heard the term before."

"I'm sure." She chuckled along with her. "I'm sorry."

Rhian shrugged. "Not your fault. He—"

"No, I'm sorry for how I froze that night. I've wanted to say that ever since you came out to us and all I could do was sit there and stare while your father turned into a man I didn't even recognise." She ran her fingers through her dark hair, now shot through liberally with silver, letting the strands ripple down her shoulders.

"It was more than five years ago," Rhian said quietly.

Rachel leant back in the chair next to Rhian and ran a hand down her back as she hunched over the desk. "Long overdue, then." She continued to rub Rhian's back in small, soft circles.

Rhian couldn't look at her. She knew there'd be tears in her eyes, and she knew she wouldn't be able to hold back her own if she saw Rachel all emotional too.

"I'm so proud of you." Her hand disappeared from Rhian's back as she stood, then she felt the pressure of Rachel's kiss on the top of her head. Rachel's hands curled over her shoulders and squeezed tight. "I know this is a huge project, kiddo. And I know I haven't always been the best when it comes to giving you the chances you should have had in this place. But this is it, Rhian. This is your chance to shine, and to show not just me but the rest of the bastards in this place exactly what I know you can do. Because you can. I'm sure of it."

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Rhian put her hand over Rachel's and pulled until she was hugging her from behind.

"There's so much riding on this, I can't... Doesn't matter. I know you'll do your best and you'll make it work."

"Thanks." When Rachel squeezed her shoulders tighter, Rhian hung her head and drew in a shuddering breath. They stayed like that for a few minutes before Rachel nudged her and pulled her arms back.

"Okay, enough of the mushy stuff. Get back to work."

Rhian chuckled. "Yes, boss."

"Make me proud, kiddo," Rachel murmured.

Rhian looked up, tears spilling onto her cheeks.

Rachel sniffed loudly and blustered out of the room again, muttering *bloody kid* under her breath. Rhian wiped her face on her sleeve and determinedly pushed away the emotions threatening to engulf her. Rachel had faith in her. Rachel. Her Rachel thought she could pull off a project. And not just any old project. Just the biggest, most amazing project the company had ever landed.

"Fucking hell," she whispered, popped open the envelope, and peeked in at the tickets and travel itinerary. She wriggled around in her seat.

"I'm going to Patagonia!"

CHAPTER 2

“NORTHWEST ELECTRICAL, MAY I TAKE your name, please?”

“Jim Brown.”

“Good afternoon, Mr Brown. I’m Jayden. How can I help you today?”

“The ’leccy’s gone off.”

“Your electricity is off. When did it go off, Mr Brown?”

“About two minutes before I got on the phone to you. I’ve been on hold for half an hour now.”

Jayden glanced at the screen and saw he’d been on hold for only ten minutes. *The muzak’s bad, mate, but I’ve heard worse.* “I’m very sorry about that, Mr Brown. I need to ask a few questions to try and figure out what’s happened. Is that okay?”

“If it gets someone out here to sort it, fire away.”

“Is it all the electricity or just say the lights or just the plugs?”

“Everything’s dead, love.”

“And if you look outside, can you see street lights, or lights or appliances on in other houses?”

“Hang on.” Crackling down the line indicated he’d put the phone down. Distant muttering and cursing followed before his voice was clear again. “The street lights are on, and it looks like the woman across the street’s trying to compete with Blackpool’s Illuminations over there. Every light in the house must be on. That enough?”

“Yes, thank you. Do you know where the fuse box is for your house?”

“Under the stairs.”

“Okay. We need to take a look at the fuses and see if they’ve tripped. If that’s what’s caused your power to go off, then we should just be able to reset it, and you’ll be good to go again.”

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“Bloody hell. Hang on a minute.”

Jayden glanced at the clock. 4:45 p.m. Only fifteen minutes until she was finished for the day. *Let's hope I can drag this call out that long. I don't fancy any more today.*

“Right,” Mr Brown said, huffing. “I can see all the fuses, and they're all where they should be. The lights and the telly are still off. Now what?”

“Okay, Mr Brown, let me just check a few details with your account to make sure there aren't any issues or any problems in the area.” She quickly paged through several screens and closed her eyes when she located the problem. “Mr Brown?”

“Yes. You sending an engineer round?”

“No, I'm afraid I won't be able to do that. When was the last time you topped up your electricity?”

“Eh? You what?”

“You're on an electricity metre. You go to the shop to put money on the key and then top up your account, right?”

“I don't. That's bloody daft, that is.”

“Your account's been on a metre for four years, Mr Brown. Does your wife normally take care of the top-up? Or someone else in the house? Perhaps you could ask them when it was last loaded up?”

“Can't ask the bitch. She's gone and fucked off with her fancy fella.”

Shit. “I'm really sorry to hear that, Mr Brown. Looking at your details, though, and given what we've looked at, it looks like your metre just needs topping up with credit to bring your electric back on.”

“How the bloody hell am I supposed to do that?”

“You take the key and go to the nearest shop that does top-ups.” She tapped a few keys on the computer. “There's a shop about a hundred metres from your house that does them. If you go there with the key, they'll put the credit on it, then you insert it into the metre, and your electric will come back on.”

“And the heating?”

“Are you on electric heaters?”

“No, gas.”

“Erm, then you'll need to speak to the gas people about your gas problems, sir.”

“Bitch. I bet she's got that on one of these bloody metre things an' all, hasn't she?”

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“I’m sorry I couldn’t be more help to you, Mr Brown.”

He sighed heavily down the line. “Not your fault, love. I’m sorry I’m being a grumpy old bastard. I just don’t know where anything is or how it all works. She took care of everything in the house, you see. I went to work and earned the money. Now she’s gone off and left me, and I don’t know what to do without her.”

“It must be really hard for you, Mr Brown.”

“Listen to me blathering on. You don’t need to be hearing my sob story.”

“It’s all right. We’re a help desk after all. Here to help.”

He laughed, but it sounded sad. “Not this kind of help. Anyway, sorry to bother you. And thanks.”

“Not a problem. I hope you get everything sorted out.”

“Aye.”

She rang off the call and watched as the clock ticked over to five o’clock. She signed out of the phone system, logged off her computer, and slung her bag over her shoulder as she made her way to the door.

“Jayden, we’ve talked about your call times before,” Steph, the twenty-one-year-old office manager, said before she could open it.

Jayden turned and looked at her. “And?”

“You know we have targets we need to meet.”

“And customers who need to be satisfied. Sometimes that takes longer than five minutes.”

“Not if you follow the script.”

“Yes, if you follow the script. Sometimes they have junk blocking access to the metres they need to read, or fuses to flip. Sometimes they’re old, and they don’t move very quickly.”

“Then you should gently encourage them.”

Jayden shook her head and turned her back on the young woman. “Whatever,” she said as she shoved open the door and left the petty issues of the office behind her.

The evening sun on the rare spring sunny day beat down on the busy pavement, and the odour of tarmac, diesel fumes, and sweat hung in the air. She crossed the road to the bike rack, slipping her helmet and sunglasses on as she glanced across the street for traffic. She quickly unlocked her bike, put the saddle back on, and clipped into the pedals as she set off.

Manchester in rush hour was no place to be. Manchester in a car in rush hour was a hell she couldn’t stand. She cranked the pedals hard, building

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momentum as she clung to the curb down Piccadilly, and within a few minutes she was coasting around the roundabout and onto the A6. She had places to be and people to see. Well, one person, actually. But an important one.

The nursing home had sprung up from the swimming baths she and her sister had played in as children. A place they'd begged her mother to let them go every chance they had. A place their mum had eventually told them to stop bothering her about. Now it was an expensive private care facility for those suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's disease. It was clean. It was well decked out. But it was still clinical, as all care facilities were. It was still sterile and had the lingering smell of antiseptic wherever you turned. Still, that was better than the other odours that could be dominating the place.

Jayden pulled up outside the front door, secured her bike to the fence rails, and stowed her helmet and gloves in her bag. She used the corner of her T-shirt to wipe her sweaty brow, re-secured her hair with a band at the nape of her neck, and pushed the buzzer for entry. One of the nurses waved at her as she signed in at reception and slinked over to her.

"Don't you drive?"

Jayden frowned at her. "I'm sorry?"

"Every time I see you, you're on your bike. Don't you drive?"

"Oh, well, I have a license, but I don't see the point in having a car. I like being on my bike. It's easy to get around everywhere, and it keeps me in shape." She shrugged, wondering what else the woman wanted to know. Her inside leg measurement, perhaps.

"I can see that." She smiled wickedly and held out her hand. "I'm Debbie, I've just been assigned as your mum's primary care worker."

Jayden's cheeks warmed under Debbie's direct gaze as it flicked up and down her body long enough to both make her feel uncomfortable and help her ignore the empty feeling in the pit of her stomach. The one where happiness used to be. The one that had sat empty for almost a year.

"Oh, right." Jayden shuffled her bag to her other hand and took Debbie's hand. "Jayden Harris."

"The mountain climber, I know."

Not anymore. Not since she'd flown out of Everest base camp and walked away from the Nepalese branch of Adventure Trekkers, much to her sister's—and co-owner's—dismay. But Fen simply couldn't be in two

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places at once—Patagonia and Nepal—and Jayden wasn't fit to be in any place at all. So Adventure Trekkers Nepal was no more. It wasn't the only outfit that had ceased operating out of Everest's base camp in the wake of the avalanche. Far from it.

"So you're working with my mum?"

Debbie cleared her throat. "Yes, yes I am. She's had a good day today. She wanted a bath earlier, and she had a walk around the garden after lunch. She seems happy."

"That's good."

"Yes. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you. Want me to show you through?"

Jayden shook her head. "I'm good, thanks." She pulled open the door to the corridor that led to the main sitting area. The patio doors onto a small walled-in courtyard were open. The scent of lavender and roses drifted in on the warm breeze. People sat in chairs around the edges of the room, and she couldn't help but think how it looked more like a doctor's waiting room than the place where every one of these people lived. A young carer wandered around the room with a trolley full of plastic cups, a big jug of water, and a kettle full of tea. She asked everyone who was awake if they wanted a drink and supplied them. Most were asleep. Or pretending to be.

Can't blame 'em. I'd want to sleep through this life too.

Michelle Harris was asleep—really asleep—in the far corner, her back to the open door, her hands wrapped around a Maltesers box, and a scowl painted on her face. Jayden snickered as she sat in the empty chair beside her and pulled her phone out of her pocket. While her mother slept, she replied to a message from her sister with a picture of their sleeping mother and started to scroll through Facebook.

Over the past nine months since Michelle had moved into the nursing home, Jayden had quickly learnt not to wake her mother. It never went well. It was far better to let her sleep. Even if she slept through the whole visit. Jayden had long since come to the conclusion that it really didn't matter. Not to her mum, anyway. She didn't remember she had a visitor from one moment to the next, and increasingly Michelle didn't recognise her. The visits were for her own sake. Both Jayden and her sister knew it.

A message popped up on her screen.

Don't let her sleep through the whole visit. I wanna Skype with you guys. I'm back at base, waiting.

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Jayden rolled her eyes. Half a world away, and her big sister was still trying to boss her around.

You know what she's like if I wake her. She gets in an awful mood. I'm not doing that to her just because you've finally gotten your arse back to semicivilisation at a decent hour!

Bitch.

And?

Seriously, is she okay?

Jayden looked at her mum with a critical eye. She looked thinner. The tall, wiry frame she and her mother shared was beginning to look little more than skin and bones. Her dirty-blond hair, also like Jayden's, was normally full of curls, long, and a little wild. Today it looked lank, perhaps a little greasy. Strange since she'd supposedly had a bath earlier. But maybe she'd bathed and not let them wash her hair. It wouldn't be the first time the stubborn woman had done something like that. Her clothes were clean, even though her cardigan was on inside out. It was highly likely that at some point throughout the day, Michelle had taken it off and put it back on herself that way.

She looks fine. They're taking good care of her here.

Good job. It costs a fucking fortune.

Good job your company's doing so well then, isn't it?

It isn't just my company, Jay, and you know it. Whether you're out here working with me or not, it's still half yours. Argentina, me, Nepal, you. Remember? So, when are you getting your arse back outside?

Ten past never gonna happen.

LMAO. I'll believe that only on my deathbed, Mogo.

Jayden scowled at the use of the nickname Fen had christened her with when they were kids and started out climbing. Mogo—short for Mountain Goat—had stuck around longer than any of the other nicknames they'd

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used for each other over the years. And way longer than Jayden wished it had.

Fuck off.

Come out here and make me. You need these mountains just as much as I do.

Jayden chuckled at the familiar yet childish banter. But Fen was right, and as much as the thought of stepping foot on the ice again terrified her, Jayden knew it. She did need them. Almost as much as the air she breathed. She wasn't going to admit it. But she knew it.

Leave me alone, I'm doing important work here.

What? Playing games on your phone?

Bitch.

Get your own insults, Baby Sister, and stop stealing what's mine.

Ignoring you now.

Yeah, yeah. We'll see.

Jayden shook her head and switched apps, opening up her games. She smiled as she made sure her mum was still asleep. Fen was right. She was over in Argentina, running their company and sending back all the funds they needed to keep their mum in the facility Jayden had chosen. Fen was working tour after tour to make ends meet. Jayden worked for just enough to cover her own rent and food money while she sat and watched it all drift by. It wasn't fair to Fen, and Jayden was honest enough to admit that. But when was life ever fair?

"Who are you?"

Jayden snapped out of her reverie and looked at her mum, a big smile slipping onto her face as she turned. "It's me."

Michelle scowled, flailing out and catching Jayden's cheek in a noisy slap. "Get away from me! You're robbing me! Help! Help! She's robbing me! Help me!"

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Jayden jumped up from the chair and moved away quickly as her mum's fists and feet set into attack mode. "It's all right. I'm not robbing you. I'm not going to hurt you. It's okay."

"Help! Help! Someone please help me!" Michelle rolled her head against the back of the chair, screwed her eyes shut, and held her hands out in front of her in a gesture of surrender. "Please don't hurt me!"

"Mum, it's okay. It's just me. No one's going to hurt you. No one, I promise."

Debbie appeared at her side. "Maybe you should move out of sight. I'll try and get her to calm down a bit."

Jayden nodded and moved away. She backed up as far as the doorway and stood so that she could see into the room but not be easily seen by her mum. It took Debbie half an hour of gentle coaxing to get Michelle to calm down enough that she could leave her.

It wasn't the first time her mum hadn't recognised her, and it wouldn't be the last. It was quickly becoming the norm. She swallowed heavily and pushed away the feelings. There was more than enough time for those when she was alone.

Debbie approached her slowly, a gentle smile on her lips. "I'm not sure it would be a good idea to go back in tonight."

Jayden shook her head. "No, I'm sure it wouldn't." She didn't look away from her mum, now wandering about the room, picking up anything she could lift and looking at it against the light. "Thank you for calming her down."

"It's what I'm here for. Can I get you something before you go? A drink, maybe?"

"No thanks. I'm good." She pushed the strap of her backpack higher up her shoulder and slid her other arm through. "Thanks again for helping Mum." She didn't wait for Debbie to answer; she just strode off down the hallway and out the doors.

The sun was starting to set, but grief clung to her. She needed to shake it off, to get away from it. She needed the silence and the vastness she'd never found anywhere but the mountains. But the mountains were no longer her refuge. Now they were the stuff of her nightmares.

She clipped into her pedals again and zipped out of the car park, then turned off the direct route home to take a detour, turning and riding with

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no direction in mind, no destination to reach but exhaustion. The night held little allure for her anymore, and sleep was an infrequent visitor.

The roads had quietened somewhat, but traffic was still everywhere as she rode the miles until her thighs ached, her lungs burned, and her mind was blissfully quiet. Then, and only then, did she make her way to her flat. She shouldered her bike, climbed the stairs, and opened the door.

“Hi, honey, I’m home,” she whispered to the empty, lonely space.

CHAPTER 3

RHIAN WAS TIRED. THE BUSINESS-CLASS seat on the plane was comfy enough, but even her headphones couldn't block out the wailing baby behind the bulkhead to the economy-class seats. For twenty non-stop hours. Rhian had no problem with children, as long as they were quiet and didn't approach her unless asked to. Okay, so she was fairly Victorian in her approach, seen and not heard, and all that. But what the hell? She hadn't subjected the world to her spawn, so why should she have the spawn of others thrust upon her?

The airport at El Calafate was a small one compared to Heathrow, but it had everything it needed. Passport control, duty-free, luggage carousels, and a clean toilet. Bonus.

She ran in to use the facilities. She swilled water over her face and peered into the mirror assessing the damage. Her grey eyes were bloodshot, and the sandpaper behind her eyelids wasn't helping. She gripped her shoulder-length blond hair, fastened it with a band, and slid it through the back of a baseball cap she'd stashed in her backpack.

She'd changed into dark blue denim shorts and a light green button-up shirt while still on the plane. They fit well over her slim frame, but the creases of travelling were impossible to miss. Ah well, not much she could do about it now. Not convinced she'd pass for human, she walked out of the bathroom and out of the airport and to seek her transportation.

Rachel had been thoughtful enough to organise her a Jeep and driver for the duration of her stay, so she didn't have to wait for a taxi or the bus to take her to El Chaltén, 220 km away. She would be forever grateful for this act of kindness. And the sleep.

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Her driver, Carlos, seemed content to let her be after loading her bags in the back of the Jeep and offering her a bottle of water. She'd almost emptied it before succumbing to the gentle sway of the vehicle as they sped along the national road around the south-eastern shore of Lago Argentino—the largest freshwater lake in Argentina, fed by glacial meltwater, and a stunning turquoise blue—before turning onto Route 40.

“Miss Phillips.”

Rhian shook awake slowly.

“Miss Phillips.” Carlos's heavily accented voice broke through her weariness and tugged her back to the crisp sunshine that beat down on her. A swift wind tugged her hair all over as the topless Jeep motored along the ribbon of tarmac towards—

“Oh my God.” Rhian stared ahead at her first glimpse of the towering sentinel that was Mount Fitz Roy. Streams of snow and ice clung to the cliff, and the formidable shadows of crags and overhangs disappeared into buttresses and crevasses. Its massive stone bulk stood tall and proud eleven thousand feet and growing over the flat plains of the steppes as they sped closer.

“The massif, Miss.” Carlos pointed through the windscreen.

“So I see.”

“I thought you would want to see.”

“You thought right, Carlos. Thank you.” She smiled but couldn't manage to tear her eyes away from the majestic beauty of Cerro Fitz Roy and the surrounding massif. It was spectacular. The sun was setting behind them and reflecting onto the jagged monolith, and its surrounding peaks turned the orange granite a palette of rose-pinks and golds. Slowly, the sun dipped lower until only the tip of Fitz Roy was lit, the jewel in the crown of the Chaltén massif.

“Does it always do that?” she asked, barely able to make herself heard over the roar of the wind.

Carlos laughed. “No, miss. Often you cannot see it for the clouds.”

“Then I'm very lucky.”

“Are you hungry?”

“Now that you mention it, yes. I'm starving.”

He flashed her a smile. “I had my wife pack some things for us for the journey. Can you reach the blue bag on the back seat?”

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Rhian turned in her chair and leant over to grab the bag and hefted it forward. "It's heavy." She grunted. "What did she pack? The whole cow?"

Carlos chuckled. "No. But maybe the whole sheep."

Rhian opened her eyes wide and popped her mouth open in a comical mask of shock. "Please tell me she cooked it first."

"How do you like empanadas?"

"Never had one before."

"Sandwiches de miga?"

Rhian shook her head and started lifting packages from the bag. "I've had sandwiches from all over the world, though, so I'm guessing that'll be fine. What's the other one you said?"

"Empanadas?" he asked, and she nodded. "They are little pastries. Isabella makes the most delicious empanadas, with beautiful sweet lamb or cheese and corn." He waved at the little packet she was holding close to her nose. "Take one out. You'll love it, I'm sure."

The little pastry looked very similar to a small Cornish pasty. The filling was completely encased in a pastry crust with a sealed edge, like a circle folded in half. It smelled delicious. And Carlos was right. The meat inside was so tender it melted in her mouth. She moaned her appreciation before swallowing. "Carlos, if you ever divorce your wife, tell her I'll marry her if she'll make these for me."

He chuckled and picked one up from the open paper in her hand. "Maybe I ask her to teach you how to make them instead."

Rhian shrugged. "That could work too, I suppose." She popped the remaining bite of the pastry in her mouth and hunted through the bag for one of the sandwiches. The crustless, thin white bread was stuffed with wafer-thin slices of meat, lettuce, and tomato. "What kind of meat is this?"

Carlos took his gaze briefly off the road. "Wild boar. Do you like it?"

She nodded. "It's just like ham but a bit, I don't know, stronger maybe. More meaty or piggy. God, I must be tired. I'm not even talking sense anymore."

"I understand what you mean. When I was in England, I had your bacon and ham, and you're right. It does taste weak compared to this. This is full of flavour. Proper meat."

"When were you in England?"

"Hm, many years ago now. Maybe ten or twelve. It was before I married."

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Rhian finished her sandwich and picked up another of the small pastries. “Were you there for work?” She bit into the cheese-and-corn-filled empanadas. “Oh my God, this is so good.”

Carlos smiled again. “I will tell my wife how much you enjoyed her cooking when we get to El Chaltén tonight. She will be very pleased and no doubt send me with breakfast for you in the morning.”

“You won’t hear me complaining.”

“Yes, I was in England to work. My family were sheep farmers for many generations, I went there to learn different ways of farming. I stayed for two years. After the second winter, I decided to come home and find a wife. It was time to, how you call it, make roots?”

“Yup. And she’s called Isabella?”

“Sí.”

“Do you have children?”

He shook his head. Rhian thought he seemed sad. “Not yet. We have been married now for eight years, but still no little ones for us to spoil.”

“Do you still farm?”

“No. My father left the farm to my elder brother when he died. He was a drunk with very bad luck at cards.”

“So now you’re a driver?”

He shrugged. “Now I do whatever I can to pay my bills and feed my wife. Today that is driving. Next week, who knows?”

“That’s sad.” Rhian grasped her water bottle and took a sip.

“That’s life.”

“Hm.” She took another small drink, then put the lid back on. “It’s still sad. Do you want me to get you a drink?”

He leant forward and pulled a small bottle out of the pocket on his door. “I have one, thank you.”

“How long have you lived in El Chaltén, then, Carlos?”

“For five years now.”

“And what’s it like?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, is it a good place to live?”

His smile stretched across his lips. “It is a wonderful place to live. It is a new town. It was only founded in 1985, and it is still growing. Still developing. There are around two thousand settlers in the town now, and

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many, many more during the summer when the tourists come to hike and climb. We are very proud of our town, and we work very, very hard to make sure it stays, how you say, pristine?”

“That’s right. Pure, clean.”

“Yes, pristine and preserve for the future. Only native species of plant and animal are found. There is not, how you say, dirt...no, ref...reuse... what is word?”

“Refuse? Rubbish?”

“*Sí*. No refuse. We recycle and have program to take away all refuse. Thank you.”

“That’s great. It sounds wonderful.”

“It is beautiful. Did you know that Chaltén means ‘smoking mountain’?”

“No.”

“Most often times when you see Cerro Fitz Roy,” he said, pointing to the magnificent giant, “it has snow or mist billowing from the summit in the wind and it looks like it is smoking. That is where this whole area gets its name from. El Chaltén. The smoking mountain.”

“I can’t wait to see your town.”

“Tomorrow, weather will be good, and you can see El Chaltén. Tonight, not so much. Too much darkness when we arrive.”

“No street lights?”

“*Sí*, some. But only very little.”

“How much longer till we get there?”

“An hour or so. Maybe a little longer.”

“I think I might take another nap.” He nodded and kept his eyes ahead as she let her heavy eyelids slowly close to the sight of Mount Fitz Roy glistening in the moonlight.

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BY ANDREA BRAMHALL

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