

# TROUBLED WATERS

SUSAN MAY  
WARREN

  
Revell

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Susan May Warren, *Troubled Waters*  
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Soli Deo Gloria

# Prologue

Oh, this was a bad idea.

Epically, abysmally, horrendously bad. The kind of betrayal that just might end any hope of resurrecting Sierra's already tattered relationship with her former boss/friend/the man she couldn't seem to stop loving.

Billionaire heartbreaker Ian Shaw.

Not that she and Ian had much in the way of friendship over the past year, but . . . well, the hope of reigniting that ember between herself and Ian still flickered . . .

Oh, who was she kidding? Sierra never had even the remotest chance of Ian seeing her as anything more than his former secretary, and her current decision had everything to do with regret, redemption, and the hope of putting things right. So maybe it didn't matter that this could backfire on her.

Besides, it was high time Esme Shaw came home. And if anyone could engineer a homecoming, it was Sierra Rose, former executive secretary and current administrative assistant of the PEAK rescue team.

Sierra stood on the broken pavement in front of a three-story

foursquare house that had lived a former, grand life as a stately, prairie-style home, with its boxy frame, overhanging eaves, and deep front porch. Situated in the historic neighborhoods of up-town Minneapolis, it seemed the perfect place for a fugitive to hide.

Light from the third-story dormer windows suggested someone—hopefully Esme—was home.

Except, the name on the postal records said Shae Johnson, a nice Swedish name that Esme, with her wheat blonde hair and blue eyes, could certainly pull off.

Sierra stepped up to the porch, past the early autumn clutter of decaying gold and red leaves. She pressed her hand against her stomach, blew out a breath, and pushed the doorbell.

The sound bellowed through the house.

Sierra listened for footsteps, her heartbeat pounding against the dying echo of the gong.

Maybe she hadn't recognized the tentative, halting voice on the recording. After all, she'd listened to nearly two hundred leads.

What were the chances that *she* would be the one to land Esme's call—and not Ian, or even Ty, who had helped Ian sort through the nearly seven hundred calls that came in after the *America's Missing* episode.

Ian had engineered the episode, detailing the case of the remains of a Jane Doe the team had found in Glacier National Park last summer. He clung to the wild hope that finding Jane's true identity would somehow lead to clues about Esme. Especially since the sheriff had supposedly found a gold necklace like the one Esme owned on the body. Only problem was, the body turned out not to be Esme's, and the whys of how the necklace came to be on the victim were still unknown.

It had Ian plotting scenarios that kept him awake, pacing and generally obsessing over finding his missing niece. Sierra couldn't live in his world any longer.

Not when she believed in her heart that Esme didn't want to be found.

At least not by her uncle Ian.

Footsteps echoed from inside the house, and Sierra braced herself as an image formed in the cut glass of the front door.

Maybe she shouldn't have gotten involved, shouldn't have succumbed to the need to fix the past.

Esme going missing had sort of, just a little, been Sierra's fault. And she'd invested four long, dedicated years running down every lead Ian stirred up. Most of all, helping vet callers gave her, pitifully, the smidgen of a reason to stay on Ian's radar. Or at least keep him on hers.

Despite the better sense that she should completely walk away from a man who had surely walked away from her.

Or at least let her go without a backward glance to her years of dedication.

The door opened.

A short brunette stood in the frame. She wore a maroon University of Minnesota sweatshirt and yoga pants and stood barefoot despite the nip of the late-August evening.

"Can I help you?"

Not Esme. She remembered Esme's voice crackling through the recorded line, just a little breathless and tentative enough to interject truth into her words.

*"Jane Doe was murdered. I saw it all. She was pushed to her death off . . . off Avalanche Creek."*

Which exactly matched the cause of Jane's death—blunt force trauma. And the location of the remains.

And why, perhaps, Esme had run. Was still running.

"I'm looking for . . . Shae. Shae Johnson—"

"Sierra. What are you doing here?"

Although Sierra had wildly hoped to be right, that finally

she'd be able to look into Esme's beautiful blue eyes, pull her into her arms, maybe weep with relief, nothing prepared her for the sight of a grown-up Esme Shaw. With raven-black hair, a tattoo sneaking up the side of her neck, and rows of piercings outlining her ears.

She stood with one hand on the polished stair rail, wearing a pair of ripped skinny jeans and a tank under an oversized flannel shirt rolled up past her elbows. She wore her hair down, straight and pushed back behind those deeply studded ears.

Yet she still possessed stunning blue eyes.

Had it not been for those blue eyes, Sierra might not have recognized the woman she'd known as a headstrong, lovestruck teenager embroiled in a Romeo and Juliet romance so many years ago.

Only, in this scenario, Juliet had lived.

Esme headed down the stairs, glanced at her pixie friend, and grabbed Sierra by the hand. "You'd better come inside."

She yanked Sierra across the threshold and closed the door behind her. And then, as her friend/roommate raised an eyebrow, Esme stepped back and crossed her arms over her chest. Considered Sierra.

Okay. So not quite the homecoming moment Sierra had imagined.

"Esme—"

"Shae, please." She didn't glance at her friend, who frowned. "Esme died a long time ago."

"No, she didn't," Sierra said softly, and then, because she couldn't help it, she put her arms around the girl.

Shae didn't move to embrace her back. But she shook, her breath shuddering.

Sierra leaned back, took the girl by her shoulders, and met her eyes. "No one knows I'm here."

Shae exhaled, but her face still bore a shade of question.

"Not even Ian."

Shae nodded then and glanced at her roomie, who was clearly enthralled by the sudden mystery of the identity of the woman she knew as Shae. "This is my uncle's secretary and my, um, friend. Sierra Rose."

"Brittany Pierce," said the woman and shook Sierra's hand.

"We need to talk," Sierra said to Shae when Brittany let her go.

"I gotta run," Brittany said. "I have class. Shae, you coming?"

Shae's gaze never left Sierra's. "Nope. Tell the group I'll meet them later." She nodded up the stairs for Sierra to follow.

Four bedrooms upstairs, and Shae's faced the tiny fenced-in backyard. A college student's bedroom, evidenced by the books piled on the floor, a painted blue chair pulled up to the chipped table Shae clearly used as a desk, and on it, a laptop.

A comforter lay tousled on the twin bed, and another chair acted as a bedside table, complete with alarm clock and an iPhone. A black and white poster of Marilyn Monroe hung over the bed, and a lime-green painted chest of drawers anchored the far wall.

An eclectic mix of garage sale finds, creatively overhauled.

Shae pulled out the chair at the desk, offered it to Sierra, and sank onto the bed, pulling up her leg to embrace it. She wore black nail polish on her toes, her fingers. "How'd you find me?"

Sierra sank down on the chair. "Your phone call."

"I didn't leave my name."

"Ian set up a system that traced the GPS location of the calls—"

"Isn't that illegal?"

"Maybe, but Ian was desperate."

"I thought you said he didn't know!"

Sierra held up her hand. "He doesn't. I hired a guy, and he found you—or at least where you placed the call."

Shae stood up then, walked to the window. "It was just a stupid



impulse. I saw the show and thought—I couldn't let him get away with it anymore . . . and then I got scared and hung up."

Sierra let those words sink in. "Which is why you didn't leave the name of the killer, I'm guessing."

Shae nodded but didn't look at Sierra.

Sierra sighed. "Jane Doe's name is Sofia d'Cruze, by the way. She was a foreign exchange student from Spain."

Shae had her back to her, her arms folded over her chest, her fingers pressing into her arms.

"Esme—Shae, you saw it, didn't you? The murder?"

She nodded.

Silence.

Finally, she turned. Wiped her fingers under her eyes. "Dante and I saw it." She blew out a breath, came back over to the bed, and sat on it. She leaned against the wall, grabbing her pillow to her chest. "We were running away together."

Sierra didn't move, didn't even nod, the fight rushing back to her. The dark memory of Ian finding Esme and her boyfriend, Dante, in a romantic clench. Ian's fear that his grand plan for Esme's future might unravel. His ultimatum that she break it off with Dante.

And his despair the next morning when Esme vanished. All of it could have been avoided, maybe, if Sierra had just told him the truth about the teenagers.

"I loved him." More tears, slow and streaking down Shae's cheeks. "I was so stupid."

"You were young."

"I was . . . entitled. I had no idea what Uncle Ian had gone through to give me a future. I thought he was being a dictator, demanding that Dante and I break up." She closed her eyes. "I was such a fool."

"Esme—"

She looked up, the mascara now gathering in the wells of her eyes. "Really, it's Shae. Esme was a privileged brat."

Sierra closed her mouth before it sagged open.

"Esme got her boyfriend killed."

Sierra stared at her.

"We were hiking out, down the trail along Avalanche Creek, when we heard fighting. Dante told me to get down, and we watched as a man tussled with this Sofia woman. He slapped her, and Dante was furious. But we were on the other side of the river—there was nothing we could do. I wanted to shout, maybe distract him so the woman could get away, but Dante told me to keep quiet."

She stared straight ahead, her voice falling, as if seeing it again.

"And then the man pushed her. She went flying into the ravine, and I . . ." She shuddered. "I screamed." Her eyes closed, as if in pain. "I screamed. And the man turned and saw us."

She opened her eyes, looked at Sierra. "Dante grabbed my hand, and we took off, back up the trail. I thought, if I could get to Uncle Ian . . ." She reached over and pulled a tissue from a box on the floor. Wiped her eyes, the mascara washing off in a wave.

She swallowed, blew out a breath, leaned her head back. "We didn't make it. I don't know if it was me—I was freaking out, maybe slowing us down—but the man ran down the trail and over the bridge and caught up with us. He . . ." She made a noise, something of grief or horror that seemed to shake through her. "Dante tried to protect me. The man had me by the neck, ripped off my necklace, and Dante tried to wrestle him off. He distracted him long enough for me to get away. I ran down the trail and hid in the woods . . ." She nodded then, as if settling upon the truth. "He killed Dante as I watched. Then threw his body in the river."

Sierra couldn't move.

"I ran. And just kept running. I don't know how, but I found

this little house in the woods. And a woman there who calmed me down. I could barely speak, let alone tell her what happened. I spent the night there, and she took me to the other side of the park, and I just . . . just kept running."

*Just kept running.* "Why didn't you come home?"

Shae shook her head.

"Shae—"

"No, see, he's still out there."

"How do you know? He might be dead or a tourist or—"

"He's very much alive. And still living in Mercy Falls." And that was when Shae looked toward the window at the twilight that had begun to fall over the skyline of Minneapolis.

Sierra tried to scramble her words into a coherent thought. "Do we . . . does Ian know him?"

Her stomach clenched when Shae nodded. "Which means that you're safer if you don't know."

"Shae!"

"He can't hurt you if you don't suspect him." She got up, tossed her pillow to the floor. "I should have never called. I was . . . angry. And I just kept thinking of the way he . . ." She breathed in. "I loved Dante. The last thing he shouted was my name."

Oh, Shae. Sierra got up and reached out for her, but Shae held up her hand. "I'm okay. I've moved on. I had some money, and I used it to get me to Fargo, North Dakota. I got a job and finally moved down to Minneapolis. Became Shae along the way. And now I'm in my second year at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. I'm starting over, and so should Uncle Ian."

"Ian is obsessed with finding you."

Shae sighed.

"He loves you. And he blames himself for you running away."

Shae tightened her lips, and Sierra thought maybe she'd hit a hot button.

"Please, just meet with him. Tell him you're alive. Explain to him—"

"And get him and everyone I love killed?"

Her words shuddered through Sierra. "Really?"

Shae lifted her shoulder. "Maybe. I don't know. But . . . wouldn't you do anything to keep someone you loved safe?"

"Ian has resources. He can take care of himself. Give him a chance. Come home, tell him your story, and let him bring Dante's killer to justice."

Shae's jaw tightened.

"He's mentioned offering a million-dollar reward for anyone who knows anything about your disappearance."

Shae sucked in a breath. "No, please, he can't—"

Sierra held up her hand. "I'll try and talk him out of it—"

"He'll do anything for you, Sierra. Please."

Sierra wanted to wince. "Uh, no, he won't. Not only do I not work for him anymore, but we're barely talking."

"What? Why?" Shae grabbed her hand now, a strange show of panic. "You two belong together."

Sierra just stared at her.

"I wasn't so consumed with my own problems that I couldn't see that Uncle Ian was crazy about you. What happened?"

*You vanished.* But Sierra kept her mouth closed, shrugged.

"Listen, you have to be there for him. He needs you."

Sierra didn't have the strength to rehash the past four years, to argue with her. "No, he needs *you*. Come home. Let him protect you—you know he can. At least long enough to set things right and let him go on with his life."

Shae let go of her hand. But she didn't argue. "Okay, I'll think about it. Give me a month."

A month? But Sierra nodded.

"And in the meantime, please, please, don't tell Uncle Ian."

He'll just fly out here and . . . well, who knows. He wasn't exactly rational last time I saw him."

He wasn't likely to be rational about a killer after Esme, either. Or the fact that Sierra might be harboring another secret from him, the very reason he fired her in the first place.

But Sierra knew a little about needing space to figure out her next step.

"Okay, one month. And then I'm telling Ian whether you come home or not. He deserves to know."

Shae drew in a breath but finally nodded. "Deal."

Deal.

One month. And then the nightmare ended.

Or not.

Because she just might be repeating the mistake that had cost her the only job, the only man, the only life she ever wanted.



# 1

SIERRA SHOULD HAVE brought marshmallows.

Maybe set up camp chairs.

Asked Ben King, country music star and fiancé of her best friend, Kacey, to show up and croon out a ballad, something about a gal down on her luck.

Then she could have sold tickets to the gawkers watching the Mercy Falls fire department douse the wreckage of her collapsed house with fuel, cordon off the area with their fire hoses, just in case, and set on fire the only place she'd really called home.

Sierra had to joke, had to find a reason to laugh, or she would dissolve into tears. All of eastern Glacier National Park was on fire, her team was on a fire-related callout, and she was here watching her house burn to the ground.

"It's just a house, sweetie." Blossom, her mother, put her arm over her shoulders. She looked fresh out of the sixties in a paisley sleeveless maxi dress and her long brown hair in two braids.

"Yes, but it was *my* house," Sierra said, and tried not to let a sigh creep into her voice. Her mother would simply tell her to snap out of it. There wasn't a problem Blossom couldn't solve, a happenstance that she couldn't figure a way through.

Even if she had to change her name, her residence, even her boyfriend . . .

That wasn't fair. Because for all her quirks, Blossom had been a good mother.

She'd taught Sierra how to survive, how to just keep moving forward.

Even though she'd shown up to watch—well, along with a horde of other neighbors, the entire volunteer fire department, and even a few kids from Willow's youth group—as the pile of rubble that used to be her home turned to ash.

"You could live in a yurt."

"Blossom."

"They're bigger than they look."

Sierra turned to her, and Blossom held up her hand. "Fine. For the record, I liked your house. It was . . . creative."

"It was old. The floors sagged, the walls barely had any insulation left, and the kitchen addition tilted to one side."

"But you filled it with love."

No, she'd filled it with garage sale specials.

But she had painted all the walls, fashioned furniture out of scraps, and generally turned the house into a place that felt cozy. Safe.

A place where she belonged.

"Yeah, I suppose." Sierra folded her arms over her chest, took a long breath in as she heard the rumble of the dozer churning its way up the alley.

The firemen wore their turnout pants and helmets, leaving off their jackets for this ho-hum fire exercise. They dragged hoses around the house to the backyard, which had eroded away in last summer's flood.

A few of the neighbors had hooked up their own hoses, just in case embers landed on their roofs.

One of the firemen lit a torch, and a murmur rippled through the crowd. She glanced behind her, longing to spot one of her PEAK teammates.

But no—they'd been called out this morning to rescue a couple of firefighters who'd been injured trying to outrun a raging fire in eastern Glacier National Park.

The fire had ignited near Saint Mary Lake, in the drought-dry forest in the eastern part of the park, and a week later over four hundred wildland firefighters from across Montana, Idaho, Washington, and even Minnesota battled to control nearly four thousand acres of inferno.

Separated from their team, two firefighters had outrun a spur of flame, jumping over a cliff to escape the blaze.

Into that inferno, her PEAK rescue teammates flew to rescue them.

Really, they weren't her *teammates*. She stood on the outskirts of the team; she was the assistant, the one who filed reports, paid the bills, cleaned the office, and yes, sometimes baked cookies.

All the same, it hadn't stopped Sierra from swiping a radio from PEAK HQ, just to keep up with the rescue. Not that they needed her, but recently Chet had let her man the squawk box, taught her the rescue codes, and generally upgraded her from all-around Girl Friday to a quasi member of the team.

Maybe someday she'd even get to ride along in the chopper.

Rescue the lost, just like Pete, Gage, Ty, Jess, and Kacey.

Even superstar country music star Ben King had his SAR creds, helping out when he wasn't on tour.

Which meant that just because she could bake a mean batch of chocolate chippers didn't mean that someday she wouldn't be one of them, saving lives, swapping stories, dusting off from near-misses.

Becoming someone who changed lives. Not left on the sidelines.



"Sierra, you need to sign here to authorize the fire department to, well, burn your house down."

Deputy Sam Brooks had sidled up to her, holding a pen and an authorization form. He glanced at Blossom, gave her a quick smile. "Hello, Blossom."

"It's nice to see you, Sam."

Sierra never thought her mother would take sides after Sam broke up with Sierra for her kid sister, Willow. Still, the way Blossom grinned at him, slipping her arm around him even as he tried to hand Sierra the authorization, seemed a tad *too* forgiving.

Oh, it wasn't Sam's fault he fell hard for Willow, with her long brown hair, beautiful hazel-blue eyes, winsome smile. Willow never made waves, had an encouraging word for everyone, and frankly had been the best thing that happened to Sam.

Sierra had never belonged with Sam, and everyone knew it.

Except maybe the one person she wished had noticed.

"Where do I sign?"

Sam indicated the line, and she scribbled something, hopefully her name.

He nodded the go-ahead to the fire chief, ironically one of the deacons at church, who then walked up to the remains of her life.

Lit it on fire.

The house went up with a whoosh of flame, which then trickled up the broken boards and ignited the remnants of curtains, furniture, fabric. She'd spent a little time sifting through the debris to find pictures, but the house so completely tumbled in on itself, folding after the flood of the century took out the foundation, that recovering any surviving memorabilia meant risking her life.

It was just stuff.

Smoke lifted, billowed, darkening the sky and turning the air sooty. Her eyes began to water.

A fine mist from the fire hoses defended the nearby houses.

"I don't understand why you had to burn it," her mother said. "Why couldn't you just bulldoze it away?"

Because she already owed the bank thousands of dollars on her home, and having it bulldozed meant sinking more cash into land that she might never pay off.

"The fire department said they'd burn it down for free if they could use it as a training exercise." The dozer would bury the remains, and then she could sell it.

And maybe make enough to walk away, free and clear.

How she hated insurance companies and their fine print.

As if on cue, the giant dozer began to push the debris into a tight pile.

Something exploded, perhaps a canister from the kitchen, and the crowd gave a collective gasp. Sierra stepped away as the flames reached two stories, a hum to the fire now. Growing.

"I gotta run. The team is on a callout, and I have to check in," Sam said, glancing at her. "You okay?"

Sweet. But that was Sam. She should have loved him. Wished, sometimes, that she had.

Because then she'd have her happy ending neatly tied up. A future with someone who couldn't live without her.

A home. Family.

Someone to belong to.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said and managed to keep her voice even.

"I'll be in when they finish turning my house to ash."

Sam gave her a small, pitying smile, disentangled himself from Blossom's hold, and jogged to his cruiser.

The dozer continued to push the house in a pile, toward the hole in the earth.

"He's going to propose to Willow," Blossom said quietly. "He asked me, like he needed my blessing."

Sierra glanced at her mother, who now affected a tight smile. So

maybe she did harbor the smallest bit of deference to her oldest daughter's wounds, however healed.

But it had never been Sam who left the scars on her heart.

"That's Sam. He always does things right," Sierra said. And Willow, well, the sun just shone on her, even when the clouds seemed to close in.

Willow had gotten all the things Sierra longed for, without even trying.

"I told him that Willow wasn't likely to want to do anything that permanent—"

"Blossom!"

Blossom caught Sierra's hand, grinned. "I'm *kidding*. Of course Willow will say yes. I just don't understand you two. Willow, getting married. You, buying a home, setting down roots."

"I'm officially homeless."

"No. Home is where your heart is. Nothing wrong with letting the wind carry you. You just might find someplace you never want to leave." Blossom pulled her daughter in for a hug. "By the way, you can always come and live in the commune—"

"I'm fine at Jess's house. I even have my own bedroom now."

"Talk about a house that just might collapse." Blossom let her go, hitched her fringe purse onto her shoulder. "Any house you buy for a dollar . . ."

"She's proud of it. And at least it's paid for." She cast another look at the now-charred pile. Flames continued to lick through the black smoke.

Blossom gave her a kiss and headed for her truck, on loan from the commune.

Sierra crossed the street to her little hatchback, waving to the family across the street that was sitting on the porch, eating cookies.

She opened the door, sat in the front seat. She used to have a porch.

In fact, on that porch, she'd nearly told her former boss, Ian Shaw, that she loved him. Right before he said that perhaps they should just stay friends. Professional friends.

Not the kind who shared kisses she should probably forget.

She only had herself to blame for the wreckage of *that* relationship.

Maybe it was best the memories burned to the ground.

She picked up her phone, checking for calls.

No, checking for *the* call.

Exactly thirty-one days since she'd found Esme Shaw.

Er, Shae Johnson.

Every call she'd made to Shae since then went to voicemail. Which meant that Shae probably wasn't coming home.

For a moment, Sierra wanted to climb into her car and just . . . start driving. Let the wind carry her, like her mother suggested. End up somewhere far, far away.

Start over.

*Home is where your heart is.*

How she wished that were true.

Ian wasn't likely to forgive her for not telling him about Esme, regardless of Esme's request. She should simply resign herself to the truth that she'd obliterated any flimsy remnant of their friendship.

And she should start rebuilding from the ashes of her life. She had the PEAK team, after all.

She clicked on her handheld radio from PEAK, hoping to get an update on the rescue.

Jess's voice came over the line. "Ten feet, can you bring it in closer?"

She hated this part—waiting, listening, not able to do anything but pray. Especially since sometimes it felt like her prayers were akin to throwing a pea at a mountain and expecting it to move.

Sierra tried not to hold her breath, wince, or even grab the radio

to what—interject some encouragement? Right. Just listening to Kacey and Jess made her palms sweat.

Then, finally, Jess's voice. "Ready to load."

Sierra was watching her house sizzle when the explosion ripped through the coms. A terrible tearing of metal and wood.

Followed by a scream, keening and high.

"Jess!"

The coms cut to static—boneless white noise that crackled through Sierra like electricity. *Jess!*

Sierra caught her breath. In her mind's eye, she could see it. Ty Remington in the copilot seat, maybe EMT Gage Watson in the back, clutching the strapping in the cargo bay as the chopper spun out of control, careening toward some jagged gorge or granite mountainside, leaving Jess stranded on the cliff.

"Mayday! Mayday!" Kacey's voice broke through. "Mayday! We lost a rotor, and we're going down!"

Static again.

Sierra pressed her hand over her mouth, closed her eyes as the silence stretched out, leaving only the terrible thundering of her heart.

*Oh, please—*

Chet's voice came over the line. "Air Rescue, come in."

She pressed the radio to her forehead, her eyes closed, her heart slamming against her chest.

*Come in, come in!*

The static buzzed through her as, across the yard, the dozer pushed the ashes of her house into its grave.



After all his other failures this summer, Ian just couldn't let his best friend die.

"Dex—"

"Listen," Dex said, strapping on his helmet. "You showed up here yesterday all moody. If anyone needs to do something crazy, it's you, dude."

"I'm not—"

"I know you, bro. Something's eating at you, and usually that means you need adrenaline. Escape. Speed, right?"

He made a face. Dex was right. The faster Ian went, the more dangerous the stunt, the higher the risk . . . the more he escaped his memories.

And today, Ian wanted to forget it all.

Starting with the choking, acrid oil fires of eastern Montana that had turned once-lush prairie land to ash and incinerated an entire town.

On his watch. The software he'd developed was supposed to stop these kinds of drilling pressure accidents. His fail, his fault.

Then he'd erase the last four fruitless years of searching for a girl who didn't want to be found, especially by him.

And if he went fast enough, rode that adrenaline high enough, he might even destroy the brutal remorse over letting Sierra Rose walk out of his life.

So, yeah, probably he should get on his bike and gun it down the canyon as fast as his WR450F trail bike could go.

But jumping over Crawford Creek?

Ian had an inkling of where Dex might be taking them when they'd topped the bluff that overlooked the vast two hundred thousand acres of cattle and oil land in south Texas owned by the Crawford family since the land grant of 1897. Ian loved this view—the place where he first dreamed big, longed for his own spread. His own legacy.

He'd always hoped to return to Texas, but not this way. Not after watching everything he loved slide through his fingers.

Right now, he needed to feel anything but helpless.

He stared out to the track Dex had suggested they run. "This is insane."

"I *know*. I've been waiting to do this since our senior year in high school." Dex hiked his leg over his bike.

"C'mon, Dex."

"Don't tell me you haven't been planning this for years, Shaw. Nobody likes to go down listening to his own screams. You're aching for another go."

Ian sighed. He worked on his gloves, scanning the trail ahead.

"Okay, whatever," Dex said to his silence. "I'm doing this with or without you."

*With*. Ian's jaw tightened. He'd never been good at deterring Dex. But maybe he could keep him alive. "Fine. But I'm going first."

Dex raised an eyebrow.

Dex had the ability to make the jump. A thrill-seeker like Ian, he'd been the one who introduced Ian to the high of epic sports. Still . . .

"Like you said, I've been planning this for, well, years. I'm going first, and you're going to stay on my tail and do *exactly* what I say."

Dex beamed at him. "No problem, dude. I've been doing that all my life."

Hardly. Dexter Crawford, son of billionaire rancher John Crawford, marched to his own beat. But he *had* been listening to Ian since high school. Brilliant but dyslexic, Dex managed to stay in school by getting his foreman's son, Ian, to tutor him, even after they both headed to Stanford.

Ian studied the route. Once they got off the bluff, they'd hit it hard, cutting down over the rutted hillside, through the tangle of mesquite and juniper brush, bushy walnut and desert willow. At the bottom, they'd shoot out into the canyon, picking up speed as they cut through the lotebush and blueweed grasses, the downed and gnarled cottonwoods that lay along the edge of Crawford Creek.

The creek turned into a river during the spring, when the rainy season filled the draws and riverbeds. But now, the water ran shallow, with boulders protruding from the surface of the spring-fed creek.

The bank on each side rose twenty feet, and the rock face was striated with evidence of the water levels.

Ian knew exactly the place where they'd cross—a lip that arched just over the creek, adding lift to their takeoff. Only sixty feet, but . . .

He still had the scars from the pins in his collarbone.  
Not this time.

He needed this moment, this triumph. Could nearly taste it—not just the soaring, but the landing. Upright and not skidding across the dust to end up tangled in devil-weed.

He lowered his visor. "Okay, listen, Dex. Keep your eyes ahead, keep your speed steady, and stay on your feet." And then, just because, "Are you sure, Dex?"

"Am I sure? Please. Who taught you how to ride your first dirt bike?" Dex grinned at him, the curls of his hair just ducking out of his helmet. "And after we make it, I'll spring for dinner at the Hondo."

"It doesn't count if you own the place," Ian said. And then he smiled. "Fine. Keep up."

Then he gunned it.

Arms bent and loose, his body over the center of gravity, Ian loved the surge riding the bike gave him, the power, speed, the thrill of danger.

He'd never pinpointed exactly *why* he loved it—the hot adrenaline of jumping out of a plane, the surreal power of standing on top of a mountain peak, even the ethereal freedom of flying a glider, a hobby he longed to return to once he . . .

No. He probably needed to seriously consider selling the ranch, investing the funds in the rebuilding of Dawson.



And that began with admitting that his life in Montana might be over.

Gunning the throttle, he wound through prickly pear and yucca, ducking away from their spears, then shot out onto the canyon floor.

Dex's bike roared behind him. Ian had always wanted what Dex had—family, legacy, land.

But according to Dex, Ian was the son John Crawford always wanted.

Maybe they both needed to break free, soar, even for a few milliseconds.

Ian had geared up for his ride—chest protector, knee and shin pads, reinforced pants, elbow pads—and now sweat dripped along the ridge of his helmet and down his spine as he flew across the rutted land. The sky arched blue and bold in the distance, and the roar of the engine boiled up through him as the creek edge approached.

Sixty feet seemed like the Grand Canyon from here. And if he failed, he'd slam into the rocky bluff on the far side, then drop the twenty feet onto a boulder the size of a buffalo, crushing his bones to dust.

Sure, he'd jumped plenty of times in Dex's practice arena, two dirt hills they'd crafted, now grassed over, for exactly this trick.

He'd nailed it there at least, well, five times.

Yes, this was really stupid.

He dug in, gunning it hard to keep ahead of Dex, and shot toward the takeoff.

Behind him, Dex whooped.

The lip came into view, a tiny launchpad where the land rose naturally. "Keep your throttle steady!" Not that Dex didn't know that, but Ian had learned the hard way that if he gave it too much gas, the front wheel wheelied up and he could flip backward.

"And don't be a coward!" Because if he eased off the throttle, he'd nose right into the creek.

"And try and land on both wheels!"

Probably Dex couldn't hear a word he was shouting, so maybe his words were for him, because his last jumps had nearly yanked the handlebars from his grip when he'd landed too hard on the rear wheel.

Ian bent low and shot toward the ramp.

*Relax. Keep it easy.*

At the apex, he throttled hard, just for a second. Straightened his legs.

Launched.

And then he was airborne.

Flying.

Floating.

Time slowed, midair, just like it did when he skydived. Or stood at the apex of a mountain, breathing in the immensity of the view.

And in that moment, Ian didn't have to think, didn't have to plan, maneuver, calculate.

He had nothing but the roar of the bike and himself, soaring. Weightless.

He let out a yell, a burst of pure thrill, then extended his legs and watched the ground come at him.

The landing shook through him, rattling his bones and jarring loose his gut. But he held on, bouncing across the far side.

He braked, skidded, and turned to watch.

Oh no.

Dex had gunned it too hard coming off the ramp, and now his front wheel flipped up. "Straighten your legs! Get over the bike!"

But Dex had frozen, jammed up.

The crash happened fast, but Ian saw it in slow motion even before Dex hit. He'd given the bike enough gas to clear the creek, but the rear wheel smashed into the soft soil, unseating Dex even as the front wheel slammed into the earth.

The bike spun out beneath him, and Dex flew off, peeling through the brambles and grass, carving a swath into the dirt.

"Dex!"

Ian parked his bike and ran over to where Dex lay sprawled on his back, unmoving.

"Please don't be dead." He knelt next to the man, afraid to touch him. He lifted his visor.

Dex's eyes were closed.

"C'mon, Dex. Don't die on me." His brain scrambled for help. Not for the first time, he regretted not getting the first-responder training his buddy Sam had taught to the PEAK team and other volunteers way back when they were searching for Esme.

In fact, this might be exactly why he started PEAK. For stupid people like him who talked their buddies into reckless acts of bravado, only to get them—

"Stop your bawlin', I'm fine." Dex's voice dragged through a groan. But his eyes opened. "We made it."

Ian just stared at him.

"Calm down, Shaw." He held up his hand for Ian to help him sit up.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Clearly you haven't figured out that I'm unbreakable." Dex popped to his feet, but Ian saw the slightest wince. "But this means you're paying for dinner, pal."

Ian went over to examine Dexter's bike. Nothing broken, and he lifted it up, wheeled it over to Dex. "I hope you don't mind if I wash dishes, because as of this afternoon, I'm broke."



No one got left behind. Not if Sierra could help it. And if the best she could do was stay here all night until Jess checked in, then she wouldn't abandon her post.

"Jess, this is PEAK. Come in."

Sierra sat at the dispatcher desk of PEAK HQ. The sun hung low, long shadows pressed into the room, and the smell of burned cookies saturated the air. Silence except for the static of the radio.

She wasn't a rescuer, didn't know the tactics, strategies, and methods of the trained EMTs and mountain rescue specialists of PEAK Rescue.

But even Sierra knew Jess Tagg could die on that charred mountain if the team didn't find her soon.

"Jess, if you can't answer, just know we're not giving up. We'll find you. I promise."

Sierra leaned back, running her hands down her face.

"Anything?"

The voice made her turn. Chet had come into the office, looking as exhausted as she felt. He wore a PEAK team gimme cap and a blue windbreaker, lines of worry aging his face.

"No," Sierra said.

"How far has the fire progressed?"

She glanced up at the radar, the fire display Pete had procured for them to track the wildfires in the park. "It's heading toward Goat Mountain," she answered, her voice taut.

Chet ran his hand over a layer of white whiskers as he bent over the giant topographical map in the center of the room. "According to Miles, the fire has cut off the Ranger Creek Trail. The forest service is closing Going-to-the-Sun Road."

Oh no. After a year as the team's administrative assistant, Sierra possessed a thorough knowledge of the terrain of Glacier National Park.

Of course, the daily weather reports, the giant map plastered to the wall, and the numerous callouts that brought PEAK Rescue to all four corners of Glacier National Park helped.

Going-to-the-Sun Road traversed the park, east to west. "If they close the road, how will Jess get out?"

Chet stood up, and his mouth tightened into a grim line.

*Don't cry.*

Because rescuers didn't give up. At least the PEAK team didn't, and right now, she wanted to be just as brave, just as smart, just as dependable as Gage, Ty, Jess, Kacey, and Sam.

"Keep trying," Chet said.

She nodded and turned back to the radio, keeping her voice even, calm, just like Chet had taught her. "Tagg, PEAK, come in."

She should have guessed that the routine call would turn south.

With the firestorm on the mountain creating its own weather, what should have been a simple drop and extract had turned precarious.

Chet had filled her in when she'd arrived at PEAK. The wind had been cycloning at the top of the cliff, and Kacey struggled to hold the chopper steady enough to rig the ropes and haul the litter in. Thus, she'd lowered the chopper to the cliff's ledge. There, she held it while EMTs Gage Watson and Jess Tagg loaded the first injured firefighter into the chopper.

Sierra had heard enough stories from Pete Brooks and Miles Dafoe, their wild land firefighter experts, to visualize the flames torching the treetops, the choking black smoke, the toxic creosote and ash that hung in the air. The chopper only churned that debris up, clogging the air, blinding them, and whipping the fire back into a fury.

And with it, a rescue rope. It flew up and tangled in a rotor, and the rotor sheered off, crippling the chopper. Miraculously, Kacey managed to put them down at a nearby campground. All passengers safe.

Well, except for Jess. Who'd been left on the cliff.

And, in the two hours since then, unaccounted for.

Sierra had mixed up a batch of cookies as she listened to the follow-up rescue on the radio, where Ben and Sam took four-wheelers into the crash site. Her silly attempt at helping. Small comfort when lives hung in the balance, but that was her job. Pay the bills, clean the office, run the schedule, and make sure PEAK ran on all engines.

Which included the traditional, fresh-baked cookies for the team when they returned. She was responding to the timer beeping, turning it off and reaching for her oven mitts, when she heard Ben's words.

*"Jess is missing. We've patrolled the riverbed—she's not here."*

Sierra forgot the cookies, ran back to the dispatch desk. "Keep looking. Maybe she climbed up to the top of the cliff."

Next to her, Chet King shook his head in a sort of frustrated eruption. Mumbled something about wishing Pete was still around.

Yeah, well, her too. Because as their climbing expert, he would simply scale the cliff like a goat and find her. And maybe too, Jess wouldn't be walking around like a zombie, her heart in so many pieces Sierra didn't have a clue how to help her paste it back together.

Maybe. Or maybe, with Pete around, it would only worsen the heartache of seeing someone daily that you could never have.

That, Sierra knew too well how to deal with. Ignore and pretend.

While she called out for Jess, the cookies roasted to a crispy black, and smoke fogged the kitchen.

Oh yeah, she was a real asset to the team.

Somehow when she'd left her job as Ian Shaw's executive assistant over a year ago, she'd envisioned herself actually *contributing*. She didn't have the bravado of EMT Jess Tagg, or the mountaineering skills of EMT Gage Watson, or even the smarts of Sam Brooks, their deputy liaison, but she longed to be someone who made a difference. Like Ty Remington. Sure, he wasn't flying anymore, but he still went on callouts, assisted in searches, helped coordinate

rescues. And with Pete Brooks gone, moving on to greener pastures as a disaster incident commander with the Red Cross, she sort of hoped there might be a slot open to her.

Not that she had any training, really, but she could learn.

Someday wear the jacket, be a part of the PEAK team roster.

"I'm going out to the barn to check on the retrieval of the chopper," Chet said now. "Let me know if you get ahold of her. We're running out of time."

Sierra nodded, sank again into her chair, and repeated for the thousandth time, "Please, Jess, come in."

*Please.*