

# WAIT FOR ME

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WARREN



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# 1

HE WASN'T LOOKING FOR TROUBLE, but if Pete didn't act right now, at least one person was going to die.

And more than anything, SAR incident commander Pete Brooks was sick of failing, of seeing lives destroyed. Especially on his watch.

"You should wait." His co-rescuer, Aimee, grabbed the back of his shirt, as if to keep him from sliding down the slope into the churning black floodwaters of the Meramec River. The 218-mile river had overflowed its banks two days ago under a torrent of rain caused by the tail end of a Cat 4 hurricane that ravaged the Gulf Coast, then traveled northward. All six Ozark highland counties, nearly three thousand square miles, sat under grimy waters, and the rain continued to fall.

Pete and his disaster team had spent the past twenty-four hours hauling people off roofs, pulling them from debris, and searching for the unaccounted.

Now, heading back to their hotel in their SUV, they'd come upon a washed-out bridge. And in the frothing waters, a caravan, drowning fast in the swift current.

Please, let there not be a family inside.

"We don't have time. We need to move, now." The SUV's headlights scraped over the bridge, most of which was submerged, having taken a hit after an old railroad bridge from upstream slammed into the girders.

Pete had watched it happen, wanted to scream at the caravan edging its way over the swollen waters. He'd pumped his brakes, slammed the SUV into park, and was halfway out when the bridge collapsed.

"You can't go in there alone," Aimee said, scrambling up the bank after him.

"I'm not an idiot," Pete snapped, and instantly regretted it. It wasn't Aimee's fault he'd had barely four hours of sleep in the past day and a half. Everyone on his team was functioning on raw, serrated nerves, their veins pumping more coffee than blood. "Sorry." He turned to Jamie Walsh, who was climbing out of the SUV. "Walsh—throw me that rope and tie it off."

The recruit, ex-navy, all muscle and get-'er-done, pulled the coil of line from the back end and secured it to the jack. He tossed the rest of the coil, plus a harness, to Pete.

Pete pulled the harness on, one eye on the gray caravan as Aimee shined the Maglite on his movements.

"Don't lose them!" he said to Aimee. He could buckle on his gear in his sleep, for Pete's sake.

She directed the light across the frothy waters.

He clipped on the carabiner, buckled on a helmet, and grabbed the life jacket Walsh handed him. "Give me two more."

Walsh loaded him up, and Pete also grabbed another harness.

The roar of the river drowned the thunder of his pulse.

Maybe he *should* wait. Going in the water was always the last choice. The waters frothed, choked with debris and who knew what lethal underwater booby traps.

But now the caravan lay on its side, half-submerged, trapped

fifty feet downstream against a cement pylon that could give way at any moment.

"Turn the truck and keep the lights on the river," he said to Aimee, then glanced at Walsh.

Good man. He'd anchored himself in with webbing to a nearby tree and would belay Pete into the wash.

*Don't let go.* He wanted to say it, but it sounded, well, weak. Afraid. As if he expected disaster.

Although, with his recent run of luck . . .

Instead, "Call for backup," he said to Aimee, because, well, he *wasn't* an idiot. His simple plan in this torrent was to get whoever was trapped in the car out and wait for help.

The night sky was dark as ink, the drizzle insidious as it soaked his shirt, his canvas pants, and sent a shiver down his back.

He waded into the wash. The current nearly swept his feet out from under him.

He should wait. He nearly turned back, except for the voice lifting from the vehicle, haunting across the waters.

"Help!" A man had crawled out of the van and was waving his arms, screaming, the words eaten by the violence of the storm.

Pete still made out the word *child*. Went cold.

"Stay put! I'm coming for you!"

A tree with stripped arms twisted past him. Pete let it go, then plunged into the frigid water. It rose to his shins, then his knees. When it hit his waist and higher, he sprang out, swimming hard for the other side.

He'd always been a strong swimmer, but he was no match for the flow as it caught him up, tumbling downstream. Walsh belayed out his line, and twenty feet from the vehicle, Pete turned onto his back, feet downstream, and let the current have him, paddling hard with his arms for the right trajectory.

The river had yanked the caravan around, and the passenger

side was downstream, submerged. Pete slid by, grabbed the bumper, and wrestled himself around. He jammed his feet against the carriage as the water crested over him, filling his eyes, his mouth.

Gulping a breath, he forced himself up onto the vehicle's side. A man lay on the side of the car, reaching inside. He didn't look at Pete. "I can't get them out!"

A woman was wedged inside against the dashboard, her belt pinning her, her mouth just above the rising tide.

A toddler screamed in a seat just behind the driver's side, still above the rising waters, but—

"I got 'em." Pete pulled the man up and buckled his life preserver around him. "You need to get to safety."

"Not without my family!"

Okay, Pete understood that tone. And didn't have time to fight him. "All right. But put this on." He unhooked the second harness and handed it to the man. Then he took his belay rope and hooked it to the harness. "Stay put. I'll get your wife."

The man obeyed, his face grim in the shadows.

Shouting came from shore, probably from Aimee.

Pete unbuckled his helmet, shoved it into the man's hands, took a breath, and climbed in, submerging himself next to the woman. His hands scraped over her writhing body. Her grip clawed into his arms as he searched for her buckle and the other debris that imprisoned her.

Her legs were pinned against the dashboard, but if he could unbelt her, move the seat back—

His lungs burned, and he came up gasping.

The man was screaming. "It's over her head!"

Pete took another breath and plunged back into the depths. She clawed at him, frantic.

He found the buckle, popped it, and she floated up.

But not enough. Her feet were still trapped. He came up for air, gasping, as her hand clutched his shirt.

"You have to let me go, ma'am."

"I'm scared—"

"I know—trust me!"

She shook her head, but he grabbed her hands, wrenched them away—yeah, he probably hurt her, but it was better than dying—and plunged back in.

The seat was electric. Foolishly, he tried to move the seat back, then, in desperation, grabbed her and tried to tug her out.

His lungs turned to fire before he surfaced. The water had crested over her again.

Above him, into the night, the man was screaming, his hands entangled with his wife's. "Save her!"

Pete went back under.

He couldn't open his eyes and cursed his lack of equipment. But he'd see nothing in this darkness, and maybe damage his eyes in the dirty water and debris. Feeling his way around her body, his hand landed on the seat tilt-back lever. Miraculously, it was manual.

He popped it and gave the seat a push. It fell back.

She released, just enough for him to grab her around the waist.

He pulled with everything inside him.

Please let him not be breaking bones.

She came free and he propelled her up.

He surfaced, the water now at the level of the driver's seat. The woman kicked him in the face as her husband dragged her out through the window. Pete shoved the second life jacket at her. "Put this on!"

She coughed, doubling over. "My baby!"

Below, in the depths of the car, the baby was screaming.

He spotted more lights panning across the water, heard shouting. A glance toward the lights suggested more vehicles had arrived.

The tumult rocked the van.

"You both need to get to shore. I'll get the baby."

The man pulled his wife into his arms. "He'll get her," he said to his wife, talking of Pete.

And yeah, he would. Because when he said he'd do something

...

Pete unclipped his harness and worked it over her legs, around her waist. "Belt her in and clip her to yourself," he told the man.

He climbed into the back. The water lipped the bottom side of the car seat, rising fast. The child—maybe less than two years old—was wedged into the seat, facing backward, arching her back, screaming.

Pete found the buckle and unlatched it, pulling the child free and holding her above the rising tide.

The entire van shook as he climbed to the front. Pete shoved the child into waiting arms, and when he followed, he discovered that another man wearing a life vest and rescue gear had reached them. Pete recognized him from the private crew of volunteers out of Minneapolis. Somebody Jones. Military build, a grim set to his lined face.

A guide rope strung along the opposite bank. Another man from their team was maneuvering a raft into the water. Walsh still had hold of the belay attached to the husband.

Jones had unhooked the wife from her husband and was rehooking her onto the rescue line, not an easy feat with the husband clutching her.

Pete climbed up onto the seat, tried to reach for the baby, to hold it while Jones hooked the woman onto the line. "Trust me, ma'am. We've got her." She trusted him. He saw it in her eyes as she loosened her hold. He started to ease the child from her arms.



And that was when the cement pylon shifted.

The current caught the vehicle, tearing the child from his grip.

*The baby!*

The woman jolted from her perch as the van jerked hard into the current. She crashed into the water.

The van rolled over.

Pete was suddenly trapped, half in and half out of the window, under the car.

How he'd managed a breath, he didn't know, but the vehicle pinned him as the force of the water corkscrewed the vehicle into the wash.

And then he was slamming against boulders, darkness and water filling his eyes, his nose, his throat.

*Not. Like. This!*

He wouldn't die with blackness choking him, the river twisting him, pummeling him.

And not without seeing Jess one more time.

Even if the sight of her with another man might drown him more than this moment.

Pete kicked against the car, straining to shove himself away, his lack of breath searing his lungs.

Air. He ached for it, the burn compelling him to take a breath, draw in the lethal water.

*Not . . . yet . . .* His hand dragged against something firm, a pole—maybe rebar from the cement pillars that had buttressed the bridge. He gripped it.

The momentum of the vehicle, carried away in the torrent, tore Pete free.

His feet found bottom, and he surged to the surface with everything inside him.

Sweet, glorious air. He drank it in even as he fought the churn of rapids surging him downriver. The frothing water roared in his

ears as the gulf crested over him, swamping him. His shoulder sparked as his body slammed against a boulder.

He'd break a leg like this. Or worse.

*Lay back. Defensive swim.*

Pete fought to get his legs around, to sit back, to turn his body to ride on top of the water.

He'd never been good at surrender.

*Calm down.* He willed himself to take even breaths, despite the water sloshing over him, burning his eyes. *Float.* Just for a moment, to get his bearings. The roar filled his senses, the surge of it turning his body to ice.

He'd been in enough training scenarios to know that if he just kept his head, he could find a way to shore.

But wow, he was tired. The kind of fatigue that poured through him, turned his body to a rock. Probably the adrenaline of wrestling his way to the surface now dropping hard.

Or maybe the fatigue went deeper. The kind that seeped through his bones to his spirit. The weariness of striving. Wanting. Failing. Of trying to break free of his broken heart.

*"I choose you, Pete."*

Jess Tagg. Her voice had the audacity to linger in his head, and he hated it.

No, no she hadn't chosen him.

Not that he should have been surprised, really, in the end. He didn't know why he'd let himself believe in happily-ever-afters.

Ahead, a great shape burgeoned in the darkness, lights on it reflecting out onto the river. A bridge. Which meant submerged girders and lethal footings.

He'd break every bone in his body.

*"Pete!"*

The voice echoed over the rim of wave and froth, lifting then bouncing into the night.

He searched for it, thrashing. The roar of the river deepened. "Pete!" A light skimmed across him, and he followed it.

A raft. Speeding down the river in pursuit. A man—he recognized him from the other team—knelt at the helm, swinging a rescue throw bag.

The orange bag arched over Pete and dropped into the water past him. The rope shifted over him, the roughness against his legs, and he grabbed it.

But his frozen hands couldn't grip the slippery line. It ripped at his skin as it reeled out, the current wrestling him away from rescue.

*Don't let go!*

Maybe someone shouted, but the words rooted, found his bones. Galvanized him. He rolled over, kicking, winding the rope into his hands and tightening his grip.

"I got you!" The man on the raft was reeling him in toward shore. "Roll over! Put the rope on your inside shoulder."

His training kicked into his brain and he obeyed, letting the rope ease him to shore. The earth scraped his legs, and as he bumped onto the rocks, he rolled over to grip them.

The raft motored up to assist.

But Pete had already crawled his way into the mud and grass to pillow himself on land.

He rolled over, breathing hard.

The man piled out of the raft and knelt beside him. "You okay?"

Pete put a hand to his chest. Alive. Yeah, his heartbeat confirmed it.

In fact, it might be the first time he'd felt it beat since the woman he loved walked out of his life into the arms of another man.

He just needed to lie here awhile and try to figure out how to get back up.



Jess Tagg had nowhere else to run.

But it didn't mean she couldn't try. Except for the grip her fiancé, Felipe St. Augustine, had on her hand, she would have already been fleeing out the front door of the seven-story mansion located in the heart of what used to be called Billionaires' Row on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

Right into the throng of paparazzi just waiting to pepper her with questions, trail her every move, splash her grimaced face onto Page 6, and turn her into clickbait for a syndicated slew of tabloids that lit up the internet.

So, no, she couldn't flee out the gold-gated front door.

And she'd already tried escaping to the red-tiled roof patio earlier, where more guests had gathered for cocktails. Unfortunately, she'd spotted a couple cameras from the high-rise across the street. That was what she got for attending a fund-raising event that also included the likes of George Clooney and Ivanka Trump.

Thank you, Vanessa White and her philanthropy-minded superstar chums.

"Champagne, *ma chérie*?" Felipe set his empty glass on one of the skirted tables and motioned for a gloved and tuxedoed waiter to swing by with his tray.

"No, thank you," Jess said, her stomach too empty for anything bubbly. Or any of the canapés. The wasabi shrimp and avocado on the rice cracker churned in her gut.

What she wouldn't do for a ham sandwich.

Felipe glanced at her, his dark brown, nearly black, eyes running over her, a crease in his brow. "Are you all right?" He lifted his other hand, as if to touch her cheek, and she gave a quick nod.

"I'm fine."

His hand dropped away, just a flicker of something she couldn't

place in his gaze. He squeezed her hand, however. "I'm sorry about earlier. We'll go out the back, or—"

"It's okay, Felipe. I'm used to it."

His mouth tightened, but just then a woman slid up to him, her hand finding his tuxedoed arm. A tall drink of water, the brunette probably walked the runway for one of the haute couture houses in Paris. She wore a dress that gloved her body, black, with a slit that hit her high on the thigh. The high neck made of sheer lace only added to her regal demeanor. Jess felt a little garish in her red strapless asymmetrical sweetheart gown. Nor was she in possession of the fluent French that rolled off this woman's elegant tongue. Jess hadn't a hope of understanding the words, but she did notice Felipe's strange expression, the way he kept glancing away from her, anywhere but on the woman's face, on her curves, even as he answered her.

His hand heated, slicking with just a hint of sweat, in hers.

Weird.

Or maybe he hated being here just as much as she did.

They both needed air. Room to breathe. Think. Sort out the whirlwind of events over the past year that led them to today. Trapped in a room filled with socialites, billionaires, athletes, doctors, investors, aka the rich and famous of New York City.

Living a lie.

The weight of it could drown her.

The main ballroom of the 1917 mansion added to the suffocation, with its heavy dark paneling, ornate coffered ceiling, and parquet flooring. Oil paintings of bankers and cotton owners who had owned the twenty-thousand-square-foot home presided over the event. The home was now in the possession of a former basketball player for the Knicks. An athlete turned celebrity sportscaster who was into raising money for Doctors without Borders, a charity she could certainly get behind. Not that Jess had any

money to invest, but Felipe did, which kept them—him, but yes, because of the lie they perpetuated, her too—on social rosters and highbrow guest lists.

It also kept her conveniently in his folded grip. Not that she minded Felipe's hand tucked into hers—he'd been more than generous this year, sacrificing more than she ever intended or expected.

But that was Felipe. Surprising. Charming. Loyal.

Safe.

Not the kind of guy who'd ask her to dangle over a cliff with him. Or tell her to hold on as they drove a four-wheeler through a forest fire. Not bossy or flirtatious or impulsive.

Not dangerous.

"I'm sorry, *chérie*, I should have introduced you. This is Gabrielle Martinique."

Oops. Felipe had taken her silence for annoyance.

Wait. Gabrielle Martinique?

"Gabrielle," Jess said, finding her socialite smile. She held out her hand.

"And this is Selene Taggart, my fiancée," Felipe finished without a hiccup in his voice. She glanced at him, and he too wore a socialite smile.

Jess tried not to wince at the name of his friend or the relationship title. Or at the flicker of surprise, even hurt, that crossed the woman's face. So, the poor woman didn't know.

Apparently, the gossip hadn't yet traveled overseas.

"Nice to meet you," Gabrielle said, her voice a smooth ribbon of chocolate. "Felipe is a lucky man."

Jess wanted to cringe for Felipe, to take the woman aside and rescue his breaking heart. Because one look at his tight-lipped smile and the bob of his Adam's apple told her he was as trapped as she was.

What a mess she'd made for both of them.

"As am I," Jess said. "Although you can call me Jess."

Gabrielle frowned, and why not? No one on this side of her Jekyll-and-Hyde life knew her as Jess Tagg.

No, she'd always be, no matter how far she ran, Selene Jessica Taggert, heiress to the estate of former billionaire Damien Taggert, the man who had bilked thousands of investors out of their life's savings.

More precisely, she was his turncoat daughter who put him away to save her own hide, and maybe—according to a few websites she'd made the mistake of reading—squirreled away her own billions in fraudulently gained funds.

Never.

She'd left it all, money, name, and reputation, gladly behind and fled to Montana to rebuild her life with only pocket change and her own two hands. Had purchased a house for a dollar and remodeled it with every extra dime she earned as the EMT for a private rescue team called PEAK.

How she missed her house, the redolence of sawdust, fresh paint, and stain, the ache in her bones from a day of painting or sanding or even sheetrocking. With the memory came the image of Pete Brooks, dusted in white from sanding sheetrock or splattered with lime-green paint, grinning at her as they took a donut break.

She was suddenly ravenous.

"Felipe, you must take her to Paris again," Gabrielle said now.

Oh. So Gabrielle *did* remember her. Interesting.

"There is nothing like strolling down the gardens of the Palais-Royal in September," she was saying, her tone a little husky, inviting, her gaze on Felipe. "The entire city becomes a watercolor painting, especially the gardens of Versailles. And they have the most delicious *vin chaud*. Don't you remember, Felipe?"

He nodded, his smile pained even to Jess's eye, and she wanted to throttle Gabrielle. What was her game here?

Perhaps now might be the time to end the charade.

If it wasn't already too late.

"It sounds divine," Jess said and eased her hand out of Felipe's. "In fact, I think Felipe would very much like to return to Paris, wouldn't you, darling?"

Felipe frowned. Gabrielle glanced at him.

Jess met his gaze. *It's okay. Really.* "I'm going to go find a sandwich." She gave him a smile, something that hinted of the friendship, the truth between them, and left him there to have a real conversation with the woman he loved.

Her heart could break for all of them.

A cellist played in the corner, a Bach solo in G minor, and she stopped by the marble fireplace for a moment to listen before she spotted a waiter and followed him.

There had to be a kitchen somewhere in this mansion.

The stairwell circled up the middle of the seven stories, lit by a stained glass dome. She'd read that the place had fourteen fireplaces, an indoor pool, and a squash court, not to mention the elevator and the three terraces that overlooked 69th Street.

The waiter headed down to the main floor and she suspected even farther, to the original kitchen, located in the basement.

But no, he circled around to the back of the house, through a narrow hallway. She followed and emerged into a working culinary kitchen lined with stainless steel surfaces, a massive chop-block counter, and a kitchen brigade attired in chef's whites. Assistants filled trays with canapés and aperitifs while waiters unloaded their empty trays.

The general buzz of conversation and activity halted when a chef in a *toque blanche* looked up and cleared his throat. His mouth drew tight a moment before he forced a smile. "Can I help you?"



Oops. Running away and hiding in Montana for five years had made her forget the rules.

"I'm sorry. I'm just . . . I was wondering if you had something simpler than the . . . well, they are delicious, but . . ." She glanced at the canapés. "I'm so sorry. Thank you."

She shook her head and turned to leave, but a waiter banged through the door behind her, blocking her path.

Maybe she wasn't hungry at all.

She just needed air.

Turning, Jess made for a door across the room, the one propped open to let the steamy air of the kitchen escape.

The night might not be layered with the pine-laced, musty autumn scent of the Rocky Mountains, but at least outside she might momentarily escape the choices that left her hungry and raw.

"Miss—"

"I'm fine," she said as she stepped into the alleyway alongside the house. Narrow, maybe ten feet wide, the alley smelled of diesel oil, dirt, and not a little refuse.

But a cool breeze tickled her skin, and she descended the stairway, aiming for the private parking lot behind the house.

Where hopefully their driver waited in the Taggart family Cadillac.

The sickly sweet scent of cigarette smoke clouded the air, and she coughed, then put her hand over her nose—more for the combined scents of the alley than the secondhand smoke.

A garish whistle arrested her attention, followed by, "Selene Taggart. Making a run for it. As usual."

She glanced around for the voice and spotted a man, midthirties maybe, leaning against the opposite wall, half-hidden in the shadow beyond the luminance escaping the kitchen door.

He had dark hair, with enough of a thatch of whisker to be called a beard, and wore a black T-shirt, a pair of jeans, and a baseball

hat on backward. She recognized a logo on his shirt but couldn't make it out. Probably with the catering company.

The char from his cigarette glowed red in the darkness.

She ignored him, walking away.

"Oh, you're too good to talk to me?"

She glanced over her shoulder. "No. Just . . . please leave me alone."

"How's Daddy?"

She drew in a breath. "He's fine, thank you." Considering he'd had a heart attack and was serving 101 years in federal prison.

"Of course he is." The man had pushed off the wall. "Because even in jail, your type gets first-class surgeons and a fancy room."

She whirled around. "He's in prison. He didn't get—"

And she stopped herself. Because it didn't matter what she said. The public thought what they wanted, despite the truth. At every event, there were a few who showed up with signs, banners, and once even mud. She shook her head and turned around to keep walking. "I don't want any trouble. I'm just looking for my driver."

"Oh, your *driver*."

His steps quickened behind her, and she picked up her pace. But she was wearing five-inch stilettos and clearly he was wearing something more substantial because he moved around her, blocking her path. She stopped short.

"What are you doing?" she said, her voice more surprised than panicked.

"Scared?" he said, and smiled. With her heels, she was about his height, but he had a good hundred pounds on her. His eyes held something dangerous.

It lit a flare of panic inside her. She swallowed it down. "Please get out of my way."

"You smell good." He leaned in, as if to catch a whiff.

Hot panic flashed through her, and she slapped him. Oh, she

knew better—had been taught better, but sometimes she just . . . well, she reacted.

And then regretted.

The story of her life. Not anymore. Now she took pains to make sure people didn't get hurt. At least if she could help it.

He touched the back of his hand to his jaw. "Really? A man pays you a compliment and—"

"Please, leave me alone." Shoot, now her voice shook.

Noises from the kitchen, the traffic on 69th, the hum of air conditioners, and a thousand other city sounds spilled out into the street. But if she screamed, certainly someone would hear.

And then, oh joy, she'd land in the papers, again.

Better to flee. She turned, her eyes on the kitchen door.

He grabbed her left arm, snatching her back. "I thought you were heading to the parking lot." His fingers dug in, a vise grip on her flesh.

"Let me go," she said. "Or I'll scream."

He jerked her close to him, his breath on her skin. "Scream. Do you really think anyone would rush to save *you*?"

It happened fast, but she'd worked it out a second before she acted. She pivoted and used her momentum to slam her palm into his face—one, two, three hard hits that snapped his face back as she ripped her arm from his grip.

The man jerked away from her. "What the—"

She turned to run just as he gave a shout of fury and lunged at her.

Her beginner Krav Maga moves fled from her mind. She screamed, threw her hands over her head.

The rest she didn't figure out until later, after the cycling lights of the patrol cars, the ambulance screaming into the city, after Felipe drew a sane breath and she found her voice.

Her driver, a man named Kais, had saved her.

New to the family and hired by Felipe, Kais was dark, broad-shouldered, and had thick arms, as if he spent his off time at Gold's Gym. However, he attired himself as a driver, in a plain black suit and matching tie, and Jess had never given him any mind—until he grabbed her attacker and shoved him against the limestone wall and slammed his fist into his face.

Her attacker howled as blood spurted from his nose onto his shirt. He railed out, but Kais towered over him a good four inches, and in a second, he had the man cowed. He drove his knee into his chest.

"You're going to break his ribs!" Sure, the man had assaulted her, but the violence drove her into the fray. "Stop!"

Kais lifted the man up by his shirt and delivered an uppercut into his chest.

She could practically hear the bones crushing, see the bruises forming. "Stop!"

Her driver let him go. Just like that, Mr. Menace had turned into a victim, crumpled in the fetal position in the alleyway with blood pooling beneath him.

"What's wrong with you?" Jess glared up at Kais even as she knelt next to the man. "Lean forward—you don't want to choke."

A few of the kitchen staff gathered on the stoop.

"I need towels! Right now!"

"Ma'am," Kais started. "He was—"

"I know! Just call 911. We need an ambulance."

"You're going to be okay," she said, her voice pitching low. "What's your name?"

One of the female prep chefs had run down the steps and now shoved towels into her hand. "That's Ryan," she said, her voice shaky.

Jess pressed the towel against his nose and helped him sit up. "You gotta lean forward, Ryan."

He moaned, his hand across his stomach. "I can't breathe—I can't—"

"Shh. Don't talk." She looked up at the crowd. "I need help moving him against the wall."

She said nothing when Kais stepped in and dragged him under the armpits to the wall where only moments earlier he'd been dismantling the guy.

"Get me some ice," Jess said, kneeling again in front of him.

"Selene!"

She looked up as Felipe pushed through the crowd, practically falling down the steps to her. He took her by the shoulders.

"It's not my blood."

He seemed to take that in with a rattled breath, his dark eyes wide in hers, so much emotion in them she could probably give her heart away to him.

If it didn't already belong to someone else.

Someone from the crowd ran down the steps and shoved a bag into her hand. Cold and clammy, it was filled with crushed ice.

She turned to Ryan and pressed it to his ribs. "Hold this in place."

Sirens cut through the trauma, and it seemed everyone took a breath.

Ryan groaned, catching her hand on the ice pack, squeezing. His grip shook. Then, in a different voice than the one a few minutes back, this one broken, on shards of pain, "Why're you helping me?"

She looked at him, his wrecked, bloody face, her bloodstained hands, the tragedy of his behavior raw and ugly and nearly fatal, and had only one response. "Because you're hurt." She sighed, her throat thickening with so much truth she wanted to scream. "And I can't stand seeing people hurt."



"You're a very lucky man to have gotten out alive, Mr. Brooks."

Pete had heard that before—from his teammates, from his boss, from fellow incident commanders. Heard it after he'd survived a cave-in last year while digging out survivors in a fallout shelter. Heard it from Jess after they'd outrun a bear in Glacier National Park. Even heard it from his fellow teammates on his hotshot wildland firefighting team.

But hearing the words from the ER doc, a pretty woman named Hensley, who was dressed in scrubs and wearing the tragedy of today's events on her face, made him look up, gave him pause.

He didn't believe in luck—just guts and training and maybe a little good timing, but today . . . Pete's gaze flickered over to the man sitting across the hall in the opposite ER bay.

Pete had learned his name from Aimee—Roger Ellis. They'd had to sedate him when he first arrived.

Pete supposed they'd have to sedate him, too, if he'd watched the woman he loved drown.

"I'd like to keep you overnight, just to make sure your lungs don't develop a bacterial infection from the water—"

"I'm fine," Pete said and pushed off the table. "Discharge me. I have work to do."

Doc Hensley frowned at him. "Only if you promise to come back if you develop a cough or a fever."

"Yeah, whatever." He reached for the jacket he'd worn trying to keep warm after he and the team finally gave up the search for the woman.

They'd rescued the baby, however—a miracle, right there. She'd gone into the drink, but one of the boat rescuers swept her up and managed to revive her.

She lay in ICU, still fighting for her life.

"I'll send a nurse back with your discharge papers," Doc Hensley

said. "Try and stay alive, okay?" She touched his arm, smiled, a nod to the fact that she knew why he'd gone into the river. Why he'd shown up here nearly hypothermic.

"Thanks," he said quietly.

She left him and he stood for a moment, then gathered up his courage and walked over to Ellis. Took a breath. "I'm sorry for your loss."

A beat passed between them, then Ellis looked up. He bore the wreckage on his face.

His mouth opened, then closed, and he simply stared at Pete. Pete swallowed, his breath brittle in his chest.

"She had her," Ellis said softly. "She had her, and then you took her away."

Pete frowned, trying to sort out the man's words.

Ellis released a hot, shaky breath and stared past him. "Have you ever been married, Mr. Brooks?"

"No," Pete said softly. Almost, but . . .

Ellis made a sound deep in his throat. "Then you don't know what it means to love someone to the marrow of your body. To pledge to protect her, to hand over everything of yourself gladly knowing you never want it back."

Pete said nothing.

Ellis looked at him, his gaze raw with grief. "You don't know what it feels like to try and hold on to her, only to have her ripped out of your hands. Only to watch her disappear." He closed his eyes.

Pete had been among the men who'd had to drag Ellis from the water, thrashing, kicking. The man had landed a few blows, and Pete had the bruises to prove it. But now he said nothing, his jaw tight.

"You don't know how it feels to lose the love of your life," Ellis whispered.

Another beat, and Pete didn't know what to say, how to reach out and help. He shifted his feet, his jaw tight. Bowed his head.

"Don't you have *anyone* that you love?"

The question emerged harsh, almost accusingly, and Pete's head snapped up. He simply reacted. "Yeah, actually, I do. Her name is Jess."

Ellis met his eyes, something in them Pete couldn't quite read. But the man's grief blew through his defenses, and he found himself putting a hand on Ellis's shoulder. His voice cut low. "And I would be destroyed if anything happened to her." He considered his words and realized he meant them, even now. "So when I tell you I'm sorry we didn't save your wife, I mean it."

The man stiffened under his touch. "She had her, man. She had the baby, and if you hadn't tried to grab her—"

Pete withdrew his hand.

Ellis started to sob.

His throat thick, Pete finally eased away, his eyes burning. He could blame fatigue and perhaps the residual trauma of the night, but the man's words churned through him.

*"You don't know how it feels to lose the love of your life."*

Yeah, he actually did know how it felt to lose the person who made you feel whole. To have that person in your arms, only to let her slip away.

In fact, he still bore the bruises. Still harbored the regrets that chased him from sleep.

So, yeah, he knew what grief felt like. He was still locked inside it, and with little encouragement, Pete could crawl right back into the hospital bed, curl into a ball beside Ellis, and weep with him.

But it wouldn't help. Pete just had to keep moving.

He emerged into the ER waiting room to find Walsh waiting for him.



"They said they might keep you overnight," Walsh said as he rose from a chair.

"Just get me back to the hotel," Pete mumbled.

He followed Walsh out to the van, under the relentless drizzle, and got in, staring into the darkness.

"A bunch of us are having dinner in the hotel bar. There's karaoke."

Pete just shook his head.

A buzzing in his pocket made him dig out his cell phone.

A text from Ben King, country music star and part-time rescuer. His wife, Kacey, flew the chopper for the PEAK Rescue team back in Montana.

---

Pete! Are you coming to my wedding reception?

Your invitation came back Return to Sender.

The last thing Pete wanted to do was attend the gala wedding reception of his buddy Ben King.

He should have never given that verbal RSVP back this summer when Ben showed up married and announced the party after a SAR operation in Minnesota. Pete had clearly been suffering from a case of desperate hope that Jess might also decide to show up.

Pete texted back.

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Oops. On the road a lot. Address forwarding must have expired. Sorry. I don't know. Maybe.

The return text came back almost immediately.

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Don't let me down, bro. Bring a friend!

Pete tucked away his phone. He stared out the window at the wind and the rain.

"Everything okay?" Walsh said as he turned into the parking lot of the hotel.

"Yeah. Just the past, trying to find me." Reeling him back home.

Back to the place where it all began.

The place, maybe, where finally it could end.