

Chapter 1

I sit on a park bench overlooking the river. I pinch the bridge of my nose, wondering why I got out of bed. I sigh. I hate this day already.

I yank my long, brown hair into a ponytail, then close my eyes. The cool air smells like grass and pine. I'm glad I decided to wear a hoodie over my t-shirt. I'll end up tying it around my waist, but right now the extra layer is welcome. Plus, it's early. There will be less runners staring at me if I cry. I gaze at the sunrise. Brilliant pinks and purples fill the mountainous horizon. Birds dip and flutter over the rushing river, singing their morning reveille. It reminds me of the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana; my family's last camping trip.

This time last year, Dad took us hiking to our special spot. The river was so clear you could see giant fish, forty feet down, calmly swaying against the current. The only downfall were the flies. They were carnivorous!

I chuckle. Those were the days.

I focus on the horizon again. The sun peeks over the trees. Yeah, those were the days. The days before...well, now it's just me. It's been just me for eight lonely, miserable, heart-wrenching months. I take a deep breath and stand up, my jaw pulsing. Yep. Just me. Happy would-be fourteenth birthday, little brother. Thanks for dying and leaving me all alone.

I stretch my muscles before starting out at a slow jog. The path twists and turn with the river at a gentle incline. Pine trees, meadows and an occasional game trail border the opposite side of the trail. A breeze tickles the hairs on my neck, but I barely notice.

I pick up speed. The path passes a large hotel. Its terrace faces the trail, offering a view of the forest and river. There's a guy sitting at a wrought iron table. He has brown hair – short on the sides, but long and wavy on top. His leg is crossed over his knee, a cup in one hand and a book in the other.

He's been sitting at that same spot for the last couple days. Just him. Of course, it's just him. Who else in their right mind is up at five in the morning?

The guy glances up from his book. His jaw drops and he leaps to his feet. I'm yanked backward by my ponytail, nearly knocking me on my back. I yelp, grabbing at my ponytail. Adrenaline shoots through my veins, and my heart races, nearly pounding out of my chest. I glimpse the thick, burly man with a scraggly beard looking down at me. His eyes are wild. That's all I need for years of training to instinctively kick in.

I slam a hammer fist to his groin. He doubles over, releasing my hair. I elbow him on the back of the neck, knocking him to his knees. Another guy, younger and leaner, tackles me from the side. I'm slammed to the ground. I skid a couple inches, knocking the wind from my lungs.

I'm elbowing him in the face when he's yanked off me by the guy from the terrace. The guy uses a few well-placed strikes—a mix of Karate and Jiu Jitsu-- until my attacker is in a bloody heap next to his buddy, unconscious.

The man from the terrace returns to me and holds out his hand. "Are you alright?" he asks, his voice subdued. He looks pretty young. Not much older than me. Twenty, maybe?

"Uh..." Panting from the run-in, I look down, checking myself for blood. "Yeah, I think so."

I take his hand. He hoists me off the ground on to my wobbly legs. I wipe debris from my sweatshirt and leggings, hissing when I accidentally brush against exposed scrapes on my legs.

"Ooh. That doesn't look good," he says, wincing. "Come inside and I'll get you cleaned up."

I hesitate, glancing at the two unconscious bodies; probably local transients living by the river. He follows my gaze, pulls a phone from his pocket, and dials. After a moment, he says, "A jogger was just attacked on the trail outside the hotel. Can you take care of it? Thank you."

He drops the phone back in his pocket and looks at me. "Do you want to stay? Or would you prefer to get patched up?"

I shudder, imagining a dozen things these guys could've done to me. "Let's get outta here." I hold up a finger. "Hold on."

I walk to the leaner of the two guys and kick him in the ribs as hard as I can. I'm about to kick the other guy, when I catch a glimpse of his hand. His fingernails are clean, and well-trimmed. Odd for a transient. I furrow my brows, crouching to look closer. He makes a noise and starts to move. I straighten, and back away, trying to get distance in case he comes to. The guy from the terrace stares at me, slack-jawed. "What?" I shrug, making a face.

He snaps his mouth shut and blinks a couple times. "Uh, nothing." He gestures to the hotel with his head. "C'mon, you can use my bathroom to clean up."

He steps off the path, toward the hotel, but I shake my head. News articles about people murdered by their rescuers flash through my mind. "I think I'll use the lobby to clean up."

"You're probably right. For all you know, I could be the Boogey Man." He steps onto the path and glances over his shoulder. "The name's Drew, by the way."

I follow him into the grass. "Aleasha. And thanks for the help." I stare at his back. His shirt stretches over well-defined muscles. I bet his chest and abs are the same way. He's lean though, not bulky like Arnold Schwarzenegger. I like lean.

There's a wire fence bordering the hotel's property. Drew holds up a cable to let me through.

"Thank you," I say, glancing up at him as I pass through the fence. Wow. Seriously green eyes.

"You bet," he says, smiling.

We trudge up the incline to the terrace. He picks up his cup and book, before ushering me inside. "The lobby is this way." He points down the hall.

"How long are you in town?" I ask.

"I'm not sure yet. It could be a couple days, or a couple weeks." He shrugs. "I'm here until the job is done."

“What do you do?”

“Lots of things. Right now, I’m a head-hunter.”

“What’s that?”

“I recruit people for specific jobs.”

“How many people are you recruiting here in the city of Spokane, Washington?”

“Just one.” He looks down at me and smiles. He guides me to the front desk, his hand at the base of my back. Warmth rushes to the spot where his fingers are resting.

“How long have you been here?” I ask, trying to ignore his hand. *It means nothing, Aleasha. Cool your jets.*

“This particular visit? Or for this specific person?” He raises a brow.

I grin. “Both.”

At front desk, a girl in a white button-down shirt, long, curly blond hair, and way too much make-up, gives me a once over, her face clouding. “Are you all right?”

“She was running and someone attacked her. Do you have a first aid kit and a bathroom she can use?” Drew asks.

The girl, her name tag says Sandi, picks up the phone. “Do I need to call the police? Are they still out there?”

Drew shakes his head. “I’ve already made a call.”

Sandi puts the phone back on its receiver, then steps out from behind her desk. Her eyes travel up my body, resting on my forehead. “Yeah, sure. Follow me.”

She points to a door just inside the lobby with a restroom sign next to it. “You can go in there. I’ll bring everything to you.”

“Thank you,” Drew says.

“I don’t think it’s anything serious. Just some scrapes and bruises,” I say, as we stop in front of

the bathroom.

“You sure about that?” Drew steps closer, raising his hand to my face. I still, unsure how to react. On the one hand, he’s a stranger. On the other, he did just save me.

He gently pushes some rogue hairs off my face. I wince as the strands graze my forehead.

“Ouch.”

“Mmhhh,” he says, nodding. “Hurts, doesn’t it?”

“A little.”

Drew smiles, glancing into my eyes then back at my forehead. “Don’t move.”

He strides into the bathroom, runs the water for a moment, then comes back with a wet paper towel. He motions to my head. “May I?”

“Uh, sure.”

Drew gently presses the warm paper to my forehead, and I wince again. Pain throbs at the spot.

When he pulls the paper away, there’s a red splotch on the material.

“Is it bad?” I ask, suddenly wishing I could look in the mirror.

“It’s still bleeding, but I don’t think it needs stitches. Why don’t you check the rest of yourself out, and I’ll hunt Sandi down.”

I nod, watch him leave, then go inside and lock the door.

I glance in the mirror and groan. Leaves are sticking out of my hair, an eye is swelling, and there’s a pretty good scrape on my chin. Wow. I’m a wreck.

Sighing, I pick at the leaves in my hair.

Drew taps on the door. “You doing okay?”

“Yeah.” I open the door. “I look like I’ve been put through the ringer, but I’ll be fine.”

“Here you go.” He hands me a washcloth and waves a band-aid in front of my face. “I managed to wrestle this bugger from Sandi.” His eyes widen in mock seriousness. “She’s tougher than she

looks.”

I chuckle. Drew nods toward my head again. “Want me to put it on?”

“Uh, sure.”

While he’s carefully placing the band-aid over my cut, I say, “You didn’t say how long you’ve been here.”

“You caught that, huh?” He clears his throat. “I’ve been here six days so far.”

“And how long total for this specific person?”

A smile twitches at his lips. “About eight months.”

“Eight months?! You’re persistent. What makes this person so special?”

Drew grins then steps away, admiring his handiwork. “Well,” he hesitates. “I’ve had to do a lot of homework with this one. I’ve been waiting for the right time to approach them.”

“Why?”

“You never know how a person’s gonna react.”

“You’re recruiting them, right? For a job? That’s normally a good thing. Who wouldn’t be flattered by that?”

Drew tilts his head and thoughtfully gazes at me. “You wanna go to breakfast?”

I catch another glimpse of myself in the mirror and wince. “How about lunch instead?”