

Prologue

The American had stopped screaming an hour ago.

Now he only made thin, raspy sounds, except when Vicente made him scream again.

Vicente Ruiz circled his canvas slowly, taking his time, looking for the next place his blade would open. Blood covered his hands to the elbows, drying in the mountain heat. The mining structure's corrugated metal walls held temperature like a bread oven, turning the air thick enough to taste. The ammonia-sharp reek of urine and the pungent shit smell beneath it where the American's body had let go of everything. Fear sweat layered over all of it, sour and acrid, nothing like exertion sweat. Vicente breathed it all in deep. His element. His medium.

The American hung from meat hooks Vicente had installed himself months ago, back when he'd first claimed this place. Industrial grade, the kind they used in rastroos for sides of beef. He'd driven them into the support beam at the right height, high enough the body couldn't touch ground, sturdy enough to hold weight while it thrashed. The hooks passed through the man's shoulders, between the clavicle and the scapula, supporting his weight. His hands were zip-tied behind his back at the wrists, keeping them out of the way while Vicente worked.

The American had thrashed in the beginning. Ninety minutes ago. Back when he still had hope.

Pendejo turista. Solo backpacking through the Sierra Madre, in search of "authentic Mexico." Some bullshit about connecting with nature, finding himself, the real experience away from resort beaches and tequila bars.

Well. He'd found the real experience.

The butcher had stripped him first, as always. The clothes had been expensive hiking gear, North Face and Patagonia labels, waterproof this and moisture-wicking that. All of it was useless now, piled in the corner with the man's pack. The naked body hung pale against the dark metal walls, skin slick with sweat and blood, lean muscle from years of gym memberships and weekend hikes turning it into something aesthetic. Vicente appreciated that. A good canvas deserved good material.

The ankles had been first. Ten minutes in, he'd made quick, precise cuts through the Achilles tendons, the blade finding that thick rope of tissue and severing it clean. The American had sagged against the hooks, all that athletic muscle suddenly useless below the knee. His legs dangled, toes pointing down, calves and thighs still defined but utterly functionless.

The shoulders were always Vicente's favorite. Something about the way skin peeled away from the shoulder blades, the fascia underneath brilliant red and slick. The muscle fibers visible in their neat, organized rows. He'd done both shoulders, though the right side had torn more than the left—the muscle had seized under the blade, bunching tight enough to catch the edge. Vicente's grip had slipped on the blood-slick handle. It didn't matter. It still worked.

Before his voice shredded down to nothing but strained, airless hoarseness.

Vicente's cock had been hard since he'd started on the shoulders. That familiar pressure was building low in his belly, warmth spreading through his groin. He'd been edging himself with the work for over an hour now, watching the American's face, listening to the sounds, feeling the way the blade

opened flesh. Every time he got close, he'd stop, pull back, let the tension build higher. The anticipation was almost as good as the release.

Almost.

He walked around to face the American now. The man's eyes were still open but unfocused, pupils blown wide. Blood loss and shock had the body trying to save what it could, shutting down everything non-essential. His breathing came shallow and rapid, his chest barely moving. The skin had gone pale and slick with sweat despite the heat.

It was almost time to finish, but Vicente needed something first.

"¿Todavía conmigo? Are you still with me?" he asked, voice soft.

The sound that came back wasn't words. Just that wet gurgling, the Americans' ruined throat trying to form sounds it could no longer make. But his eyes shifted slightly and found Vicente's face, showing he was still present.

Good.

Vicente reached out and placed his palm flat against the American's chest, feeling the rabbit-quick heartbeat, the heat radiating through skin. His fingers traced down over ribs, feeling the definition there, the muscle beneath.

"I want to try something," Vicente said conversationally, as if he were asking for consent, though that wasn't the case. "Want to see how you react."

He moved his hand lower, fingers finding the American's ribs. He pressed in slightly, feeling for the spaces between bones. When he found one, he pressed hard, grinding his knuckles into the intercostal muscle, finding the nerves that ran there.

The American's body jerked. His mouth opened, and what came out was a scream stripped down to almost nothing because his lungs already gave everything it had. His ruined legs tried to kick even though the tendons were severed, feet twitching uselessly.

Vicente watched his face. He watched the pain register behind the shock, watched him try to process it and try to beg with eyes that couldn't quite focus.

Hermoso.

He kept the pressure steady for a count of ten, then released. The American's body sagged against the hooks, breathing even more raggedly now.

"That's the thing about nerve pain," Vicente said, moving his hand to a different rib. "It's so clean. No new damage, nothing permanent. Just signals firing, telling your brain you're being destroyed. The signals lie, though. You're still intact. For now."

He pressed in again. Different spot, different nerves. The American's body convulsed, each breath hitching shorter than the last.

Vicente's cock throbbed, the ache becoming unbearable. That edge he'd been riding for the last hour was right there, one good push away, and the sound the American was making, that broken animal desperation, was exactly what he needed.

He moved behind the American, pressing close. The hooks made it awkward, and he had to position himself carefully, avoid the worst of the blood pooling on the concrete, and find the right angle. He'd done this enough times to know exactly where to stand.

The Americans' eyes suddenly focused. Really focused, looking directly at Vicente with something that hadn't been there before. Hope was long dead. This was recognition. Understanding. The moment when the last pretense fell away, and he saw exactly what this was, exactly who Vicente was, exactly what was going to happen.

Abi está.

Vicente's breathing quickened. His hand moved from the American's ribs to the left shoulder, the clean one, where the flaying had been precise. His fingers found the edge where skin ended, and raw muscle began. The fascia was slick under his fingertips, the exposed tissue warm and yielding.

"I need to hear you one more time," Vicente whispered. "Can you do that for me?"

The Americans' eyes widened in some last desperate attempt at pleading, at bargaining, even though they both knew there was nothing left to bargain with.

Vicente worked his belt open with his free hand, the leather sliding through the loops with a sound that seemed too loud in the metal structure. He popped the button and slid the zipper down, then pushed his jeans and underwear down to his thighs. He needed skin, needed the release without ruining his only clean pants. His cock sprang free, aching hard, and the relief of just that small freedom was immediate.

He pressed himself against the American's bare thigh, the contact sending electricity up his spine. Warm skin, slick with sweat and blood. He could feel the muscle beneath, still firm despite everything. His hand gripped himself, and just holding it, feeling the pulse, was almost enough to finish him right there.

His other hand rested carefully on the American's shoulder, fingers against that raw red meat, feeling the pulse there, the blood flowing just beneath the fascia.

Then he pressed in hard, fingers digging into exposed muscle, finding the nerve bundles he knew were there from a hundred other canvases, pressing with all his weight.

The American screamed.

Really screamed, high and sharp and animal, the sound cutting through the thick air. His whole body convulsed against the hooks, every muscle firing at once, and Vicente felt it through the thigh pressed against his cock, felt the spasm and jerk of it.

His hips ground forward against the American's bare thigh, his hand working himself in rough, urgent strokes, his other hand still buried in that wound, fingers digging deeper, making the American scream again even though his voice was nearly gone. The orgasm hit Vicente in waves, and he had to lock his knees to stay standing, his vision whitening out at the edges, his breath catching in his throat. He felt himself spilling hot against the American's skin, felt it run down the man's thigh in thick rivulets, some of it splattering on the concrete below.

When it finally ebbed, Vicente stood there breathing hard. The wetness was cooling now against the American's leg, sticky and obscene. His fingers were still buried in that shoulder wound, and he could feel the pulse there getting weaker.

Slowly, carefully, he pulled his hand free. The wound made a wet sound as his fingers emerged, and he looked at them in the dim light filtering through gaps in the metal walls. Blood and something paler coated them, fat or lymph. He brought his fingers to his mouth, tasted copper and salt, then

pulled his pants back up with his clean hand. The denim was rough against sensitive skin, uncomfortable but necessary. He tucked himself in and zipped carefully.

The frenetic energy was gone now. That desperate need had drained away with his release, leaving something calmer in its wake. He could think again without that pressure clouding everything.

Vicente stepped back slightly and really looked at the American. The man was barely conscious now, eyes rolling, body hanging limp except for the occasional twitch. The deep red of exposed muscle, the purpling blooms where blood had pooled beneath unbroken skin, the white-yellow gleam of fascia, and his own release drying in pale streaks down one thigh. A map of what El Carnicero could do when he took his time.

Beautiful work. Not his best, but good work.

He reached up, almost tender now, and ran his fingers through the American's sweat-matted hair.

"There you are," he whispered. "Now you see me."

The American's eyes found his. No recognition was left, no understanding. Just animal pain and the fading awareness that death was close.

Vicente pulled out his killing knife. The blade caught the dim light as he positioned it against the American's throat.

The Americans' eyes flickered one last time, finding Vicente's face. Something passed between them, though understanding was too much to call it. He was too far gone for that. Just the simple acknowledgment of what came next.

"Gracias," Vicente whispered, and meant it. "You were a good canvas."

He pulled the blade left to right in one smooth motion, deep enough to matter. The carotid artery opened and blood sprayed across Vicente's face and chest, warm, almost hot, the smell of it filling his nose. The American's body did what bodies do. It jerked and convulsed. His hands, still zip-tied behind him, clenched and unclenched reflexively.

Thirty seconds and it was done. The blood flow slowed from spray to drip, and the light went out of his eyes completely.

Dead meat.

Vicente stepped back, breathing steady. The work was finished. Time for the rest.

He wiped his blade clean on the American's discarded pants, folded it closed, and tucked it away.

The killer turned the body carefully, both hooks still holding, until it faced east. Sunrise direction. His mother's voice in his head said the same thing she'd told him at his grandmother's funeral when he was six years old, standing over the open casket: *Los muertos miran donde nace el sol para encontrar el camino*. The dead look where the sun rises to find the path.

His mother had been full of superstitions. Vicente didn't believe in any of it. He didn't believe in devils or luck or wandering ghosts.

He turned them east anyway. Every single time. The one time he hadn't, he'd had nightmares for a week, the dead man's face staring west, eyes open and accusing.

Vicente reached up and closed the American's eyes. *Nunca dejes los ojos abiertos*, his mother had said at that same funeral, her hand on six-year-old Vicente's shoulder. *Los muertos te miran y te siguen*. Never leave the eyes open. The dead watch you and follow you.

He reached into the back pocket of the discarded jeans and pulled out the wallet. Flipped it open. Driver's license: Thomas Brewster, Phoenix, Arizona. Forty-three years old. The photo showed him smiling, tan, and younger. Behind the license, family photos in plastic sleeves showed two kids, a blonde wife, and a golden retriever—the whole American dream in laminated squares.

Thomas.

Vicente pocketed the license. They'd called him El Carnicero after the third job he was given. The Butcher. The name had stuck because of the way he worked, the time he took, and the attention to detail. Eighteen years of this, and the metal box in his closet held forty-seven driver's licenses, forty-seven canvases he'd taken his time with, enjoyed, remembered. Thomas would be forty-eight.

Vicente dropped the wallet and left the family photos behind.

He stepped back and looked at his work one final time. Blood was everywhere, on the floor, on the walls, on his hands and clothes. The butcher's craft, laid open for the mountains to judge.

He walked to the corrugated metal door, paused at the threshold, and looked back. Later, he'd come back and cut the body down, section it, and let the forest take it piece by piece. But not today. Today, he'd let it hang. Let the mountain air dry the blood. Let the coyotes and vultures find the scent, let them do what scavengers do—tear at the soft tissue, scatter what they could reach, drag pieces into the brush. They'd degrade the scene but never erase it. The hooks would still hold bone and leftover meat. The blood would still stain the concrete. His semen, his skin cells, whatever forensic evidence he'd left on and inside the body. None of it mattered. The people who collected evidence in Sinaloa worked for the same people Vicente did. No investigation would ever reach this room, and even if some lost hiker stumbled in and called it to the federales, the case would die in a desk drawer before anyone swabbed a single surface. Let any hiker unlucky enough to find this place see what lived in this forest.

Este es mi territorio.

Vicente stepped outside into the crisp air and breathed deeply.

The walk back to his truck passed through a pine-oak forest. Vicente's boots hit dirt, and his own breathing and the smell of blood mixing with crisp air were the only things registering. He didn't think about Thomas anymore. That part was done, filed away in the part of his brain that held all the others. What came next was practical: cleanup, disposal planning, and checking in with Javier.

His truck sat camouflaged under branches where he'd left it. Vicente stripped off his bloody clothes and tossed them in a garbage bag in the bed, so much for keeping his only clean pants clean. He'd burn them later tonight.

He pulled a jug of water from the truck bed and poured it over his hands, his arms, scrubbing with a rag until the worst of the blood was gone. Pink water dripped onto dirt. Good enough for now. He changed into a clean shirt and joggers from the supplies he kept in the extended cab, the pair he'd pulled down to his knees.

Then he pulled out the small bottle of Brut cologne and looked at it for a moment. That blue glass. That fucking label. His father had worn this cheap shit that miners used because it was all they could afford, all they needed for Saturday nights at the bar or Sunday Mass. Vicente unscrewed the cap, and the smell hit him immediately, made his throat close up, and made his stomach turn sour. His

father might as well have been standing right there next to the truck, watching what his son had become. Disappointed. Ashamed. Disgusted.

Chingada madre.

The cologne covered the blood smell better than anything else Vicente had tried, so he splashed it on his neck, his wrists, and his chest over the clean shirt. He gagged a little, screwed the cap back on, and shoved it in his pocket.

A cartel sicario couldn't drive through Culiacán, still reeking of copper and iron, and expect to make it home.

The drive back carved through switchbacks and rutted roads that would destroy a city car's suspension. Vicente's truck ate it up, an older-model Toyota, nothing flashy, nothing that drew attention. He drove with the windows down, letting the wind pull at his hair, letting the cologne and the last of the sierra replace the smell of the work. By the time he reached the city's outskirts, the sun was balanced on the western horizon, turning the whole sky orange, red, and purple.

Vicente appreciated beauty when he saw it.

He parked two blocks from the bar where he was meeting Javier and walked the rest of the way. These streets were cartel-controlled, which didn't make them safe. It just meant you knew who to fear.

Vicente's apartment was in the safe part of the city, the part where police still patrolled, where mothers walked their kids to school, where buildings had security guards and underground parking. His neighbors were doctors, lawyers, and businessmen who didn't ask questions about what their quiet neighbor on the seventh floor did for a living.

He parked in his spot, rode the elevator up, and let himself in. The apartment was exactly as he'd left it that morning. Clean and quiet, a place to sleep between jobs and nothing more.

The metal box with his collection lived in the bedroom closet, behind winter coats he never wore because Sinaloa didn't get that cold. Vicente pulled it out now and opened it. Rows of driver's licenses, organized chronologically. Forty-seven faces stared up at him, different ages, different backgrounds, different stories. All of them were his. All of them canvases he'd taken his time with.

He added Thomas Brewster's license. Forty-eight.

Vicente closed the box and put it back.

In the bathroom, he showered with hot water, scrubbing until his skin turned red. Pink water circled the drain. Blood under his fingernails took the scrub brush to get out. Hair, chest, everywhere. The blood didn't bother him. Vicente liked the gore, enjoyed the smell, the warmth, the way it felt slick on his hands. But walking around with a dead man's viscera crusted in his knuckles was sloppy, and Vicente wasn't sloppy.

When he stepped out, the mirror showed him clean again. Forty-four years old. Compact muscle, dark eyes. The kind of face that could be anyone. He could walk past you on the street, and you'd never know what he did with his nights, what he kept in a box in his closet, what he was.

That was the point.

In bed, lights off, the sicario replayed the day. He skipped past the killing, which was always the forgettable part, and lingered on the work. The way Thomas's body had responded to each stage. The sounds. The breaking moment. That instant when Thomas's eyes had focused and really seen him.

His phone buzzed.
Vicente opened his eyes. It was past midnight. He picked up.
"Compa." Javier's voice. "Got work. Sierra Madre. Multiple targets."
Vicente sat up. "How many?"
"Around a dozen. Americans. Hikers. I'll brief you tomorrow."
A dozen of them.
Vicente smiled in the dark.
"I'll be there."

Chapter 1

The thing about divorce was that nobody warned you about the silence. Or maybe they did, and Madison O'Neill hadn't been listening.

Eight months in, and she still woke up every morning expecting to hear her four-year-old son destroying her living room. The crash of toy trucks into furniture. The TV blasting Bluey or Paw Patrol at a volume that suggested he thought the characters couldn't hear him otherwise. That pitter-patter of little feet on the linoleum heading toward the kitchen, followed by the sound of the chair scooting across the floor and the pantry opening.

Instead, there was nothing. Just the hum of the aggressive refrigerator and the water stain on her ceiling that looked like someone had spilled coffee and given up halfway through cleaning it.

Madison lay there doing the thing she told herself not to do every morning, listening for Lucas. She was waiting for a sound that wouldn't come. Wouldn't ever come again because he didn't live here anymore. Because she'd signed papers that said he was better off somewhere else. Because being a good mother had turned out to mean admitting you'd failed at being a mother at all.

She pushed herself up, only to immediately want to lie back down. Her arms felt like they were filled with wet sand. Her chest did too, like someone had piled stones on her ribs overnight and expected her to carry them around all day. Grief had weight. Actual physical weight that made getting out of bed feel like bench-pressing your own failure.

Everything feels like that these days. Lifting the coffee pot. Opening the pantry. Existing.

The apartment smelled like the previous tenant's cigarettes and mildew from the leak the landlord wouldn't fix. That sour-wet smell was coming from the walls as if the building was rotting from the inside out. Eight hundred a month in a five-hundred-square-foot apartment bought you that smell, sirens at two a.m., and the guessing game of whether the sharp cracks echoing through the courtyard were gunshots or fireworks. Madison had learned to tell the difference, which said more about her life than she wanted to think about.

The place was rotting, and nobody cared. She'd spent enough years working at the vet clinic to know what neglect looked like: the matted fur nobody bothered to brush, the food left untouched in the bowl, the eyes that stopped tracking you when you walked into the room. Funny how easy it was to spot when it was someone else's responsibility.

Madison forced herself to stand, gathering whatever energy and motivation she had left. Her feet found the cold laminate floor. *Three steps to the bathroom. I can do three steps.*

The bathroom mirror was cruel in the morning light. She was thirty-six years old, but her eyes looked older. Dark circles so deep they looked bruised against her pale complexion. Her auburn hair was pulled into a greasy ponytail. It was the fifth day without washing, maybe a week... She'd lost count. And the makeup. *Oh God*, the makeup. Yesterday's mascara clumped under her lashes in black flakes. Foundation caked into the lines around her eyes. She'd stopped removing it most nights because what was the point? Just put more on in the morning as if to cover the damage, fail, and repeat.

Her freckles showed through anyway. They used to be cute, those freckles. Back in college, when being tired meant studying too late, and the worst thing waiting for her was the next exam. Now they belonged to someone who looked like she was slowly disappearing.

She looked exactly like what she was. A woman who cried in the shower as quietly as she could because the walls were thin and the neighbors might call in a noise complaint. A mother who'd given up her kid because she couldn't give him what he deserved and was barely holding on.

Madison squeezed toothpaste onto her brush with her right hand and started brushing. Her left hand rested on the sink, and without thinking about it. Her thumb found her ring finger and started rubbing the bare skin where the wedding band used to be. Circling the space as if she touched it enough times, the metal would reappear.

She caught herself doing it in the mirror and stopped.

Eight months. Eight months since she'd signed the papers and taken back her maiden name so fast the courthouse clerk had looked impressed. Her finger didn't care about paperwork. It still felt naked while it still reached for the mass that wasn't there anymore.

O'Neill. She watched herself in the mirror. *Madison O'Neill. Like you can erase six years by changing your name back.*

In the kitchen, the coffee maker sputtered to life. She'd taken it in the divorce mostly because her ex had been a tea drinker, which should have been the first red flag. *Who chooses tea? Who does that?*

Madison finished giving her teeth a half-assed scrub and called it good enough. The coffee was ready. She poured herself a cup, which would yellow her teeth anyway, so what was even the point of brushing?

She added so much sugar to her coffee that it probably qualified as a dessert. She'd stopped caring about things like nutrition somewhere around month three, at the same time, she'd stopped caring about most things. It was hard to care about sugar intake when you were trying to remember why you bothered eating at all.

Her phone sat on the counter.

Don't look. You know what you'll find. You know it'll hurt.

She looked anyway.

She loaded Instagram, and there was her ex-husband's page. She'd unfollowed him months ago but still checked it every day because grief had a way of making her stupid and self-destructive.

His most recent post from yesterday made her stomach drop.

Their son, *her son*, was in an actual yard with actual grass. Real suburban grass, instead of the concrete slab behind Madison's building. He was laughing, chasing a soccer ball, and his whole face lit up with a joy that made Madison's chest hurt.

And behind him, barely visible but definitely there, standing in the doorway of the house Madison would never be able to afford, was her.

Jessica. Jess. The woman her ex-husband had been sleeping with for the last year of their marriage. The woman who now lives with Madison's son. Who made him breakfast, read him bedtime stories, and played mommy while the real mother lived eight hundred miles away in a shithole apartment.

The caption said, *Love watching this guy make friends in the new place. Best decision we ever made.*
#DadLife #NewBeginnings

Best decision we ever made.

We.

Madison set the phone down as if it were radioactive.

Her hands were shaking. She pressed them flat against the counter and held them there until the trembling stopped, which took longer than it should have.

She was supposed to be fine with this and be the mature co-parent. The mother who put her son's needs first, didn't badmouth his father, and definitely didn't make Lucas feel caught in the middle. She was supposed to be grateful, even, that there was another stable adult in his life. Let it go. Move on. Accept that her ex had started a whole new family in the ruins of their old one.

God, she was trying so fucking hard.

Every time she saw *that* woman in a photo with her son, Madison wanted to scream. She wanted to drive eight hundred miles and rip her out of his life with her bare hands. What kind of person slept with a married man in the same house as his four-year-old, then moved in six months after the divorce like she'd won some kind of fucked-up prize?

She couldn't do any of that, though. Her son was a child and needed stability. He was starting kindergarten in September at a school with art programs and a playground that didn't have broken glass in the wood chips. His dad had a well-paying job and lived in a safe neighborhood, with apparently a live-in girlfriend who made him smile in ways Madison never could.

She'd made the right choice letting Lucas go.

It was killing her, but she'd made the right choice.

Instead, she got video calls twice a week. Seven p.m. on Wednesdays and Sundays, right after dinner but before bedtime. Madison got ten minutes to be the voice on the screen, asking *How was your day, buddy?* and watching him lose interest after three minutes because he was a toddler with much more interesting things to do. To him, Mom was just a face that showed up sometimes, less real than the neighbor kids he played with or the woman in his house who was there when he woke up.

Last Sunday, he showed her a drawing. "Look, Mommy. I made this."

"It's beautiful, baby. Tell me about it."

"It's my house. See? That's my room. That's Daddy's room. That's the backyard where we play soccer."

There was no room for Mommy. Why would there be? Mommy lived too far away. She was the one who'd said yes when Daddy got the promotion because she *knew* that staying meant worse schools,

dangerous streets, and an apartment where he'd still be sharing a bedroom with her until she could afford something better, if she ever could.

She'd made the right choice.

Madison sipped her coffee and stared at the pile of hiking gear in her living room while leaning back against the kitchen counter.

This was Sophia's fault. All of it.

Her little sister had booked this trip three weeks ago, as if Madison's participation was a foregone conclusion. *"We're going hiking in Mexico! The Sierra Madre! I already paid! It's going to be amazing! You need this!"*

Madison had said yes because saying no to Sophia was impossible. Sophia had that kind of optimism that made you feel like an asshole for pointing out that reality didn't work the way she thought it did.

Her phone buzzed.

Sophia's text said, *Good morning!!! Day before the big trip!!! Are you EXCITED???*

Another one came through immediately. *Have you started packing yet?*

Then, *I sent you the list last week. Did you see it?*

And finally, *It's color-coded!* Four texts in thirty seconds. Sophia seemed to be showing restraint.

Madison looked at the messages and felt that familiar heaviness in her chest. Sophia meant well. She always meant well. She'd gotten out, made it to culinary school across the country, found a good job, a husband who actually treated her like a person, and an apartment where the biggest danger was gentrification. And now she felt guilty about it. Guilty enough to keep trying to fix Madison from a distance, as if she thought, *If I just apply enough nature and sisterly bonding, Maddy will be okay again.*

Except Madison wasn't okay. She hadn't been okay longer than she thought. And she definitely wasn't going to be fixed by three days of sleeping on the ground, shitting and pissing in the woods alongside complete strangers.

Sophia was trying, though. And Madison had so little left that she couldn't afford to lose her sister, too.

She texted back, *Yeah, packing today. See you tomorrow.*

Three dots appeared immediately. Then Sophia's response came through. *Okay!!! Text me if you need help with anything!!! I'm SO excited!!! This is going to be SO GOOD for you!!!*

So good for me, Madison thought, setting the phone down. *That's enough for today.*

She drained her coffee and balanced the mug on top of the precarious pile in the sink, a fucked-up game of reverse Jenga she was apparently committed to winning. *I'll get to these eventually.* The same lie she'd told herself yesterday and the day before that.

Then she sat on the floor next to the gear pile in the living room. The backpack was eight years old, from back when hiking was something she did for fun. Before being married and slowly disappearing into someone else's life until you looked up one day and couldn't remember who you'd been before.

She unzipped the pack, and a cloud of dust exploded into her face. She sneezed, wiped her nose on her sleeve, and kept going.

Sunglasses with a scratched lens. A granola bar that expired five years ago. A first-aid kit from the Obama administration. She popped it open because she couldn't help it; years at the clinic had made that reflex permanent. Everything inside was dried out or expired. Sophia would lose her mind over this kit, would show up tomorrow with a fully stocked replacement, and that look that said *I love you, but you're a mess, and I'm trying not to say it*. She closed it, put it back in her pack, and that's when she saw it wedged in the bottom corner. A small plastic dinosaur.

Green. Two inches tall. The cheap kind from the dollar store.

Madison picked it up and something in her chest cracked open.

Lucas.

He'd been obsessed with dinosaurs last year, back when they were still a family. Lucas had been convinced they were the most important things in the universe. He hid them everywhere, in coat pockets, her purse, and between couch cushions. Maybe it was a game he played to see if she could find them. Or maybe it was just what toddlers did.

She'd thought she'd found them all when she packed his things.

This one had been here the whole time. Waiting.

Madison closed her fist around the dinosaur and felt the tears come. The ugly kind that stole her breath and made her chest ache, dragging sounds out of her she didn't recognize. She was grateful, suddenly and fiercely, that she lived alone. No one should have to see this.

She cried for ten minutes. Maybe fifteen. Time got weird when you were breaking down. When she was done, she was still sitting on the floor holding a plastic dinosaur, and nothing had changed except now her face hurt and her eyes were swollen.

Get up. She told herself. *You have to pack. You have to function. You have to keep existing because somewhere out there is a boy who might need you someday, even if he doesn't need you now.*

That's what kept her going. Because what if someday he needed her? What if someday he asked why Mommy didn't fight harder to keep him?

She couldn't quit. Mothers didn't get to quit.

Even when she sometimes thought about how easy it would be to just... stop.

She put the dinosaur on the coffee table and went back to packing.

She pulled out Sophia's color-coded packing list. Blue for essentials. Green for recommended. Yellow for optional things, including something called a "PackTowl."

Madison had no idea what a PackTowl was and didn't care.

By afternoon, the pack sat by the door. Madison looked at it and felt nothing, just the familiar numbness that had become her default setting.

She could text Sophia right now. *I'm sick. Can't go.* Sophia would understand. She would show up with soup because that's who she was.

But then Madison would be here. Alone. In the silence, with nothing between her and the thoughts that came late at night when she couldn't sleep. Thoughts about how much easier it would be if she took an eternal nap. How tired she was. How every day was mundane, and too much to handle.

Then she thought about her son.

Fine. Madison thought. *I'll go.*

She made dinner, a frozen pizza that tasted like nothing. Everything tasted like nothing these days. Her phone buzzed one more time.

Sophia's message said, *Okay, I know I'm being annoying.*

But I'm just really excited.

I missed you, Maddy.

I know things have been hard.

But I really think this will help.

Love you.

Madison stared at the messages.

Things have been hard. Madison almost laughed. *Hard* was a word for a bad week at work. *Hard* was car trouble and rent coming due on the same day. What Madison had been doing for months didn't have a word, and using the word *hard* was offensive.

She typed, *Love you too. See you tomorrow.*

Not enough. I should say more. I should say thank you. I know you're trying, and I appreciate it, even if I can't show it. I'm barely holding on, but you're one of the reasons I haven't let go completely.

Madison thought as she shook her head in defiance. *That's too much, and she'll worry. I don't want to burden her.*

By nine, she was in bed with the alarm set for five in the morning. The building's usual sounds filtered through the walls as a TV blared nearby, someone argued in Spanish, and sirens wailed in the distance.

Before she turned off the light, she got up and retrieved the plastic dinosaur. She put it in her jacket pocket, the one she'd wear tomorrow.

Madison touched her ring finger one last time as she lay back down and closed her eyes before tears could start again. She was done crying for the day.

Tomorrow would come whether she was ready or not.

Chapter 2

The van's suspension groaned over another pothole, and Madison's stomach lurched with it. She pressed her palm against the window, the cold glass shocking her skin awake, and watched the Sierra Madre mountains crawl closer through early morning mist. Pine-covered ridges stacked against each other, each layer darker than the last until they disappeared into clouds that hadn't burned off yet.

She'd forgotten about the plastic dinosaur in her jacket pocket until the van hit a pothole and Lucas's toy bit into her ribs like it was trying to remind her. She recalled that she decided at two in the morning, somewhere between the third and fourth time she'd kicked the sheets off, that bringing it was stupid. Something that small, that irreplaceable, on a hiking trip where it could bounce out of her pocket and disappear into the dirt abyss. She was planning to take it out before she left. Then the alarm went off, and she hit snooze four times, because getting out of bed meant the trip was real. By the time

Sophia's knock came through the door, she was still pulling on her pants with one hand and shoving her feet into boots with the other. Now, it was too late, and the toy was hitching a ride.

"Look at that view!" Sophia leaned across the narrow space between them, one hand braced on Madison's headrest, the other pointing at the mountains. "Maddy, seriously, look. It's gorgeous."

"I'm looking." Madison didn't turn her head while she was busy fiddling with her coffee cup. Sophia's reflection showed in the window, bright-eyed and grinning.

"I'm just saying, this is already amazing, and we haven't even started hiking yet." Sophia's hand landed on Madison's shoulder, warm and solid. Madison shifted slightly. The hand fell away. "Last time we hiked together, you were what? Twenty-four?"

"I honestly can't remember."

The van climbed higher, and the engine whined as if the stress of the incline was too much and it was going to break. Through the cracked window, Madison caught the scent of pine sap, dirt, and wet rocks. She closed her eyes and inhaled the earthly scents. The cold air stung going down and came back out as fog against the glass. Something in her body loosened slightly, and for the first time in a while, her body didn't feel like it was bracing for impact. Her shoulders dropped. Her grip on the coffee cup went slack enough that the liquid sloshed against the rim. She hadn't even realized how tight she'd been holding it.

She took a sip of gas station coffee as she gritted her to swallow. It tasted like someone had burned a pot of water, added coffee grounds as an afterthought, then left it on the burner for six hours. Bitter and acidic, with a metallic tang like licking pennies. But it was the only caffeine she'd managed to get down this morning. She took another sip anyway.

Sophia was talking again. Her voice came through muffled, like Madison was hearing it from the bottom of a pool. She droned on about something with the itinerary, how the guide had excellent reviews, and perfect weather forecasts. The words reached her ears but stopped before they got anywhere useful, bouncing off whatever wall her brain had built between the world and wherever she'd gone.

"...and I know you didn't want to come, but I really think this is going to be good for you. For both of us." Sophia's voice had that careful brightness, the one that meant she'd been planning this for months. "We can just... exist, you know? In nature. Away from everything."

Madison's jaw tightened. The dinosaur dug deeper into her torso as icing to the cake of her misery.

"Yeah," she said.

Sophia heard the edge and chose to ignore it. "I brought those almond croissants you like. From the bakery on Fifth?"

"You didn't have to do that."

"I know. I wanted to." Sophia's hand was back for a second, squeezing Madison's shoulder before retreating. As she settled into her seat, her hand drifted to her stomach, rested there for just a moment, before she seemed to catch herself and moved it to her lap. "Someone needs to make sure you don't waste away."

The mountains were close enough now that Madison could see individual trees and could make out granite cliffs cutting through the green. The road curved, and suddenly the valley opened up below them—a sprawling vista of ridges, forest, and a river catching morning light.

Madison, despite everything, felt something in her heart acknowledge that this was, objectively, beautiful.

The van rounded another curve, and the moment passed.

The van's brakes squealed as they pulled into the trailhead parking area, gravel crunching under tires. Madison unbuckled and stepped out into an atmosphere that smelled like dust and elevation, sharp enough to sting the inside of her nose.

She dumped the last of her coffee onto the gravel and watched it sink into the dirt.

The parking area was a wide spot carved out of the mountainside. Gravel and dirt, wooden posts marking spots, a weathered information board listing trail regulations that nobody read. Two other vehicles sat at angles. A dusty Subaru with Colorado plates and a white pickup truck that had seen better decades. Both rigs had the look of vehicles driven hard for several nights. Road dust was layered thick across the hoods. Coffee cups sat in the cupholders.

Two men stood near the Subaru. Middle-aged guy with a dark complexion, broad-shouldered in the way ex-athletes get when they stop training, but keep the frame. He stood with a wide stance, hands in his jacket pockets, watching a younger guy who had to be his son. They had the same jawline. The kid was talking with his whole body, gesturing wildly, and laughing too loudly. His father's shoulders had gone tight with secondhand embarrassment.

Labrador energy. All enthusiasm, zero spatial awareness.

Near the pickup, two women stood close enough that their shoulders brushed. The tall one had light skin and brown hair in frizzless Dutch braids. She held her phone high to frame the mountains, angling her body three-quarters to the camera, chin tilted upwards, one hip cocked as a shuttering sound came from her phone. Her arms were lean and defined, the kind of definition that showed even at rest.

The other was shorter and built solid through the shoulders. She stood with her weight even on both feet, arms crossed across her chest, head turning just enough to track everyone in the parking lot without her body moving with it. Blonde hair faded close at the sides, longer on top, and falling messily to one side. She is wearing work boots that are soft at the creases from years of wear. *That's going to be a bitch to hike in.*

The blonde's eyes tracked Madison for a second, then dismissed her as non-threatening. *Fair.*

"Is that them?" Sophia had her backpack half-out of the van, and one strap caught on the door frame.

"The other hikers? We should introduce ourselves!"

"They're not going anywhere." Madison pulled her own pack from the back. The weight settled against her shoulders, familiar in a way that made her body remember post-grad Madison, the one who used to do this for fun.

A truck pulled into the parking lot, tires crunching over gravel as it parked at an angle. The engine cut, and the driver's door swung open. A man stepped out, checking his watch at the same time. He moved toward the group in short, quick steps, patting his jacket pockets once, then again, as if confirming things hadn't disappeared in the distance between truck and trailhead. His skin was brown, and his hair was salt-and-pepper, trimmed close to the scalp. Round wire-frame glasses sat on his nose,

and he pushed them up with one knuckle as he walked. His pack straps were cinched so tight they dimpled the shoulders of his jacket.

Behind him came a woman. Silver-gray hair was braided thick as a rope down her back. Lines ran deep around her eyes and mouth, and her skin had the color of someone who'd spent decades in the sun and wind. Her pale eyes moved across the parking area, from the Subaru to the pickup to the van to the people, then back to her partner. Her pack rode high and sat on her hips as it belonged there.

The man's hand found hers. She turned her head and leaned in close to his ear, whispering something only he could hear. Whatever she said pulled a warm smile across his face, and he nodded, squeezing her hand once before they both faced forward. Her fingers threaded through his without her having to look.

A beat-up sedan pulled in last, easing into a spot near the edge of the lot. A solo figure emerged, moving quietly. They were thin, lost inside hiking pants that bunched at the ankles and a loose flannel layered over a short-sleeve shirt. Mid-length hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, the bulk of it dyed a soft teal that faded toward the ends, with shorter pieces falling loose around their face. A silver septum ring caught the morning light. Black gauges sat in both earlobes, the openings wide enough that Madison could see clear through to the daylight behind them, the stretched skin healed smooth and even around the edges. Their features were delicate, soft jaw, full mouth, eyes that tilted slightly down at the outer corners, and Madison genuinely could not tell if she was looking at a man or a woman. She turned the question over for half a second, realized it didn't matter for any reason she could think of, and dropped it. They pulled a backpack covered in enamel pins from the trunk and crossed the gravel without looking at anyone.

Madison turned to say something to Sophia and found only empty air where her sister had been standing. Sophia was already halfway across the parking area, of course, drawn toward the group the way she was always drawn toward people.

Madison shouldered her pack, clipped the hip belt, and tossed the empty coffee cup into the trash bin near the information board. By the time she caught up, Sophia was already mid-sentence with a stranger.

"Okay!" The voice came from the far end of the lot, male and aggressively friendly. A man pushed off the side of a dusty SUV where he'd been leaning over a clipboard, closed the hatch with his hip, and started across the gravel toward them. "Looks like we're all here!"

He wore cargo pants with the cuffs bloused over scuffed hiking boots, a fleece vest zipped halfway, and a long-sleeve technical shirt underneath. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. Sandy blond hair fell to his ears, a little shaggy at the edges, past due for a trim. Stubble along his jaw said he'd skipped shaving for a few days. A clipboard hung loose in one hand. The other stayed in his vest pocket.

"I'm Caleb. I'll be your guide for this trip." He stuck out his hand to Madison first. His grip was firm and practiced, the exact pressure of someone who had rehearsed it in a mirror. "You must be Madison and Sophia?"

"That's us." Sophia's voice came from Madison's elbow as she caught up. "This is so exciting! Thank you so much for organizing everything."

"My pleasure." Caleb's smile widened. He shifted his weight slightly, presenting more toward Sophia. *Smart.* "Let me get everyone together for introductions and safety briefing, then we'll hit the trail. First day's pretty gentle, just six miles to our first camp."

He raised his voice, projecting without quite shouting. "Alright, folks, gather up! Let's meet our hiking family for the next week!"

The word "family" made Madison cringe.

The group shuffled into a loose semicircle. Madison hung back slightly.

"Okay!" Caleb's voice cut through the morning air. "Welcome, everyone, to what's going to be an amazing couple of days in the Sierra Madre. I'm Caleb. I've been guiding in these mountains for a while now, and I'm stoked to have you all here."

For a while now. Something about that snagged, though she couldn't say what. She let it go.

"Let's go around. Names, where you're from, what you do, whatever you want to share. I'll start. I'm Caleb Rivera, born and raised in California. I have been doing this long enough to know where the good views are." He smiled again.

The older man cleared his throat. "Garrett Ackerman. This is ma son, Marcus. Drove down from Colorado last night." A pause. Something in the silence after telling you the drive had been long. "Paramedic. Twenty-two years."

Marcus jumped in before the pause finished. "Yo, so listen, I did one of those survival weekends last year, the SERE-lite kind, not the full military deal, but close. Full pack, ten a day, water purification, shelter builds, the whole setup. Dude running it was legit, former Ranger, and I'll tell you what, I came out of that weekend knowing more about—"

"Great!" Caleb cut him off smoothly, his smile never wavering. "Next?"

Marcus turned to his dad without missing a beat. "I was gonna tell them more about the water purification thing, too," he whispered, still not realizing he'd been dismissed. Garrett's jaw tightened another fraction. His hand moved to his jacket pocket, found something there, pressed it once, briefly. Whatever he was holding onto, it grounded him long enough to keep his mouth shut.

The tall woman raised her hand slightly. "Hannah Burke, personal trainer. This is my best friend, Callie Powell. She basically got dragged along because I needed a hiking buddy."

Callie shrugged. "She wanted to go. I'm here." Her voice was flat, matter-of-fact, the kind that didn't waste words. She paused, seeming to consider whether the group warranted more effort. "I build things. Construction."

Hannah laughed, bright and performative, and bumped Callie's elbow with her own. Callie's expression didn't change, but she shifted almost imperceptibly closer.

Madison watched Callie's hands as she crossed her arms. Her hands were calloused from years of gripping tools, the skin thick and yellowed at the base of each finger. A thin scar cut through her left eyebrow, healed white. She looked like someone who'd been hit before and learned to hit back.

The anxious man was next, and he was physically startled when Caleb gestured to him. "Oh! Yes. Hi. I'm Ajay Kumar, and this is my wife Katerina. We're, uh—" His hand found hers again, a nervous reflex. "This is our honeymoon, actually."

A few polite murmurs rippled through the group. Sophia made a small, delighted sound.

Katerina spoke calmly. "Kat works fine. I work in HR consulting, but I've been hiking recreationally for about five years now. Looking forward to doing it somewhere new."

Ajay visibly exhaled, as if her competence were a life vest he could stop inflating on his own. Madison noticed a bright "JUST MARRIED" luggage tag dangling from Ajay's pack strap, right next to where four separate flashlights were clipped in a tidy row.

Four flashlights for a three-day hike. Madison almost smiled. Almost.

The solo hiker went last, not looking up from their notebook that they were writing in. "Quinn Messner. Grad student. Researching invasive species distribution. This trip overlaps with my fieldwork. Pronouns are they/them."

Nobody reacted, which seems like everyone passed the vibe check. The introduction had been delivered at the same flat volume as a grocery list, pronouns included as matter-of-factly as the research topic. Madison appreciated the efficiency. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a small internal correction finished itself and filed away without ceremony, the pronoun she'd already been using settling into place with a name attached.

"Awesome!" Caleb said. "And that brings us to..."

"Madison and Sophia," Sophia said, saving him. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Sisters. Madison's a vet tech, I'm a pastry chef. We used to hike together years ago, and I basically bullied her into doing this with me."

"I wouldn't say bullied," Madison said.

"I would," Sophia said cheerfully.

The group chuckled. Marcus was already opening his mouth when Caleb smoothly redirected. "Alright, fantastic! Now let's talk safety basics."

Madison let his voice fade into the background noise. Mountain lion protocol, water purification, staying together, the usual. She watched the group instead.

Marcus raised his hand. "Yeah, listen, real quick on the mountain lion thing — you want to maintain eye contact, you want to pick up rocks, sticks, whatever you can throw, and if it comes at you, you fight back. Do not turn your back, do not run, do not crouch down, because crouching makes you look like—"

"That's solid information," Caleb said, smiling steadily. "Mountain lions in this range tend to stay clear of groups our size. Not something we're likely to deal with on this trip."

Marcus opened his mouth to add something. Caleb had already moved on to the next subject.

Hannah pulled out her phone and checked it. Madison saw her face scrunch as if she was in pain before she tucked it away. That wasn't the first time she'd checked it since they'd gathered. She'd been glancing at the screen in the parking lot, too, while Callie pretended to notice nothing. Callie tracked that phone movement with her eyes, her jaw setting in a way that suggested she knew exactly who had been texting.

Quinn was writing in that notebook, completely checked out of the safety briefing.

Sophia listened with rapt attention, as if Caleb were revealing the secrets of the universe rather than telling them not to approach wildlife.

This is the group. These are the people I'm spending the next few days with. Fucking Sophia.

Her hand found the dinosaur in her pocket and squeezed it once. *Three days. Three days, then a plane, then her apartment, then her kid. Three days was nothing. She could do three days.*

"Alright, everyone," Caleb said, clapping his hands together. "Let's hit the trail!"

The trail started as hard-packed dirt, wide enough for two people to walk side-by-side, before narrowing into the forest proper. Madison's boots, the same ones from years ago, pulled from the back of her closet and dusted off, hit the ground. The pack settled against her shoulders like thirty pounds of gear, water, and Sophia's insistence that she bring extra socks.

Her calves remembered this before her brain did. The slight incline, the way her body had to recalibrate for uneven terrain after walking on flat surfaces. By the time they'd gone a quarter mile, she could feel the beginnings of what would become a full-body ache by nightfall.

Ahead of her, Sophia walked with her arms slightly out from her sides, a balance-beam posture. She kept looking around, up at the canopy where morning light filtered through pine needles in dusty shafts, down at wildflowers Madison didn't know the names of, then sideways at birds.

The group had spaced itself into natural formations without anyone organizing it. Caleb led with easy confidence, Kat and Ajay close behind, her pace patient while he was hurried-then-stopping as he adjusted his pack. The cluster of gear hanging from his straps clinked softly with each step. Garrett and Marcus took the middle, Marcus's voice constant and Garrett's responses single syllables. Hannah and Callie brought up the rear, with Quinn somewhere between, moving alone with headphones in.

The forest smelled like sap, decomposing needles, and that particular earthy sweetness that came with high-altitude pine. Cooler here under the canopy, the sun filtered into suggestion rather than presence. Madison could hear her own breathing, the creak of her pack, the soft percussion of ten people walking in loose formation.

A bird screamed from somewhere overhead, a harsh, grating call that made Madison look up automatically. The bird sat on a low branch, blue-black against green, scolding them for existing in its territory. It launched from the branch, and another answered from deeper in the forest. Back and forth, marking the group's passage with typical territorial aggression.

Sophia dropped back until she was next to Madison, matching her pace. Their arms brushed.

"Thank you for coming," Sophia said quietly. "I know you didn't want to."

"You wore me down."

"That's my special skill." Sophia linked their arms. "Sisters who hike together, something something."

"That's not how the saying goes."

"I'm making a new one."

A squirrel chattered from a pine snag ahead, just another foraging rodent complaining about the invasion of its space. Madison looked up and saw three more in the branches above, tails flicking as they watched the group pass. Nature was doing exactly what it was supposed to do.

The trail curved through a gap in the trees. Madison caught a glimpse of the valley below. Ridges stacked on ridges, forest stretching toward mountains with granite peaks sharp against the sky.

Sophia made a small sound of wonder.

Then the forest closed in again, darker and tighter. Madison's pack dug into her shoulders. A chipmunk skittered across the trail ahead of them, pausing to stuff its cheeks with seeds before disappearing into the underbrush. It stopped at a sunny patch, grooming itself, completely unconcerned with the humans passing nearby.

"This is gorgeous," Sophia said, humming under her breath now.

Madison looked at her sister's face, bright with uncomplicated joy, and thought about all the ways love made you vulnerable.

Somewhere ahead, Marcus was explaining proper hiking posture to someone who definitely hadn't asked. "Yeah, check it, you want to lean into the hill a little, keep that core tight, let the legs do the work. Ranger taught us that. He was like, your legs are the engine, your core is the frame..."

Caleb pulled out his phone, frowned at the screen, and put it away.

The forest stretched ahead, dark and green and beautiful. Madison noticed that Quinn had taken their headphones out. They were looking around with the expression of someone taking everything in.

Madison kept walking. She'd spent the last quarter mile running through excuses in her head. Twisted ankle. Migraine. Something with Lucas. An emergency at the clinic. None of them held up against Sophia humming next to her, already in love with this trip and probably convinced it was working. Turning around would mean explaining the low dread that had been sitting in Madison's chest since the parking lot, the feeling that something about this excursion was subtly wrong.

The trail curved ahead, disappearing into deeper forest. *Six miles to their first camp. I could do six miles.* The plastic dinosaur in her pocket pressed against her with each step. Lucas would probably love this; the trees and the birds and the adventure of it all. She could picture bringing him here someday, when he was older, when she could afford to be the kind of mom who took her kid on hiking trips.

Sophia squeezed her arm gently. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah," Madison said. And almost meant it. "I'm okay."

The group kept walking, following Caleb deeper into the trees.

Madison followed because her sister was here, the day was beautiful, and she was still trying to believe that good things could happen to her again.