



**Mountain  
Rescue**  
ON THE EDGE

Sky  
Croft

# *Mountain Rescue: On the Edge*

by

**Sky Croft**

*Yellow Rose Books*

*by Regal Crest*

**Texas**

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Last but not least, a huge thank you to all the readers who fell in love with Saber and Sydney. Without your loyalty, this sequel would never have been written.

## **Dedication**

For the love of my life, my beautiful Carrie.

# Chapter One

DOCTOR SYDNEY GREENWOOD hurried along one of the many hallways of St. James Hospital. Technically, she was at work, but she was on a short break to check up on a personal matter. A quick glance at her watch showed she had mere minutes to spare, and she hoped the session hadn't finished early.

In her right hand she carried a bouquet of delicate red roses—she'd stopped at the gift shop on route—and the flowers' faint perfume wafted into her senses, the sweet smell heavenly against the hospital's sterile air.

Her vocation as a doctor meant she had an intimate knowledge of the hospital's layout, and she used that knowledge to her advantage, cutting through the expansive building in the most direct route possible.

As Sydney hastily rounded a corner, she passed by a striking piece of modern art on the wall. The vertical artwork was made up of various panes of multicoloured glass, and she couldn't help but catch sight of her reflection in it. Though Sydney wasn't a vain woman, she marvelled at the change in her physique. She'd always been slender, but now she appeared fit, athletic. Thanks to her voluntary work on the local Mountain Rescue team, she was now in the best shape of her life. More than her figure, Sydney appreciated the healthy glow to her cheeks, and how her green eyes sparkled, reflecting how she felt—happy. Her happiness was due to one woman, the woman she was on her way to see in fact: Kelly Saber. Saber was her partner, in every sense of the word.

Upon reaching the physiotherapy department, Sydney ran her free hand through her short blonde hair, trying to neaten it after the mad dash around the hospital. She slowed her pace when she saw the door at the end of the waiting room was still firmly closed—she'd made it. Saber's physiotherapy session, hopefully her last, hadn't yet ended. She'd arrived just in time though, as the door suddenly opened and Saber stepped out.

Sydney hid the bouquet of roses behind her back, as she shamelessly studied her partner's profile. Saber was stunningly beautiful, and Sydney never tired of looking at her. Saber's sleek black hair cascaded to a stop midway down her back and shone even more than usual under the hospital's fluorescent lights. Fitted black jeans and a burgundy T-shirt highlighted Saber's tall, toned, yet voluptuous form perfectly.

As if feeling Sydney's gaze, Saber's intense blue eyes locked onto Sydney's. Her face lit up in a warm smile, and Sydney instantly returned it. Saber's long stride carried her to Sydney's side.

“How'd it go?” Sydney asked.

“Great. Everything's fine. My shoulder has a clean bill of health. No more physio for me.”

“That's wonderful, Sabe. I'm so pleased.” Sydney presented the flowers to Saber with a flourish.

Saber gave her an affectionate glance and took hold of the bouquet. “What are these for?”

“To celebrate.” Sydney, who'd always been on the short side, stood on her tiptoes and kissed Saber full on her lips. “I know it hasn't been easy, Sabe, but you've been a real trooper.”

Saber lightly caressed Sydney's cheek. "I should be buying you flowers, I couldn't have done it without you."

"Now we both know that's not true," Sydney said. After all, this was the second time Saber had been through this. The first time Saber's shoulder had been damaged was in her teenage years, at the hands of her own parents; they disagreed strongly with her lifestyle. The second, much more recently, happened while on a Mountain Rescue mission. Saber saved the climber's life, but in doing so she'd pulled the tendons in her shoulder.

Saber's blue eyes twinkled. "Okay, I couldn't have done it as *well* without you."

Sydney chuckled. "I'll give you that."

Saber examined her flowers, raising them to her nose and smelling the red blooms.

"Beautiful."

Sydney couldn't resist. "As are you."

Both women shared a loving smile.

"I'm going to be sick," said a voice in the waiting room.

Sydney whirled around, intending to give the narrow-minded person a piece of her mind, but she soon realised the man wasn't commenting on them—he was indeed going to be sick.

"Uh oh." Sydney rushed into a nearby store cupboard, grabbed a sick tray, and ran toward the man.

"I'll leave you to it," Saber called out.

"Okay, honey, I'll see you tonight," Sydney said, getting the tray to the man as he began to vomit.

SABER GLEEFULLY CLIMBED into her new car, and set the roses down on the plush black leather seat. The 4x4, a Land Rover Discovery SDV6, was a sturdy, solid vehicle, and practical for the mountainous terrain around Saber's home, a tiny village called Shirebridge, nestled deep in the Scottish Highlands.

Saber had a passion for cars and though the Land Rover was practical, the power of its three-litre engine more than satisfied the petrol-head side of her personality. She turned the key and the engine purred to life. Checking the mirrors she pulled out of the hospital car park and on to the road.

She was still getting used to driving the new vehicle, as she'd sensibly, but nevertheless impatiently, decided to wait until her shoulder healed before buying the car. Saber felt a smile touch her lips. No more physiotherapy for her. No more damn hospitals. Elation swept through her at the prospect of climbing again. She'd missed it so. Missed being out on the mountain with the team, her closest friends. Though the injury to her right shoulder meant it would always be weaker than her left, she'd learnt how to compensate for that long ago, after the first incident. Still, Saber knew she'd have to take things slow. Just because her arm no longer encumbered her in daily life, didn't mean she could suddenly scale mountains. It would take time. But at least now she could make a start, get back out there. Saber's smile grew—a few practice runs were in order.

As soon as Saber returned home from the hospital, she began making preparations for that evening. She planned to cook a special dinner for Sydney, to express her gratitude for Sydney's help and support over the last few months. Sydney had been her rock throughout her recovery,

always there with an encouraging word when Saber got frustrated and there to pat her on the back when she succeeded. Sydney hadn't once wavered.

Saber recalled a time, shortly after her injury, when she'd worried she'd be a burden to Sydney, that her injury would put a strain on their relationship. She couldn't have been more wrong. Their relationship emerged intact, the ordeal binding them closer together.

Saber withdrew a set of white fairy lights from a box of Christmas decorations stored in the loft. She retrieved a ladder from the garage, and followed the path leading down the side of the house. After opening the side gate, she entered the back garden. Ladder and fairy lights in hand, she walked across the neatly mowed lawn, heading toward an old oak tree.

Beside the tree was a gurgling stream, which wound its way along the garden's edge. The weather was perfect for dining outside, and she intended to make the most of it. Using the ladder, she wrapped the white lights around the tree's thick branches, taking her time to ensure they hung evenly. Satisfied, she fetched an extension lead to plug the lights into and switched them on. She stepped back to admire her work.

The twinkling glimmer was pretty, illuminating the tree and the surrounding area well. As dusk fell, the display would grow more effective, and bathe everything in a pale white glow.

Pleased with her work, Saber finished the outside preparations and returned to the house to cook the meal. She set up the table close to the tree, and dressed it with a cloth, candles, and flowers.

On her way back into the house she turned on the hot tub lights, which lit up the water from below, and set the temperature accordingly. Saber had every intention of pampering Sydney, and after being wined and dined, relaxing in the hot tub was an ideal way to do it.

SYDNEY DROVE INTO Shirebridge, slowing the car to cross the narrow bridge at the end of the village. The crossing, one at each end, spanned the rippling stream that cut through the centre of the tiny village, which only contained a dozen buildings, allowing the residents access to either side. This was crucial, as the buildings were located on both sides of the stream. The houses were characterful, the grey stone and wooden beams allowing the structures to blend in with the surrounding countryside.

Shirebridge itself was in a valley, encased on all sides by impressive mountains. A waterfall flowed down one mountain, and ran into the stream that bisected the village. On one side, behind the houses, was a bountiful forest that came to a halt near the foot of a mountain.

The road into Shirebridge was a dead end, so the village had very few visitors, which helped to ensure a high level of privacy for the residents.

As Sydney approached home, a five-bedroom house at the end of the village, she wondered why the house lights weren't on. She considered a power cut, but dismissed the thought as light blazed in the windows of neighbouring houses. She decided Saber must be out.

Sydney pulled onto the driveway, confused at seeing Saber's car parked in its usual place. Clarity soon hit her. She knew Saber wasn't working tonight, so she had to be at a friend's, most likely Coop's.

Sydney parked her car, got out, and headed for the house. A note was taped to the front door. It read, "Use the side gate."

Sydney followed the note's instruction, growing more curious by the second. She ambled down the path at the side of the house and her eyes widened as she opened the gate, revealing a

white wonderland beyond. The garden appeared completely transformed, certain areas highlighted with the pale glow of twinkling lights, while others resided in shadow. An exquisitely set table awaited Sydney at the end of the garden, while a bubbling hot tub, lit from below so it seemed like the water itself fluoresced, called enticingly to her weary body.

Sydney went to neither the table nor the hot tub, scouting around instead for her heart's desire. As if manifested from Sydney's thoughts, Saber chose that moment to step out of the house via the kitchen door.

"Hi, sweetheart." Saber crossed to Sydney and kissed her in greeting. "How was the rest of your day?"

"Fine." Sydney indicated the garden. "The place looks wonderful. Are we celebrating the end of your physio?"

"That, and to thank you for everything you've done for me over the past few months."

"Sabe, there's no need—," Saber laid a gentle finger on her lips.

"Yes, there is. You've been there for me every step of the way, with support and love. I just wanted to do something to show you how much I appreciate it." Saber's hand moved to Sydney's cheek, cupping it tenderly. "How much I appreciate you."

Sydney was moved by the seeming adoration in Saber's eyes. She closed the distance and brushed her lips softly against Saber's. She relished the feel as Saber's arms wrapped around her, pulling Sydney closer. Willing lips parted to deepen the kiss, and tongues lightly caressed each other.

Several pleasurable moments passed before Saber withdrew. "Why don't you go and take a seat? I'll bring dinner out."

"I can help." Sydney made a move to follow Saber into the house.

Saber wagged a finger. "Ah ah. This is *your* evening and you're not to do a thing. Just sit back and enjoy." She took Sydney's shoulder bag and coat from her. "Now go. Sit."

Sydney chuckled as she was all but pushed toward a finely laid table. She admired the glimmering white tree, and had barely sat in her chair before Saber returned, carrying two plates of delicious smelling food.

"Lamb shanks in red wine sauce," Saber said as she set down the plates. "With new potatoes and vegetables."

In eagerness, Sydney rubbed her hands together. "Ooo, you're spoiling me."

"That's my intention," Saber said.

They ate in companionable silence. After a short while, Saber took a drink and cleared her throat.

"Syd, your birthday's coming up next week, is there anything special you'd like to do?"

"I always go to my parents for my birthday, my siblings do too, it's kind of a tradition in my family." Sydney put down her cutlery and gave Saber her complete attention. "I'd really like it if you'd come with me."

"Of course, if that's what you want." Saber's tone turned wry. "It's probably about time I met your family anyway, given we're already living together."

"Tch. I suppose we are doing things a bit backward. Still, if not for the travelling distance, I'm sure you would've met them by now." Sydney tapped her chin in thought. "And speaking of travelling, it might be best to stay overnight at my parent's house when we go."

"Okay, we'll do that." Saber grinned. "I can't wait to see if your mother has any embarrassing photos of you when you were younger."

Sydney tried to scowl, but couldn't quite manage it. "Don't make me un-invite you."

SYDNEY FELT TOTALLY relaxed. Saber had pampered her all evening, and after two slices of delightful chocolate cake for dessert, she now reclined in the bubbling hot tub. The soothing warmth of the water was lulling Sydney to sleep, but she fought against it, not wanting the night to end.

“Have you got any ideas as to birthday presents? The guys are bound to ask me what to get you.”

Sydney thought the question over. She was at a loss, but then inspiration hit. “A subscription to that climbing magazine. It could be a joint gift.”

Saber clicked her fingers together. “Good idea.”

“Wait. The *guys* will ask? Does that mean you’ve already bought me something?”

Saber bit her lower lip, as if struggling to hold in a secret. “I couldn’t possibly say.”

Intrigued, Sydney rose out of the hot tub and moved closer to Saber. “That’s a yes. What is it?”

Saber shook her head, causing her ponytail to swish back and forth. “Oh no, I’m not telling you that. I want it to be a surprise.”

“At least give me a clue.”

Saber patted Sydney’s shoulder in a condescending manner. “Don’t you know the meaning of surprise?”

Sydney scoffed, but she didn’t relent. “Where did you buy it?”

Saber raised a delicate eyebrow. “Do I seem stupid? I’m not saying.”

Sydney splashed some water at Saber. “Fine.” She sighed. “I’ll just have to wait and see.”

“That you will,” Saber said.

“Besides,” Sydney’s tone was coy, “I think I already know what it might be.”

Saber rolled her eyes. “No, you don’t. You merely want to list several things, and hope you guess lucky so my reaction gives it away.”

Sydney blinked and descended into giggles. “Busted. You know me too well.”

“I certainly do. And one of the perks of that is knowing how to distract you.” Saber draped long arms over Sydney’s shoulders, hands entwining casually behind Sydney’s neck.

Sydney’s amusement came through in her voice. “Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm. It’s easy. Watch.” Saber leant in and kissed Sydney’s cheek. Then, she laid another kiss teasingly at the corner of Sydney’s mouth and lingered there for a long moment before continuing on, kissing her way down Sydney’s throat.

Sydney felt a warmth flood through her that had nothing to do with bubbling water. Her fingers cupped Saber’s face and drew her upward, but before their lips could meet Saber pulled back, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Do you still want to talk about your birthday present?”

Sydney shrugged. “What present?”



## Chapter Two

THE CAFE WHERE Saber worked resided at the centre of the village. The café's interior, decorated in pale shades of cream and burgundy, contained numerous tables to sit at, and larger booths by the front windows. Since the village was so remote, the café was also the pub, and several barstools sat beneath the long serving counter. The counter was positioned at the back of the room, in the centre, and behind it was a doorway that led into the kitchen. As one of the two chefs who worked in the café (one chef per shift), Saber spent most of her time out back, in the kitchen.

She stood beside the cooker, hands flitting from one pan to another as she prepared three different meals at once. As the multiple orders came from a single table each meal needed to be served in unison, despite the differences in cooking times. This task presented no problem for Saber, who was used to catering for much larger numbers.

When ready, she dished the food out onto the plates and took it through to the waiting customers. Or at least she tried to. Marge, a tiny plump woman in her mid-fifties, deliberately blocked Saber's progress. Marge owned the café and had given Saber her first job back when she was sixteen. Marge had also given Saber a much-needed place to live, as Saber's parents had assaulted her, and kicked her out of her family home for being gay. Marge took Saber under her wing and welcomed Saber into her life and into her home. Saber owed Marge everything.

Marge shook her head in disapproval as she wiped her hands on the apron she wore. "Give me those plates. Don't think I'm going to let you fall back into bad habits, y'hear? You're the chef and *I'm* the server."

"I'm merely helping." Saber surrendered two of the plates, but kept hold of the other, which nestled between her body and the crook of her elbow. She knew Marge had a strong work ethic, and didn't like anyone else to do her duties, but Marge tended to take on every job, and would work to exhaustion if left to it. Despite the frequent protests, Saber insisted on helping wherever she could. She lightly pushed Marge in the direction of the window booth. "I've got this plate. Lead the way." Saber followed as Marge shuffled across the café, and on route, Saber picked up a rack of condiments in her free hand.

Marge tutted and scowled at Saber. "You know, I think I preferred it when you could only use one arm. At least then you let me do my job properly."

Saber chuckled, not the slightest bit offended.

"Here you go," Marge said to the customers as she smiled and set the plates down on the table. "Enjoy your meal."

Saber put down the remaining items before glancing around the café. It wasn't overly busy, and everyone had either been served their food, or finished their meal. Since her break was long overdue, she decided now was a good time to take it.

The sound of screeching tyres outside drew her attention. A van skidded to a halt in front of the café. Saber recognised the white vehicle as Doug's work van. Doug, Rich, Jeff, and Coop piled out of the van.

Saber headed for the door, wondering if there'd been an accident, and the Mountain Rescue team was needed. She needn't have worried though, for as she stepped outside, the reason for the van's hasty arrival was made clear.

"That's the last time I let you drive, Rich," Doug said, snatching the keys out of his apprentice's grasp. Doug owned his own DIY business, Jeff was his carpenter, and Rich was his handyman. On some occasions, since Coop took early retirement, he would help out if and when needed.

Coop rested a hand over his stomach, looking decidedly queasy. "Any farther, and I think I'd have thrown up in the van."

Rich clapped Coop on the back with a hearty thump. "That's how *real* drivers drive."

"That's how *learners* drive." Jeff, a slender, quiet man who only spoke when he had something important to say, rubbed his narrow, clean-shaven face. "Too fast around the corners, and too hard on the brakes."

Rich waved the comment off. "You're all getting old."

Saber bit back a smirk. That was typical Rich. Despite the consensus on his poor driving skills, Rich put the blame onto someone else. He couldn't possibly be at fault. Rich was by far the most arrogant, cocky member of the Mountain Rescue team, but he had a good heart, it was just sometimes difficult to find under all the bravado. At twenty-nine years old, Rich still hadn't grown up, and his immaturity remained his main problem.

Coop noticed Saber's presence, and came over to her. He lightly clasped Saber's arm, and searched her face with gentle brown eyes. "How'd it go at the hospital yesterday?"

"Great. I got the all clear. My shoulder is healed."

Coop's round, impish face lit up. "That's terrific news, Saber!" He embraced her. "Well done, the hard work's paid off."

Saber returned the hug and grinned. After Sydney, Coop's opinion meant the most to her. Coop was her family, an older brother in spirit if not by blood.

"Did I hear right, Saber?" Doug asked as she and Coop stepped apart. "You're ready to start training again?"

"Sure am. I can't wait to get back out on the mountains." Throughout Saber's recovery, she'd assisted the team, but her injury had kept her confined to the Mountain Rescue Station. She'd helped Charlie Bainbridge, their guy on the ground, with everything from the initial callout, to arranging the rescue helicopter. But it was a far cry from being at the scene of the incident, and she was keen to reprise her previous role.

"Your wish..." Doug enveloped Saber in his broad, muscular arms. "My command. We'll soon have you back in shape."

Feigning indignance, Saber drew back from his embrace and placed a hand on her hip. "Are you saying I've put on weight?"

"What? No, of course not."

"Ooo." Rich jostled the team leader. "Now you've done it, Doug."

Appearing self-conscious, Doug scratched at his brown beard. "I merely meant your fitness levels would have dropped." He gave Jeff a pleading glimpse.

"Don't bring me into it," Jeff said. "I've been married for over ten years, I know better than to comment on a woman's figure."

Both Saber and Coop erupted into laughter.

Doug seemed to realise he was being teased, and folded his muscular arms over his chest. “Very funny, Saber.” He raised a warning finger. “I’ll remember this when you’re begging me for a break.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She knew Doug well enough to know he wasn’t serious. He was an excellent leader, very fair. Doug could be relied upon, both on and off the mountain. He was a friend to all on the team.

Jeff stepped up and patted Saber’s shoulder. “I’m glad you’re going to be back in the thick of things with us. I bet Sydney’s pleased to have her climbing partner back.”

The six-member team often split into three groups of two during searches. Coop with Jeff, Doug with Rich, and Sydney with Saber. During Saber’s absence, Sydney teamed up with Doug and Rich.

“Speaking of Syd,” Saber said, “it’s her birthday next week, so she and I will be away a couple of days, visiting her folks. Before we leave, I thought it might be nice to throw her a surprise party here, at the café.”

Doug nodded in agreement. “Good idea. Leave the logistics to us, we’ll plan it all. The team needs you to do an important task, crucial in fact.”

Saber interrupted before he could continue. “Sydney wants a climbing magazine subscription. Get it as a joint gift.”

Doug blinked in surprise, clearly taken aback that Saber not only knew what he’d been about to say, but that she had the answer at the ready. “That’s exactly the type of forward thinking I like on a team.”

Saber chuckled.

“You’d better practice those ass-kissing skills, Saber.” Rich tucked a strand of wavy light brown hair behind his ear. “You’ll need them if you’re meeting the potential in-laws.”

THE NEXT DAY, on the mountain, Saber, Sydney, and Coop stood at the base of a rock wall preparing both themselves and their equipment for their ascent.

Saber could barely contain her excitement, and she took a moment to appreciate her surroundings. The mountainside was as beautiful as she remembered, the sun bathing everything in a lovely golden hue. They’d set off early that morning, and made good progress. Saber’s practice run had turned into an easy, but practical task—a routine trail check of the lower half of the mountain. Mountain Rescue teams were required to check on the condition of the paths and make sure they were clear of any obstruction. So far the trio hadn’t encountered any problems, and were readying themselves for the climb upward to the next path.

Saber laughed as Coop removed her helmet from his backpack. He’d insisted on collecting it from the Mountain Rescue Station that morning, and now she knew why. Wearing a wide grin, Coop thrust the helmet out in front of him, allowing both Saber and Sydney a better view. On Saber’s helmet, stamped onto the side, was the face of a sabre-toothed tiger. The well-detailed image was tan in colour, and went nicely with the red of the helmet.

Saber took the helmet from Coop and studied it closely. “It’s brilliant, Coop. I love it.”

“I knew you would. As soon as I saw it in the mountaineering shop—there was a bunch of helmets showing different designs—I thought it was perfect for you.”

Sydney traced the image with her finger. “It certainly is.”

“I know it’s only a small token,” Coop ran a hand through his short-cropped red hair, “but it’s my way of saying welcome back.”

“Aww, thanks, Coop.” Saber warmly clasped his upper arm and then fastened the helmet in place. “How’s it look?”

“Like you’re all set to go.” Coop started toward the rock wall. “I’d best get up there, or I can see you chasing me up the climb.”

Sydney giggled. “I can just picture that.”

“Well if you’d let me lead—” Saber wasn’t given the chance to finish.

“No way, Sabe.”

At the exact same time, Coop said, “Not a chance.”

Saber held up a surrendering hand. “I was joking.” At Sydney’s skeptical glimpse, she added, “I was!”

As the fastest climber, at least before her accident, Saber was used to leading climbs. The lead-climber was the person at most risk. Since they were belayed from below, if they fell they dropped to the last piece of equipment they’d placed in the rock. It was vital for the equipment to be carefully and securely placed, for it was all that stood between the climber and the hard, unforgiving ground. There was also the small risk of the equipment itself failing, but those were the dangers of climbing.

The risk lessened if you weren’t in the lead. Since the lead-climber, once situated, belayed from a higher vantage point, the following climber wouldn’t drop to the last piece of protection if they fell because they were secured from above.

Saber understood that Sydney and Coop were just trying to protect her from those risks, and their concerns were valid. After all, there was a very good chance she could fall—she’d been out of commission for a while, and her shoulder didn’t have the strength it’d once had. Though her strength would gradually return, until such a time it made sense for someone else, on this occasion Coop, to lead the climbs.

Saber jumped when the radio at her waist crackled to life.

Coop’s voice came through loud and clear. “Okay. I’m set. Climb when you’re ready.”

Saber gazed up in surprise. Coop was already at the top of the climb. She’d been so lost in thought she hadn’t noticed his ascent. Hands were suddenly at her waist, as Sydney tied the climbing rope on to Saber’s harness using the figure-eight loop.

Saber was overwhelmed to finally be at the moment she’d been working toward for months, the goal in her mind. Hours upon hours of pain, effort, and hard work all led to this. She sucked in a deep breath, growing nervous. “Moment of truth.”

Sydney watched Saber with attentive green eyes. “You’ll be fine. If your shoulder starts to hurt I want you to peel off, all right?”

Saber nodded somewhat shakily. “Yes, Doctor.”

Sydney brushed her knuckles over Saber’s cheek, and then stepped out of the way. “Take your time.”

Saber lifted the radio to her lips. “Coop, I’m climbing now.” She waited for the excess rope to be taken in. Seconds later, it pulled taut against her, then slackened slightly, allowing her room to move. Saber began to climb. Her feet were barely a metre off the ground when she peeled off, pushing away from the wall of rock and dropping the short distance to the trail below.

Sydney was instantly beside Saber, hands running over her in worry. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” Saber waggled her fingers. “I forgot to chalk up my hands.”

“Oh, thank God.” Sydney chuckled in visible relief. An instant later she slapped Saber’s rump in reproach. “Don’t do that to me, Sabe! I thought something was wrong.”

“Ow! Sorry, I didn’t think.” Saber dug into the chalk bag at her waist, and her fingertips came out white. The chalk would help her to grip the rock. She did the same with her other hand, coating it liberally in white powder. “Right. Here I go, again.” Saber winked at Sydney before once more starting the climb. Her newly chalked hands gave her good purchase on the rock, and after a brief assessment, she chose the simplest, most direct route up the cliff face. Though the climb was one of the lowest graded in the area, a moderate level of skill was still required to reach the top, and Saber didn’t want to stretch her shoulder’s limits too quickly. She needn’t have worried, for her shoulder gave little protest, and she moved with relative ease. As her confidence in her weaker shoulder grew, she gained momentum, and soon found herself nearing the halfway point of the climb.

Grinning from ear to ear, a joyful laugh emerged from Saber. She’d succeeded. She could climb again. Climbing wasn’t just a hobby to Saber, it was her passion, and had been from a young age. She was exhilarated to return to it now, and as she scaled up the rock, hand-over-hand, happy tears fell from her eyes.

## Chapter Three

“IT APPEARS AS if there’s been some rock movement farther ahead.” From her vantage point on a small rise of the trail, Saber pointed along the mountain path that stretched out before her. The trail wound across the mountainside, weaving its way ever downward toward the valley floor. In several places the path passed quite close to jutting outcrops of rock, and in one such place it appeared, at least from where she stood, that part of the outcrop had collapsed, and littered the path with rocks and other debris.

Sydney and Coop stopped in their tracks, both lifting a hand to shield their eyes against the glare of the shining sun.

“I see it,” Sydney said.

Saber stepped behind Coop and pointed over his shoulder, so he could follow her arm directly.

“Ah yes. I’ve got it,” Coop said. “Well spotted.”

Saber moved forward. “Let’s get down there.”

The trio continued quickly along the trail with renewed purpose. When they neared the tumble of rocks, Saber thought she heard a bleating noise. A quick scan of the area revealed no animal, so she presumed the light wind simply carried the noise across the mountainside to her.

“We can shift most of this ourselves.” Coop lifted an end of a broken tree branch, as if in demonstration. He tugged the large, bedraggled limb off the trail, and set it down off to one side, out of the way. “We should be able to clear the path.”

“I don’t know, Coop.” Sydney sounded doubtful. “How are we going to shift the larger rocks? They’ll weigh a ton.”

“We’ll roll them,” Coop said. “Between the two of us we should manage. Saber, they’ll be too heavy for your shoulder, so you can direct.”

Saber nodded. “I can at least help clear the smaller debris. Let’s clear everything else first, to give you both room to manoeuvre.”

They got to work, moving smaller rubble, unearthed plants, and anything else that had become dislodged by the outcrop’s collapse. Fortunately, most of the broken outcrop sat at its base, a few metres from the path—a jumble of large boulders, covered with chunks of dirt and dust.

It took some time, but they eventually cleared the trail of the smaller debris. As Saber stretched her back, she saw that only four rocks remained on the path. She knew the remaining stones would be difficult to move, given their large size, and felt slightly annoyed she couldn’t assist with their removal. Still, it wasn’t wise to push her shoulder too fast, so she reluctantly stood off to one side.

“Right.” Coop took a long drink from his sports bottle before tossing it onto the grass beside his rucksack. “Let’s see what we can do with these rocks.”

Sydney and Coop converged on the nearest stone, which was also the largest of the group. Once in position, Sydney said, “On three. One. Two. Three.”

The rock began to move. They pushed it into a slow roll, careful to ensure it didn't roll over anyone's feet, and guided it safely off the path. They repeated the procedure for the other stones, and after the last was moved, Coop flopped down on the grass.

"Phew!" Coop wiped his sweating brow. "You girls may have to roll me down the mountain."

"No chance of that," Sydney said as she collapsed alongside him. She lay back in the grass, closed her eyes, and spread out her limbs. "Sabe, it's on you to get us both down."

Saber chuckled as she sat next to Sydney. "Well, God help you both."

"I'll second that," Coop said.

Saber made an indignant noise. "The cheek!" She picked up a small, dried up clump of mud and threw it at Coop, striking him square in the chest.

Coop made a show of brushing off his T-shirt, though his sparkling eyes betrayed his humour. As he opened his mouth to retort, Saber held up a hand.

"Did you hear that?"

Coop's bushy red eyebrows furrowed together. "Hear what?"

"A bleating sound. Like from a goat."

"I didn't hear any—"

"Shh. Listen." Saber cocked her head, trying to get a fix on the direction of the sound. The bleating noise came again. Saber was certain the sound was a goat. It sounded nearby, but she still couldn't see the animal. Another bleat. The sound seemed to be coming from the jumble of boulders near the base of the collapsed outcrop. Understanding hit Saber, and she clambered to her feet. "I'm just going to take a closer look at those boulders. I think a goat might've somehow gotten stuck."

"I'll come with you," Sydney said. She accepted Saber's offered hand and was pulled upright.

Coop stood as the goat bleated once more. "I heard it that time."

As they closed in on the tangle of boulders, the goat's bleats became clearer, and it was obvious the animal was in some distress.

"Poor thing." Using the noise to guide her, Saber clambered onto one boulder, then, with caution, tested the next to ensure it was steady before she transferred her full weight onto it. It was more of a scramble than an actual climb, and she made short work of it, traversing over the rocks with a nimble agility that belied her months away from the mountain.

She soon spotted movement between the boulders, and angled toward it. She came upon a void between two rocks, and was about to jump across the hole when a flash of white caught her gaze. Saber got down on all fours and peered into the shadowy opening. Below her, staring back with frightened eyes was a wild, white mountain goat.

"Hey there, fella." Saber kept her voice low, soothing. "What ya doin' down there?"

The goat bleated in response, as if answering her question. Saber assumed it'd simply been exploring, slipped and fell.

Saber removed the torch from her pack, snapped it on, and shined it into the crevice. The light lit up a space much larger than its entranceway—about six by ten foot. The drop didn't appear to be much more than five foot, and fortunately, from the way it trotted around, the goat appeared unharmed. However, the animal was well and truly stuck. The walls on all sides leaned inward, so even an able climber like a mountain goat had no hope of getting itself out. Saber knew it would starve to death if they left it in the hole.

Sydney stuck her head into the crevice. "What's the plan?"

Saber jumped. “Jeez!” She drew back from the hole, holding a hand over her chest. “You startled me.”

“Sorry, honey.” Sydney couldn’t refrain from smiling, though it was obvious she was trying not to. She reached out and squeezed Saber’s arm. “What’s the plan?”

“The hole’s not particularly deep, so I think we’ll be able to lift it out. Two from above, one from below.”

Coop nodded. “I agree. So, who wants to go and wrangle a goat?”

Saber and Sydney stared at him, twin smirks on their faces.

Coop harrumphed. “Looks like it’s me then.”

“You know I would if I could,” Saber said. “But I can’t lift the goat that high, not with my shoulder.” She thrust a thumb toward Sydney. “And you’re taller than Syd, which means you can get the goat nearer to us so we can grab it.”

“That’s assuming I can grab the goat.” Coop sat down and dangled his legs into the crevice.

Saber patted his arm. “I have faith in you. Besides, I don’t think the goat will struggle too much, surely it wants to be out of the hole?”

“Are you forgetting it’s a *wild* mountain goat?” Coop raised a warning finger. “If it’s gone feral and I get eaten alive, it’s on you.”

Sydney laughed. “You’ve been watching too many zombie movies with Saber.”

“Quite possibly.” Coop grinned as he lowered himself into the hole. When his feet reached the ground, he hunched over and moved deeper into the crevice.

Saber peered down into the hole and lit the space with her torch. She knew Coop needed both hands for the goat, so he depended on her to illuminate the way. A second beam of light cut through the remaining shadows, as Sydney added her torch to the mix. Saber saw Coop and the goat, which had retreated to the far corner of the crevice at Coop’s arrival.

“Easy, fella.” Coop slowly approached the wide-eyed animal, trying not to startle the beast.

The goat stood perfectly still, as if frozen in place by the shining lights. Its scared eyes were fixed on Coop, and its ears were straight up, at full attention.

Coop was halfway to the goat when it bolted forward, as if Coop crossed some invisible line that only the goat saw. The goat charged at Coop, head down and horns out. Fortunately for Coop, its horns had curled around with age, and weren’t pointed. Coop stood his ground, but when the goat rammed powerfully into his legs he was driven back a few steps.

“Grab his horns!” Saber yelled from above.

“Don’t let him get away from you,” Sydney added.

“What do you think I’m trying to do?” Coop wrestled with the goat, claspings on to its horns to try and keep it still. The goat bucked frantically, and managed to tear out of Coop’s grasp. Coop made a lunge for the animal, diving toward it with his arms outstretched, but the goat was too fast, and Coop ended up face down in the dirt.

“Good try, Coop.” Saber clapped her hands and burst into laughter.

Beside her, Sydney chuckled. “I wish I had my camera.”

Coop scowled up at them as he stood and dusted himself off. When he tried to advance on the goat again, the animal grew skittish, darting out of Coop’s way. Coop scampered after it, and was soon led a merry dance around the crevice.

Saber and Sydney both shouted instructions from above, but as the chase went on they descended into fits of giggles.

Coop stopped for a rest, waving a dismissive hand at the goat. He bent over, placing his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. “What was that you said, Saber?” His voice rose in



pitch, as if in imitation of her. “The goat won’t struggle too much. Surely it wants to be out of the hole.”

The women’s giggling turned into full-throated laughter.

“You both owe me for this.” Coop jabbed a finger in their direction. “Big time.”

He turned once more to the goat and moving closer he picked up a small pebble from the ground. He tossed the pebble to the goat’s left, startling it. The goat dashed to the right, and Coop sprang forward to intercept it. His hands locked on to the goat’s horns. Before it could buck free, Coop clamped his arms around the goat and lifted it into the air.

“That’s a boy!” Saber said. “Well done, Coop.”

“Good work, Coop.”

Coop carried the goat to the entranceway, seeming pleased. He hoisted the goat upward as it began to writhe and kick. “I’m trying to help you, stupid animal.”

Ready and waiting, Saber quickly latched on to the horns, while Sydney grabbed a handful of hair on the goat’s back. As Sydney and Saber heaved, Coop pushed, and they wrangled the goat out of the hole.

The wild goat bounded away and leapt down the jumble of boulders onto the lush grass below.

“You’re welcome!” Coop yelled, shaking his head at the goat’s retreating form. “You little...”

The goat abruptly halted, lifted its tail, and relieved itself.

Coop covered his face with a hand. “Oh, that’s just charming.”

Saber snorted a laugh. “Don’t take it personally, Coop. He was scared.”

Sydney nodded. “You might wanna be grateful he didn’t do that while you were holding him.”

Coop’s nose scrunched. “Good point.” Retracing their earlier steps, he made his way down the rocks. “You know, I’ve changed my mind. I think I rather liked that little goat.”

Following him, Saber shared a grin with Sydney as they continued toward the mountain path below.

SYDNEY AND SABER relaxed at home after their excursion. Sydney pressed the button on the side of the brown reclining sofa, and a low electronic hum sounded. The seat shifted backward, and a footrest came out to prop up her weary feet. She settled into the sofa with a contented sigh. She’d really enjoyed their earlier outing, even though they’d been on the mountain longer than planned, given the unforeseen rock fall.

Saber managed particularly well, and Sydney was over the moon with her progress. The high point of the day was seeing Saber climb again—Sydney knew how much it meant to her partner. Saber rose to each new challenge as she had all those before: with courage, determination, and without complaint. She was in complete awe of the woman. “You amaze me, Sabe. You really do.”

Saber came into the living room, carrying two steaming mugs in her hands. “It’s only hot chocolate.”

Sydney chuckled at Saber’s interpretation of her words. “No, that’s not what I meant.” She took the offered mug from Saber. “Thanks.”

Saber sat on the sofa and curled long legs beneath her. She had a heat pad wedged under her arm, and she draped it over her right shoulder. "Then what did you mean?"

"Is your shoulder hurting you?" Sydney asked.

"No. Just being cautious."

Sydney nodded. "Wise woman."

"It's easy being wise when you're dating a doctor." Saber took a sip of her hot chocolate. "So what did you mean before?"

"I was just thinking about today." Sydney twisted in her seat to get a better view of Saber. She caught and held her gaze. "Despite the seriousness of your injury, I never doubted you would climb again." She tweaked Saber's nose. "I know how stubborn you are. But actually seeing you back out there... I'm so proud of you, what you've achieved."

Saber leaned over and captured Sydney's lips in a long kiss, cradling her face with feather-light fingers. "Mm, the perfect end to a perfect day."

Sydney reclined back against the sofa and slipped an arm around Saber. Careful not to spill either drink, she drew Saber close, smiling as Saber nestled into the embrace. Saber's warmth settled over Sydney like a snug blanket, and after the day's exertions, she found herself drifting off to sleep. Sydney surrendered to it, feeling safe and loved in Saber's arms.

## Chapter Four

SABER PUSHED A heavily laden trolley down the shopping aisle. She checked her grocery list, making sure she hadn't missed anything. The supermarket was in Gransford, an hour's drive from Shirebridge, so she couldn't just pop back for any forgotten items. A large fridge and freezer were essential in any remote village household.

Saber tended to do the shopping because Sydney worked longer hours. She went once a week in the summer, and once a fortnight in winter, due to the, at times, impassable roads. Whatever the season, she and Coop shopped together, it was a ritual of theirs. Realising she'd collected every item on her list, she began to search for Coop, who'd ventured off to fetch his own supplies. She rounded the next aisle, then the next, and finally spotted him near the sweets.

Coop held two boxes of chocolates in his hands, and studied them with intent. He smiled at Saber as she approached. "Just in time." He showed her the boxes. "Which does Sydney prefer?"

"I thought you were getting that magazine subscription?"

"I am, but that's a team thing. I wanted to get her a little something from me."

"That's sweet, Coop." Saber grinned as Coop wagged the boxes at her, clearly wanting an answer. "The red."

Coop placed the red box into his trolley and returned the other to the shelf.

Saber was excited for Sydney's upcoming birthday, but she admitted she was nervous about meeting Sydney's family for the first time. Scared even. Her experience with her own family hadn't been a good one—she'd never been close to her parents, even before the incident that saw her kicked out of her home at sixteen—and she found the closer the meeting became, the more that bad experience tainted her point of view.

Saber was self-aware enough to know she'd been traumatized by the brutal incident. She was unable to speak of it until years afterward, and even now only Sydney knew the full story. But she hadn't expected it to affect her in this way. After all, Sydney's parents were obviously very different from her own—not only had Sydney told her as much, but the stories she told, happy memories of her childhood, all attested to that. The fact Sydney was still close to her parents as an adult, even given the physical distance between them, spoke volumes to Saber—Sydney was often on the phone with her parents and siblings alike, exchanging the latest news about work and family life.

Saber admitted that Sydney's parents were clearly the complete opposite of hers. She had nothing to fear. She needed to focus on that, and not be influenced by past events. With difficulty, Saber pushed her nerves aside.

As she followed Coop down another aisle, Rich's words about sucking up to the potential in-laws ran through her head. Saber realised that for once, Rich was right—in time, she intended to marry Sydney, so Sydney's family would become her own. It was important she make a good impression.

Nervous, she turned to Coop for advice. "Did you get on with Mary's family?"

Coop seemed surprised at the mention of his late wife, and then clarity appeared to dawn on him. “Ah. I was forgetting you’ve never met a partner’s parents before.” He pushed his trolley to one side of the aisle and stopped. “Mary’s father was a Sergeant Major.” At Saber’s raised eyebrow, he said, “No joke. James served in the military his whole life and he was as hard as nails. James was very protective of his daughter.” Coop chuckled. “At our first meeting I was so nervous my hands were slick with sweat, so I had to keep wiping them on my trousers. James opened the door and shook my oily hand, so it wasn’t exactly the best start. I assumed to a military man, a firm, strong handshake would be important, a way to show one’s character.”

“I would’ve thought that too.”

“James later referred to it when I asked for his consent to marry Mary. He told me he’d appreciated my nerves, as it showed I cared. And since I cared about the outcome, I had to be thinking long-term, which meant I deeply loved his daughter.”

Saber was impressed by the man’s insight. “Wow. James was a smart guy.”

“That he was. His wife, too.” Coop paused for a moment, as if lost in his memories. “So to answer your question, Saber, I got on very well with Mary’s family, they were splendid folks.”

Saber regarded him with an eager expression. “Any pointers?”

“You don’t need pointers.” Coop leaned over the trolley toward her. “Like James, all parents want for their children is for them to be happy and loved. You love Sydney, and you make her happy, so you have nothing to worry about.” He reached across and patted Saber’s arm. “Trust me.”

Saber felt a lot better after Coop’s words. His reassurances quelled her nerves some. A smile emerged as she steered her full trolley through the shop, headed for the checkouts—if all she had to do was love Sydney, there wouldn’t be a problem.

SABER OPENED THE kitchen cupboard and stacked several tins of food inside. She’d just returned from her shopping trip, after dropping Coop off at his house, and now busily unpacked the supplies she’d bought.

She emptied the numerous carrier bags of their contents, and placed all of the items onto the kitchen worktop. Saber separated the fresh and frozen produce, and put those foodstuffs away first. The phone rang as she finished storing the perishables in the fridge. Saber moved into the living room, and picked up the phone on the fourth ring. “Hello?”

“Hello?” It sounded more of a question than a statement, as if the woman on the other end expected a different voice. “May I speak to Sydney please?”

“I’m sorry but she’s at work right now. May I ask who’s calling?”

“Her mother.”

Saber nearly dropped the phone in fright. She sat down hastily on the couch.

“This wouldn’t be Saber per chance?” Sydney’s mother asked.

Saber found her mouth to be suddenly dry. She couldn’t get her tongue to work. After a moment she cleared her throat. “Yes it is, ma’am.”

“Well it’s nice to finally speak to you. Sydney’s told me so much about you.”

Despite her discomfort, Saber smiled at that. “It’s nice to speak to you, too.”

“Sydney tells me you’re a chef?”

“Yes, ma’am, that’s right.” Saber’s mind froze, she couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Please call me Penny, all that ‘ma’am’ stuff makes me feel old.” She chuckled.

“Right, sorry. Penny it is.”

“I hope you’re coming to Sydney’s birthday. I would so like to meet you in person.”

“Yes, ma—Penny, I’ll be there.” Saber slapped her head and pulled herself together. “Do I need to bring anything? Food, desserts, anything like that?” She’d never attended such a gathering and wasn’t sure of the procedure.

“No, no, we’ll manage. I’m sure you must get sick of cooking. Just bring yourself, and my daughter of course.” Another chuckle.

“I can do that.” Saber’s gaze flicked to the clock on the mantelpiece; Sydney wasn’t due home for hours. “I’m afraid Sydney won’t be back till after six, but I’ll ask her to call you. Either that or you can try her mobile.”

“No. I won’t disturb her at work.” Penny paused for a moment. “Though I would’ve sworn she was off today, I must’ve muddled up her shifts somehow.”

“Actually Syd was supposed to be off today, but she swapped a shift to give her more time off around her birthday.”

“Oh, that makes sense. I thought it was odd, I’m usually quite good at keeping track of doctors’ schedules.” Penny laughed. “I have to be with three in the family.”

Saber could imagine. “I bet. It must be difficult organising everyone at Christmas.”

Penny giggled. “Oh it’s a nightmare! You’ll see for yourself when you come. Anyway, I’ll let you go, I’m sure you have things to do.”

“I’ll get Sydney to ring you when she gets home.”

“I’d appreciate that. We’re all looking forward to meeting you soon. Good-bye.”

Saber hung up. She stared at the phone for several long moments and replayed the conversation in her head. Sydney’s mother, or rather Penny, seemed a nice woman. Perhaps she shouldn’t be so nervous about meeting her after all?

ON HER EARLIER shopping excursion, Saber had purchased a couple of new DVD’s thinking it would be fun to have a movie night.

Saber picked up the two plates of sandwiches and carried them through into the living room. She reshuffled drinks and other snacks, and squeezed the plates onto the coffee table. Her eyes flitted over the food selection, noting that there was plenty to pick at while watching the films.

She examined the DVD cases, reading the run down of the films trying to decide which one to watch first. Both sounded good. She couldn’t decide between them, so she’d give Sydney the choice. Saber checked her wristwatch; Sydney was due home any moment now.

As if her thoughts conjured Sydney, Saber heard the front door open.

“Hi honey.” Sydney’s voice came from the hallway.

“I’m in here.”

“What a day! I’m shattered. I just want to collapse on the sofa.” Sydney entered the living room, and grinned as she noticed the food-laden table. “You’re too good to me, Sabe.”

“I hope you’re not too tired to eat?”

“Never.” Sydney’s face lit up as she snatched up the DVD’s from the table. “Ooh, I’ve been wanting to see these.”

“I know.” Saber indicated the array of snacks spread out before them. “I thought we could have a movie night.” She shrugged. “I know how you hate early-start shifts, how long they seem. I figured you’d be ready to put your feet up.”

Sydney regarded Saber for a long moment. “You know, Sabe, you’re really going to have to try to be less perfect, you’re making the rest of us look bad.”

Saber was pleased by Sydney’s words. “Is that a yes for movie night?”

Sydney stepped in and wrapped her arms around Saber’s waist. “It’s an I love you.”

Saber ran her fingers tenderly through Sydney’s hair. “I love you too.” After an instant she playfully ruffled the blonde locks. “But is it a yes?”

Sydney rolled her eyes as she laughed. “Yes it’s a yes.”

“Good. But before we start you’d better call your mother back, she rang this afternoon.”

“All right, I’ll do it now.” Sydney gave Saber’s waist a squeeze. “It’s probably about the arrangements for my birthday.” She was halfway to the phone, which rested on a nest of tables in the corner of the room, when she whirled around. “I hope you didn’t ask her to hunt out any embarrassing photos of me. I know how keen you were on that idea.”

Saber sniggered. “No, I didn’t. Though I wish I had.” She sat down on the sofa and tugged at her ear. “My mind kind of went blank.”

Sydney scrunched her eyebrows together. “Did the conversation not go well?”

“No it went fine. I’m pleased I had chance to speak to her, it settled my nerves a little.”

Sydney, leaving the phone untouched in its cradle, returned to Saber. She knelt on the floor in front of her, and rested warm hands on Saber’s knees. “Why are you nervous, sweetheart?”

Saber’s response was quiet, subdued. “I don’t exactly have a good track record with family.”

Sydney winced. “I know that.” She held Saber’s hands. “And given what you went through, what they put you through, it must be incredibly difficult for you to think of any kind of family in a positive light.”

“You understand me better than I understand myself.” She inhaled an unsteady breath. “But it’s more than nerves, Syd, I’m scared,” she shook her head in disgust, “which is ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not.” Sydney paused, as if to let that sink in. “It’s perfectly natural that you don’t want to open yourself up to any more pain. Especially on the family front.” She squeezed Saber’s hands. “But it breaks my heart, love, that you’ve never experienced the simple joy of having a loving family around you. And I can’t abide it. I won’t. You deserve a family. Please let me share mine with you?”

Profoundly moved by Sydney’s impassioned plea, to say nothing of her generous spirit, Saber felt a tear roll down her cheek.

Sydney brushed it away with a soft thumb, then rose up on her knees and cradled Saber’s face in her hands. “You know I would never do anything to hurt you. I realise it’s difficult now, but I promise you it’ll be worth it, and I’ll be with you every step of the way. All you have to do is be yourself, and my family will grow to love you as I do.”

Saber thought things over. She still had reservations, but they were no longer as prominent as before. She trusted Sydney with every fibre of her being, and her word was more than enough for Saber. Her gaze still fixed on Sydney’s, Saber said, “I’ll do my best.”

Seeming satisfied by that, Sydney climbed onto Saber’s lap and enfolded her in a tight hug.

Saber laid a soft kiss in Sydney’s hair as she returned the embrace. After a few seconds, she repeated Sydney’s earlier sentiment back to her. “You’re going to have to try to be less perfect, you’re making the rest of us look bad.”

SYDNEY SWITCHED ON her window-wipers as she drove home from work—a fine drizzle had begun to fall. She was pleased to have the next few days off. The week had flown by and she looked forward to spending time with her family. She couldn't wait for Saber to meet them, and was excited at the prospect of showing Saber around the home she'd grown up in.

The village came into view. Sydney steered the Range Rover down the hill, and passed by the gate that marked the entrance into Shirebridge, its name inscribed into the wood with bright green lettering.

She slowed her car when she reached the narrow bridge, and allowed its speed to fall further when she spotted Saber exiting the café. Saber stepped into the road and signalled for Sydney to pull over. Sydney drew the car alongside her, and Saber opened the passenger door.

Sydney grinned. "I don't usually pick up hitch-hikers."

"That's fortunate, because I don't want a lift. Come on inside for a moment."

Sydney leaned forward so she could peer past Saber and into the café. She couldn't see inside because all the blinds were drawn over the windows. Beyond the blinds the lights were clearly off. She noticed the closed sign over the café door, and grew concerned. "It's not like Marge to close early. In fact, I've never known her to do so. Has something happened?"

Saber's face gave away nothing. "No questions. Just come inside."

"All right. I'll just park up." She waited for Saber to close the door, and quickly parked her car. Her mind whirring with various possibilities, all of which were bad, Sydney hastily jumped out and jogged to Saber's side.

Saber wasted no time, and ushered Sydney ahead of her into the café. Sydney couldn't see or hear a thing.

Saber slapped on the lights. The café suddenly erupted with noise, as people all around shouted, "Happy birthday!"

Sydney jumped. She took in the café with wide eyes. Brightly coloured streamers, banners, and balloons were everywhere. Three large tables were joined together at one side of the room, and covered with an extravagant, tasty-looking buffet.

The café was quite full of people, and Sydney was touched to see everyone in the small, close-knit village had turned out for the event. They'd taken time out of their lives to celebrate Sydney's birthday with her. She grinned at every one of them.

"Right people," Marge called out, taking charge of the proceedings. "Now the birthday girl's arrived, you can all help yourselves to the buffet."

Not needing to be told twice, the majority of the people in the room headed for the food tables.

Rich came over and high-fived Saber. "At least we know the party was a genuine surprise," he sniggered, "Syd couldn't have faked that reaction."

Sydney laughed and playfully slapped Rich's arm. "Sabe, you're looking far too pleased with yourself." Sydney slapped Saber's arm, too.

"And here we were," Rich's tone was dry, "thinking you'd actually *appreciate* a surprise party. The entire team pitched in to help organise it."

"I do appreciate it." Sydney stretched up and kissed Rich on the cheek. "Very much so."

Rich beamed at her. "Come and open your present."

Sydney followed Rich toward the rest of the team, who stood waiting around a table.

As they walked, Saber leaned into Sydney from behind and whispered in her ear, "Don't I get a kiss?" She sounded disappointed.

“Oh, you will,” Sydney said. “Especially as I have a strong suspicion that this whole thing was your idea.” She winked seductively over her shoulder. “But the kiss I’m going to give you isn’t suitable for this kind of audience.” She reached back and entwined her fingers through Saber’s. “Or any audience for that matter.”

Saber cleared her throat. “I like the sound of that.”

Sydney chuckled. “Hold that thought.”

“Happy birthday for Friday, Sydney.” Doug stepped around the table and enfolded her in a bear hug. He gave Sydney a bouquet of yellow flowers. “These are from me, Faye, and the kids.”

“These are lovely, Doug. Thank you.” Sydney glanced around to thank Faye, Lauren, and Michael, but they were over at the buffet, so she made a mental note to thank them later.

Doug gamely presented his cheek to Sydney. He’d obviously seen her earlier thanks to Rich.

Sydney laughed and shook her head at him, but relented and kissed Doug’s cheek.

“That’s enough of that.” Coop light-heartedly shouldered Doug aside. He presented Sydney with a card and a wrapped, square-shaped gift. “Happy birthday, Sydney.”

“Thanks, Coop. Do you want me to open them now, or should I save them for Friday?”

“Now,” Rich said, though she hadn’t asked him.

Coop didn’t object, so Sydney opened first the card and then the present—a box of chocolates. “These are my favourite, Coop. Thank you.” She kissed Coop’s cheek, causing him to blush.

Jeff, by far the quietest man in the group, slid a bottle-shaped present across the table. “Three guesses as to what it is.”

Sydney chuckled, and unwrapped the gift. Unsurprisingly, a bottle of wine was revealed. Though not a big drinker, she did enjoy the occasional glass. Not wanting Jeff to feel left out, Sydney crossed to him and kissed him on his cheek. “Thanks, Jeff. I’ll try to ensure I get to drink it.” She dropped her voice conspiratorially. “Saber tends to use it in her cooking.”

“Uh, excuse me.” Saber’s hands rose to her hips. “But who exactly eats that cooking?”

Coop chortled. “She’s got you there.”

Sydney held up her hands. “I take it back.”

Rich gestured at Saber dismissively. “Ignore her.” Grinning, he drew a card from behind his back. “Save the best till last, that’s what I say. This is from the team.”

Sydney opened the birthday card. Inside, there were well wishes from all the guys, and a confirmation subscription receipt for a year’s supply of her favourite climbing magazine. “This is great, just what I wanted.” She regarded each of them in turn. “Thank you all.”

“You’re welcome,” Coop said.

“So come on, Saber,” Rich pushed her to the forefront of the group. “What’ve you got for Syd?”

Saber shook her head. “Oh no, I’m not telling you.”

“What?” Rich’s voice lifted in disbelief. “You mean you haven’t brought it with you?”

“Of course not. I’ll be with Sydney on her birthday, so I’ll give her the gift then.”

Sydney waggled her eyebrows at Saber. “I’m more than happy to open it now.”

Saber jostled Rich in annoyance. “Now see what you’ve started?” She shook her finger at Sydney. “You’ll have to wait for your present from me.”

Sydney sighed. “You just want to keep me in suspense.”

Saber shrugged. “That’s fun too.”



# Chapter Five

SYDNEY AND SABER decided that Sydney would drive to her parents' house, as she knew the route there, and it would be simpler than giving directions all the time. Sydney was used to the busy city traffic. The extreme contrast between her old house and where she lived now was startlingly apparent to Sydney as she drove the black Range Rover through the scenic, deserted mountain roads.

When Sydney had spoken to her mother, Penny suggested that she and Saber travel down the day before her birthday. That way, after staying the night, Sydney would be able to spend the majority of her birthday at her family home, before having to leave in the evening to return to Shirebridge.

Knowing the journey to Wakefield was a good few hours drive away they set off mid-morning.

"Let's make sure I've got this right," Saber said from the passenger seat. "Your mother's Penny, your father is Daniel. Your dad's a doctor like you, as is your eldest brother Thomas."

Sydney nodded at each point. "Spot on so far."

"Your other older brother, Anthony, is the rebel in the family. He dropped out of Uni, and," Saber peered across to Sydney, "is he still travelling around Europe?"

"That makes him sound exotic, which he isn't. Anthony bums his way from place to place. But yes, he's still doing that."

"Will he be at your birthday?"

"Oh yes, he's quite good at showing up for these events. He always makes the effort to come home, no matter where he is." Sydney thought for a moment. "If I recall correctly, it's difficult to keep track, I believe he's just returned from Switzerland."

"Switzerland?" Saber sounded intrigued. "I hear it's beautiful around there."

"Oh you'll hear about it." Sydney chuckled. "Anthony's always keen to discuss his travels."

Saber seemed pleased. "Well at least if conversation runs dry I'll know what topic to raise."

Sydney reached over and rubbed Saber's knee in reassurance. "You'll do fine."

Saber grasped Sydney's hand and raised it to her lips, kissing it softly. "Thanks for being patient with me."

Sydney squeezed Saber's hand. When sure Saber wasn't going to add anything further, she said, "You've forgotten a family member."

"I have?" Saber's brow creased as she frowned. Her expression cleared an instant later.

"Your younger sister, Caitlin. Has she met Mr. right yet?"

Sydney's tone was droll. "You mean Mr. rich? No, she's still searching." The subject brought forth an oversight on her part. "And that reminds me, Thomas's wife, Paula, will be there. They've been married for almost ten years."

"Any children?"

"No, despite years of trying. Paula's currently undergoing her second round of IVF."

"You mentioned that Caitlin's single, but what about Anthony? Does he have a partner?"

Sydney scoffed. “Anthony changes partners as often as he changes countries. I’ve met the odd girlfriend over the years, but he’s never been serious about any of them.” She shrugged. “He just isn’t the type to settle down.”

“Well, each to their own,” Saber said as she retrieved a packet of fruity sweets from the glove box. She offered a sweet to Sydney, leaning over and holding it up playfully to her lips.

Amused, but keeping her eyes on the road, Sydney acquiesced and opened her mouth. She felt Saber’s finger slip inside, placing the sweet slowly, and deliberately on her tongue. Sydney couldn’t refrain from closing her mouth, and lightly trapping the finger in her teeth. She began to suck on the digit, finding that much more interesting than the sweet.

Saber withdrew her finger bit by bit, with a sensual grin. “Is it nice?” At Sydney’s expression, she chuckled. “The sweet?”

“Umm...” Sydney had to shake her head to focus her thoughts. “Can’t say I’ve noticed one way or the other just yet.” She concentrated on driving for several moments. “Though I will say that perhaps Anthony would settle down if he found a woman half as intoxicating as you.”

Saber blushed. “I’m already taken.”

Warmth spread through Sydney’s chest. “And I thank God every day for that.”

“WOW, YOU GREW up here?” Saber asked as she stared at the huge mansion before her. The private gated development only contained six impressive executive-styled homes, each with its own landscaped gardens. Mature trees separated every property, giving the individual plots their own measure of privacy. Since real estate was at a premium in most cities, especially those with land, Saber couldn’t even hazard a guess as to what these houses were worth.

Saber rubbed her sweaty hands on her trousers, and the action made her recall Coop’s story, and his words of wisdom. Taking a deep breath, she took Sydney’s outstretched hand, and they walked up the garden path to the front door.

Sydney gave Saber’s hand an encouraging squeeze.

“Don’t worry, they’ll love you.”

A small grey-haired woman in her mid-sixties opened the door and rushed out to greet them. She had a jovial countenance, and positively beamed as she hurried toward Sydney, arms outstretched. “Hi, sweetie.”

“Hi, Mum.” Sydney moved forward to meet her. Mother and daughter threw their arms around each other with exuberance and shared a long, affectionate hug.

When they separated, Penny surveyed Saber. “This must be tall, dark, and beautiful. My, my, you certainly are that.”

Saber stood rooted to the spot, quite unsure as to how to respond. “Umm...thanks.” She held out a polite hand for Penny to shake.

Penny batted the hand aside and embraced Saber heartily. “Lean down for me, dear, you’re too tall.” As Saber leaned forward, Penny kissed her cheek and peered into her face. “I see what you mean about those eyes, Sydney. I could get lost in them myself.” She smiled at her daughter as she released Saber. “I bet you’ve got to carry a box around all day, to stand on every time you want to kiss her.”

Saber’s eyebrows hiked up, surprised at the woman’s openness. It was apparent she’d been a topic of discussion between mother and daughter, and Sydney had painted her in a rather flattering light.

“Mum!”

Penny grinned at Sydney. “What?” She took Saber’s hand, leading her toward the house. “Never let it be said that my daughter doesn’t have good taste.” She lowered her voice. “She got that from me, you know.”

Saber nodded, somewhat taken aback. Her view of family was different than most, and so far Sydney’s weren’t at all like she’d expected. That was definitely a good thing. She felt Sydney’s supportive touch on her back and drew strength from it, grateful for the subtle reminder she wasn’t alone.

“Daniel? Anthony? They’re here,” Penny called out as she stepped into the expansive, marble-floored hallway. Penny’s voice echoed in the large space. She turned to Saber. “You’ll meet Thomas and his wife Paula tomorrow. Caitlin too. They live a lot closer so have no need to stay over.”

Impressed by the grandeur of the place, Saber took in the clean lines of the cream coloured hall. The light colour was offset nicely by the dark wood of the wide, sweeping staircase, which was carved intricately in places with a delicate leaf design. “You have a magnificent home.”

“Thank you. We’re very fortunate. I’ll give you a tour later. As a chef, I’m sure you’ll appreciate the kitchen.”

A silver-haired man who Saber presumed was Sydney’s father appeared at the top of the stairs. He made his way down to them. He was smartly dressed in a shirt and tie, and impeccably groomed. He had an important bearing about him, and Saber could easily imagine him in charge of a hospital ward. His face was quite stern, but his features softened when his gaze landed on Sydney.

“Ahh,” he said as he stepped off the bottom step. “The young progeny returns.”

“Hello, Dad.” Sydney hugged her father warmly, and he kissed the top of her head. She withdrew and indicated Saber. “Dad, I’d like to introduce you to my partner, Kelly Saber. Sabe, this is my father, Daniel.”

Daniel held out a steady hand in a friendly manner. “I’m very pleased to meet you, Saber. Sydney has told me so much about you.” As Saber firmly shook his hand, he leaned in closer. “Don’t worry, it wasn’t all bad.”

Saber chuckled, liking his sense of humour. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“Actually, I haven’t heard a bad thing about you,” Daniel said. “Not one. Sydney’s clearly quite taken with you.” Saber threw an affectionate glimpse Sydney’s way, and Daniel lifted a finger, as if in warning not to celebrate success too soon. “But before I make up my mind, I have an important question for you.”

Saber swallowed. “All right.”

Daniel kept her waiting for a long moment, building the suspense. He finally asked, “Do you like football?”

Relief flooded through her, but she kept a straight face, unsure of the seriousness of Daniel’s question. “I don’t mind the odd match.”

“Good. Which team do you support?”

Saber had spoken truthfully, she didn’t mind the odd game, but she wasn’t interested enough to follow and support a team. Though that answer wouldn’t help her here, Daniel was plainly an avid supporter. She could easily name a team, but what if she chose the wrong one? Knowing her luck, she’d choose the team that were bitter rivals to the team Daniel supported. She felt Daniel’s grey eyes on her, waiting for her response. She couldn’t keep him hanging much longer. She was just about to blindly name a team when the answer came to her. “Whichever team you do, sir.”

Daniel guffawed. “Sydney, she’s perfect!” He clapped Saber on the back, and guided her out of the hallway. “I can see you’re going to fit in just fine around here.”

DANIEL LED SABER into an opulent living room, which, though grand, still managed to maintain a homely air. The décor was mainly neutral tones, while the suites, curtains, and other accessories were cherry red, adding colour and warmth to the room.

At Daniel’s indication, Saber moved to take a seat. She crossed to the nearest suite, and a light danced across the wall catching her attention. She tracked the refracted light back to an ornate crystal chandelier, which sparkled overhead.

Saber sank into the plush, red leather suite, as she heard a thundering of footsteps coming from the hall.

A handsome, fair-haired man bounded into the room. His face lit up when he spotted Sydney. “Hey, sis!” His arms outstretched, he raced over to Sydney, but at the last possible moment, his eyes landed on Saber, and instead of enfolding Sydney in a hug, he swept her to one side. “I *was* going to hug you, but who’s this gorgeous lady?”

They all laughed, and Sydney batted his arm. “Just ignore my brother, Sabe. I told you Anthony fancies himself as a ladies man.”

“Now sis, there’s no need to be jealous.” He grabbed hold of Sydney in a bear hug and swung her around in a circle. “It’s so good to see you!”

“You too.” Sydney giggled and kicked her feet, which were still off the floor. “Now put me down so you can meet Sabe properly.”

Anthony set Sydney down, and walked over to Saber, who stood up as he approached. Now at her full height, Saber couldn’t help but chuckle as Anthony whistled, and made a show of staring up at her.

“Talk about little and large.” Anthony shook Saber’s hand. He leaned in and dropped his voice to a whisper, but from the decibel it was obvious he wanted everyone to hear. “Does Sydney have to carry a box around with—”

Sydney scoffed and interrupted him. “Not you too! I’ve already had the box comment from Mum.”

Saber laughed along with the rest of them. The light-hearted banter continued, and she began to feel more at ease. She felt welcome, and looked forward to meeting the rest of the family.

## Chapter Six

SYDNEY LINKED AN arm through Saber's as they ambled around the expansive grounds. After a nice meal, she had shown Saber the rest of the house, and now they strolled through the lush gardens at the rear of the property. Penny was a keen horticulturist, and that passion was proudly displayed here. The borders were well stocked and well established with a variety of multi-coloured flora, the art of topiary had been used on several bushes, and decorative archways were laden with climbing roses.

The gardens were cleverly thought out, and divided into sections. The first was a kitchen garden near the house, which gave off a nice aroma of herbs. The next was a walled garden, with fan-trained fruit trees and delicate flowers. And finally, a rock garden with alpine flowers and a miniature stream that flowed into the water gardens, where Koi swam in a large pond. A bridge led over the pond to a picturesque summerhouse, which was Sydney's favourite place in the entire garden.

A heady perfume wafted over them, as they reached the rose garden. Both women leaned closer to smell the roses, and laughed as they almost bumped heads.

"I don't know how Penny finds time to tend all of this. It's immaculate."

"Now that she's getting older she hires gardeners in for simple maintenance duties. She has a cleaner for the house too, since it's so large."

"I bet you and your siblings had fun growing up here, plenty of places for hide and seek."

Sydney grinned. "We loved playing hide and seek. Anthony always won. We'd eventually find him hiding halfway up a tree, or curled under a bush somewhere." She giggled. "He always ended up filthy, no matter what he did. It used to drive Mum to despair."

"Sounds like me as a kid. How much of an age gap is there between all of you?"

"There's a three year gap between each of us. We were very carefully planned." Sydney's voice became droll. "Doctors do have a tendency to over plan, you know."

"Oh believe me, I've noticed."

Sydney bumped Saber with her hip. "I'm not that bad." She peeked up at Saber. "Am I?"

"No," Saber said. She stroked her thumb over the back of Sydney's hand, which was still linked through Saber's arm. A moment passed, then Saber's lips twitched in amusement. "But my timekeeping skills have improved a lot since I met you."

Sydney squawked. "That's it, you're sleeping alone tonight!" She unhooked her arm from Saber's, and, feigning annoyance, strode away on the garden path.

Saber followed, knowing Sydney was only teasing.

Sydney took the route toward the water gardens, and emerged near the Koi pond. She crossed the bridge over to the summerhouse, stopping to watch the fish for a moment as they swam sedately through the water. This part of the garden was completely screened off from the main house. Despite that, when Saber entered the summerhouse behind her, Sydney still closed the door.

Saber sat on a wooden chair and pulled Sydney down onto her lap. She wrapped her arms around Sydney's waist. "Have you forgiven me yet?"

Sydney draped an arm over Saber's shoulder. "I don't know." She kept up her pretense. "I think a kiss is in order."

"Hmm, I'm sensing I've been brought here for an ulterior motive."

Sydney smirked. "I'll admit that when I was a teenager I often fantasized about wooing beautiful girls here."

Saber's eyebrows shot up toward her hairline. "Sydney Greenwood, you little minx!"

"*Fantasized* being the operative word."

"I find that hard to believe. I bet you had girls fighting over you."

"I was very involved in my studies back then, hence it remained a fantasy. You're the first beautiful girl I've brought here."

Saber blushed. "Really?"

"Really."

Saber dipped her head and captured Sydney's lips in a soft kiss. Sydney returned the kiss in kind, and soon got lost in that simple delight. As one kiss turned into several, Sydney ran her tongue teasingly across Saber's lips, seeking access. Saber's lips parted and their tongues slid against each other in an ardent caress. In every kiss, Sydney felt the love Saber had for her, and the unbreakable connection they shared. The feeling overwhelmed her. With great reluctance, she pulled back from the kiss, and grinned at Saber's groan of protest.

"If I don't stop now, I won't be able to." At Saber's low chuckle, Sydney said, "And I know you won't feel comfortable making love on my parent's property." She knew Saber was somewhat shy when it came to sex—she did like her privacy. It had taken Sydney a while to convince Saber to make love outside in their hot tub, despite the fact it was a private, un-overlooked garden. Sydney knew she'd have little to no chance here at her parent's house.

"You're right about that." Saber stood, bringing Sydney up with her. She patted Sydney's rump, and winked at her. "Don't worry, I promise it'll be worth the wait."

SYDNEY LEANED BACK into the plush, red leather suite. She made herself comfortable, and took a drink of Horlicks from the mug she held. Her parents had suggested a nightcap before bed, so she, Saber, and Anthony joined them in the living room. She and Saber were seated on one of the three-piece suites, while Anthony and her parents were on the other, directly opposite. Between them, was a long, rectangular coffee table.

Before they'd even settled, Anthony set his drink down and dug into a carrier bag that rested between his feet. He excitedly brought out a stack of photos, and came around the table. "Scooch."

Knowing how Anthony liked to show and explain his photos, Sydney moved over so he could sit in the middle. She shared an amused glance with her mother. "I take it you and Dad have already seen them?"

"The first day he arrived." Penny chuckled. "In fact, I think it was the first thing we did."

"It was," Daniel said. "More photos to add to his ever-growing collection. His room, when he's here to use it, is overflowing with the things."

Anthony dismissed the comment with a casual flick of his wrist. He tapped the top photo in a clear attempt to draw their attention to it.

Saber leaned forward, seeming genuinely interested. "Switzerland, wasn't it?"

"That's right. I stayed in a little village called Saas Grund, in the south of Switzerland. That's it there." Anthony indicated the photo of a beautiful, lush green valley, surrounded by vast, impressive mountains. A sprawling village nestled at the bottom of the snow-capped peaks. "A lot of the mountaintops were so high that whenever it rained it landed as snow, so it was a great place for skiers."

"Do you ski?" Saber asked.

Sydney snorted. "Only if he wants a broken leg!"

Anthony laughed, and nudged Sydney with his shoulder. "*I* ski!" He grimaced. "A little. It's not my forte." He revealed the next photo.

Sydney bent forward for a closer study. "Ooo, are those the Alps?"

"Yes, that photo was taken from a place called Allalin, you can ski all year round there. The professional skiers tend to go there during the summer, and while I was there I saw the Russian national ski team training." Anthony pointed at the snow-covered peaks, which stretched off into the hazy distance for as far as you could see. "The ones closest are the Swiss Alps, and those beyond are the Italian Alps." He showed the next picture. "This was a revolving restaurant, it turned very slowly, and so over the course of your meal you got to see a panoramic 360 degree view of the Alps."

"Wow," said Sydney and Saber in unison.

"It was pretty spectacular." Anthony revealed another photo. "There you can see the glaciers. I went into the ice pavilion, which was actually inside a glacier. Boy, was it cold in there!"

At the next picture, which seemed to be of a typical Swiss village, Sydney noticed that all of the wooden huts, topped with unusual, slate roofs, were raised off the ground by about two feet. Each hut balanced on what appeared to be four stone mushrooms, one at each corner. "I love these huts. But what are the mushrooms for?"

"I asked one of the locals about that," Anthony said. "Most of the huts are used for storing grain and such for the animals. The overhanging cap at the top of the vertical base stops rats and other vermin from climbing up and getting inside."

Saber sounded impressed. "Clever."

"From what I saw, the majority of people seem to live in apartments, often with balconies that were decorated with rows upon rows of brightly coloured flowers. Like this one here..." Anthony put another photo in front of them. He grinned. "I thought Mum would appreciate the flowers."

"I did, dear," Penny said. "I'm quite taken with them. In fact, I was thinking about adding flower boxes to our balcony."

Daniel groaned in exasperation. "Not more flowers. I think I'll develop hay fever."

They all laughed, as Daniel faked a sneeze.

"Show them the photos of the marmots, Anthony." Penny's eyes flicked to Sydney. "They're the cutest little things."

Anthony flicked through the pictures, and brought a couple to the top of the pile.

"Aww," Sydney said as she saw the furry creature before her. The marmot resembled a beaver, and was similar in size too. Its fur was a mixture of colours, brown, grey, and fawn.

"The marmots live on alpine inclines, and when I was on the cable cars I often saw them running about below." Anthony stood and stretched across the table. He dragged his carrier bag toward him. "Though wild, they were quite friendly, and would let you get close as long as you

had something to feed them.” He dipped his hand into the carrier. “I knew you’d like them, Syd, so I brought you one back.” Anthony threw something brown and furry onto Sydney’s lap.

Sydney squealed as she jumped off the sofa.

Chuckling, Anthony picked up the marmot. “Relax, it’s just a toy.”

Sydney blushed. “Anthony!” She thumped her brother on the back.

Anthony’s grin widened. “Here. Watch. You’ve gotta see this.”

He sat the toy marmot on the table, and pressed its paw. The marmot released a shrill whistle, and then began to yodel and dance around the table.

Sydney gaped at the spectacle in disbelief. A moment passed, then everyone dissolved into helpless laughter.

“THAT’S THE LAST of them,” Anthony said as he showed the final photo. “This was taken in Zermatt. As climbers, you should recognise that mountain.”

Saber nodded. “It’s the Matterhorn.” It was an iconic mountain. She knew many a climber had perished while attempting to reach its summit. The return descent was equally perilous, and many lost their lives on their way back down the mountain.

“And before you ask, Sydney, no I didn’t climb it.” Anthony held up a finger. “But only because it was overcast.”

“Yeah, right.” Sydney shook her head. “No one believes that.”

“That’s odd.” Saber took the photo and raised it for everyone to see. “Because in this picture it’s a lovely sunny day.” She gazed at Anthony with the utmost innocence. “Not a cloud in sight.”

Daniel leaned over the table and inspected the photo. He smirked. “She’s got you there, son.”

Sydney giggled. “You might wanna work on that story, Anthony.”

“Give me that.” Anthony snatched at the photo and put it out of sight at the bottom of the pile. He narrowed his eyes at Saber, teasing. “And I was just starting to like you.”

Saber sniggered. “Sorry.” She indicated the stack of holiday snaps on the coffee table. “There are some great shots in there. You’re a talented photographer.”

Anthony beamed, clearly pleased by the comment. “It’s a passion of mine. I like to have a...how can I put it?” He paused as he searched for the right words. “A visual diary of my travels. I try to capture as much as I can. I move around a lot, so I’ve had plenty of practice.” He shrugged. “I like to think I’m getting better at it.”

“You certainly are,” Penny said in an encouraging tone. “You’ve improved tenfold since you began.”

“You’re very good.” Saber regarded Anthony with a serious expression. “Have you ever thought about selling some of your photos?”

Anthony seemed surprised, as if the thought had never even crossed his mind. “No, I can’t say that I have.”

“That’s a great idea.” Sydney pushed a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “You should consider it, Anthony.”

“I will.” Anthony nodded. “I’ll think it through.” He examined Saber. “What about you? Have you travelled much?”

Saber shook her head. Since she’d left home at a young age, she’d needed to support herself, so never had the money to travel. She wasn’t about to discuss all that with Anthony, so she



simply said, "I've never really had the chance. I'd like to though." She pointed to the photo pile. "Switzerland appears beautiful."

Anthony chuckled. "I highly recommend it." His brow creased. "Wait. Does that mean you've never been abroad? Not once?"

"Nope," Saber said. "But I don't feel like I've missed out. After all, I've found my perfect place—Shirebridge." She met Sydney's gaze and they smiled at each other.

Anthony sounded incredulous. "I don't know how anyone settles in one place."

"Most of us manage, Anthony," Sydney said.

"Don't you get bored?"

"You're forgetting that most of us work for a living," Daniel said in a pointed tone. "We don't have time to get bored."

"Well yeah, fair point." Anthony glanced between Sydney and Saber. "But you've mentioned before that Shirebridge is a tiny, secluded village. *Miles* from anywhere. What do you do for entertainment?"

"The people themselves are the entertainment." Sydney chuckled. "There are some real characters in that village."

Saber nodded. "You can say that again." She thought of her friends and neighbours back home. "There's a strong community spirit in Shirebridge, which means we're often involved in one another's lives. For example, the other day we had a surprise birthday party for Syd, and the whole village came out to celebrate with us."

"Oh, how lovely," Penny said.

Sydney smiled at her mother. "It was."

Saber's gaze returned to Anthony. "I love the outdoors. It's fortunate that Sydney does too. The mountains surrounding Shirebridge have a good array of hiking trails and climbs, so we're often out and about. We're also kept busy with the Mountain Rescue work we do."

"Well that part sounds interesting," Anthony said. "And just so you know," he jabbed a thumb toward his chest, "Sydney got her love of the outdoors from me."

"Is that right?" Seeing Sydney's confirming nod, Saber raised her eyebrows at Anthony in question. "So you climb then? Are you any good?"

Anthony scoffed and puffed out his chest in a macho display. "Am *I* any good?"

Saber rolled her eyes. "The truth. No exaggerating."

Anthony's chest deflated. "I am actually quite good."

"Then the next time you're free you should come up our way. There are some good climbs that Syd and I could show you."

Anthony grinned and glanced at Sydney, obviously seeking her approval.

Sydney didn't hesitate. "Of course. You're welcome anytime."

On that note, they all finished their drinks and said goodnight.

SYDNEY STRIPPED OUT of her clothes and put on her pyjamas. She pulled back the bed covers, which were a lovely duck-egg blue colour, and clambered into bed. She propped up the pillows behind her and covered her body with the duvet.

As she waited for Saber to return from the bathroom, Sydney regarded her old bedroom. The room held a lot of good memories for her. Though now a guest room, she appreciated her mother's thoughtfulness in giving her this room. The décor had changed since Sydney lived

there, the furniture too, but the layout had stayed pretty much the same. As all the rooms in her parents' house, it was luxuriously fitted. The oak-framed, queen-sized bed sat in the centre of the large room, with its carved headboard resting up against one wall. The remaining walls were lined with cupboards, drawers, and a vanity unit, all of which were made from the same matching oak as the bed. The furnishings, a pale duck-egg blue, suited the room so well Sydney wished she'd decorated it in that manner when it had been her bedroom.

Saber stepped out of the bathroom, crossed to the oak drawers, removed her nightclothes, and began to change into them.

Sydney watched the display fondly. Saber's beauty never failed to captivate Sydney. Saber was the perfect specimen of womanhood.

Saber's gaze lifted, as if she felt Sydney watching her. She stopped mid-change, her top-half bare, and raised an eyebrow at Sydney. "Enjoying yourself?"

Sydney wasn't bashful at being caught. "Very much." She slowly raked her eyes over Saber's half-naked form, lingering on her full, round breasts. "Please...don't stop on my account."

Saber smirked and continued to change, then climbed into bed beside Sydney.

"You're such a tease." Sydney shook her head. "Changing in front of me when you won't let me make love to you here."

"You didn't have to look."

"Ha! As if I could resist."

Saber yanked up the duvet and covered Sydney's head with it, blocking her view. "There. Now you can't see. It was that easy not to look."

"Oi!" With a giggle, Sydney pushed the duvet off her head. She flattened the covers down. "It's never that easy with you. I'm amazed that you have no idea how gorgeous you are."

Saber coloured slightly. "Would you rather have me vain and conceited?"

"No." Sydney ran her fingers through Saber's dark locks. "You're perfect just as you are." She held Saber's gaze for several moments. "How are you holding up? How are the nerves?"

Saber went quiet before she responded. "They're gone."

Pleased to hear that, Sydney took hold of Saber's hand. "Good."

Saber entwined her fingers with Sydney's. "I'm glad I've finally met your folks." At Sydney's chuckle, she said, "It took me a while to adjust, your parents are so open and caring—the complete opposite to mine." A sad expression came over Saber's face at the mention of her own family, but it cleared as Sydney rubbed her forearm in sympathy. "I like your folks very much. Anthony too. He reminds me of Rich."

Sydney considered the similarities between the two. Both were immature and full of themselves, but at the core they were good men. She was surprised she hadn't noticed their likeness before now. "And I can tell they already adore you." She leaned in and brushed her lips softly against Saber's. "Thank you for asking Anthony up to visit. That meant a lot to me."

"That's why I did it." Saber grew sheepish. "Syd, I don't think I've been very fair to you."

"What?" Sydney's brow furrowed in confusion. "Why?"

"Because up until today I never realised how much you missed your family. You told me often enough, but I never understood. But today, when I saw you with your family...you light up around them, Syd. I can see the love you have for them, and they for you." Saber shook her head, seeming cross with herself. "I'm truly sorry you haven't seen them for a while. I know that's mainly my fault, given my recuperation—"

It was Sydney's turn to shake her head. "Sabe, no, that's not your fault. I wanted to be there for you."

"And I love you for that." Saber cupped Sydney's face and stared deeply into her eyes. "More than words can say. But I just want you to know I get it now, I understand. So whenever you miss your family and want to visit, count me in. Or if you'd rather they visit us, consider our home open to them—all of them, not just Anthony."

Sydney was touched by Saber's words. More so, since only a day ago Saber still had reservations regarding family in general, due to her own chequered personal history. The fact Saber tried to move past those reservations for her benefit moved Sydney. She stroked Saber's cheek with the backs of her knuckles. "Thank you. That's the best gift you could give me."

Saber enfolded her in a warm embrace. "That's going to make my birthday present a bit anticlimactic." At Sydney's chuckle, she said, "Perhaps I should've saved the speech for tomorrow?"

## Chapter Seven

“MORNING SWEETHEART,” SABER said as Sydney opened her eyes. “Happy birthday.”

The words seemed to snap Sydney wide-awake. She sat up eagerly, hope on her face. “Does that mean I can finally open my present?”

Saber chuckled and hopped out of bed. She squatted next to her luggage bag and searched through its numerous pockets. She knew exactly where Sydney’s present was of course, but she wanted to keep Sydney in suspense for a bit longer. She found the birthday card, and passed it over for Sydney to open. While Sydney was preoccupied with that, Saber removed the small gift box and tucked it behind her back, in the waistband of her nightclothes.

Sydney read the card with a smile, and set it on show on the nightstand.

At Sydney’s expectant face, Saber feigned a mortified expression. “Syd, I’m so sorry. I think I must’ve left your present at home.”

“Very funny.”

Saber tipped out the bag. Nothing fell out. “I’m not joking.”

Sydney’s brow creased. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” Saber held a hand over her eyes and shook her head. “I remember putting it out to pack...” She paused as if thinking. “On top of the drawers in our bedroom.” She clicked her fingers, pretending to have succeeded in recalling the events. “The postman came. I had to sign for a package, and I must’ve gotten distracted.” She made a face. “Your present’s still at home, where I left it.”

Sydney sighed, visibly disappointed. “Well, these things happen. It can’t be helped now.” She rose to her knees, held out a hand to Saber, and tugged her back onto the bed. She draped her arms around Saber’s neck. “I forgive you. But if I was a suspicious woman I might think you’d done it on purpose, I know how you like to keep me on tenterhooks.”

Saber grinned. “I think you’re getting paranoid in your old age.”

“Tch.” Sydney smacked Saber’s stomach. “You’re still older than me, you know.”

“Mm-hmm. And you should show your elders respect.”

“I’ll show you respect...” Sydney started to tickle Saber mercilessly, going for all of Saber’s weak spots. Saber put up her best defence, but it was no good, and she was soon reduced to helpless giggles. Sydney stopped mid-attack, and narrowed her eyes at Saber. “What’s that behind your back?”

Saber fought to regain her composure. “Nothing.”

“Don’t give me that. I felt something there.” Realisation appeared to dawn on Sydney, and her face lit up with excitement. “It’s my present, isn’t it?”

Saber was smug, more than happy with her ruse. “It might be.”

“Why you little...”

“You’re really going to have to find a new expression for me, because I’m not the small one.”

“Okay, smartass.” Sydney held out her hands, palms upward. “Now give it here.”

Saber relented. She drew out the small gift box from behind her back and presented it to Sydney. “Happy birthday, love.”

Without preamble, Sydney opened the box. Inside, was a white gold, diamond set, double-heart pendant. The hearts were intertwined; one set in diamonds, the other plain white gold. Sydney gasped. “It’s beautiful.”

“Then it’ll be perfect on you,” Saber said.

“I love it, Sabe. Thank you.” Sydney kissed her. “Will you help me put it on?”

SABER SET THE pan of potatoes down on the large range cooker, so they could be brought to boil. She was helping to prepare Sydney’s birthday lunch, in a kitchen more vast and impressive than any she’d ever seen before. It was her absolute dream kitchen. Modern wall units, finished with a white high gloss shine allowed for tons of storage space. The long expansive black granite countertops offered plenty of working space, and gave a stark but effective contrast to the surrounding white of the units.

A large island sat in the centre, providing more storage along with a breakfast bar to sit at. Tall, chrome high-back chairs tucked neatly under the breakfast bar, the cushioned seats and backrests covered in rich black leather. The central island had pop up electrical points, which was fortunate, as the kitchen was laced with all the latest appliances and gadgets.

All of the drawers, Saber found to her delight, were not only self-closing, but a light came on inside, illuminating the contents. As a chef, Saber would spend most of her life in a kitchen, and she would gladly do so in this kitchen, it was her fantasy come to life.

Saber regarded the only other occupant in the room—Penny. Earlier, Sydney offered to assist with the food, but she’d been all but forced from the kitchen by Penny, who’d insisted she wasn’t to do any work on her birthday. The last Saber saw of Sydney, she’d been heading into the living room with her father.

Saber surveyed the kitchen. “This is by far my favourite room in the house.”

“I knew you’d appreciate it.” Penny grinned. “And speaking of appreciation, thank you for helping me with the birthday dinner. I know it’s your day off.”

“No problem.” In truth, Saber was pleased for the chance to speak to Penny alone. She wanted to ask her a delicate question, so she wanted to do it in private. She wasn’t quite sure how to go about it, but knew the rest of Sydney’s family would be arriving shortly, so it was now or never. “Can I ask you something, Penny?”

“Of course.” Penny wiped her hands on a towel, and gave Saber her full attention.

“I’m not sure how much Sydney has told you about my parents,” Saber trailed off, watching Penny’s response closely. She wasn’t worried Sydney had broken her trust, for she knew Sydney would never do that, but it was necessary for Penny to at least know an abridged version, or she wouldn’t comprehend the reasoning behind Saber’s question.

“I know you no longer have any contact with them. A falling out over your lifestyle.”

“That’s right.”

Penny shook her head. “I just can’t understand that. How a parent can turn against their child for simply being who they are is beyond me. It really is.”

Saber swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. That led nicely to her question. “You don’t mind that Sydney’s gay?”

“She was always more interested in girls, even at a young age, never looked twice at a boy. I thought that would change with time.” Penny shrugged. “It didn’t. Sydney’s just Sydney, we all love her for that.”

Saber swallowed around a lump in her throat. She’d wanted another parent’s opinion on the topic of having a gay child, and now she had one, a positive one. How different her life would’ve been, if her own mother had reacted in a similar manner. Though the thought saddened her, Saber was pleased beyond measure that Sydney hadn’t endured the same painful rejection. Her estimation of Penny grew tenfold, and in appreciation, Saber reached out and squeezed Penny’s arm. “Sydney’s lucky to have you as a mother.”

Penny patted Saber’s hand. “I’ve never seen Sydney happier than when she’s with you, so I’d say she’s lucky to have you, too.”

SABER GLANCED UP as Sydney jogged into the kitchen.

“Before you yell at me for entering the kitchen, Mum,” Sydney said as she held up a hand. “I just thought I’d tell you they’re here.”

Penny’s eyebrows rose. “All of them?”

Sydney nodded. “I only peeked out the window, but I saw Caitlin in the backseat. They must’ve decided to travel up together, in the one car.”

“Good, because dinner will be ready shortly.” Penny crossed to the sink and washed her hands, then dried them on a towel. “Saber, how’s everything at your end?”

Saber checked the various pots and pans. All of the food was coming along nicely. “Fine here.”

Sydney chuckled. “Sounds like you two have everything under control.”

“I tell you, Sydney,” Penny indicated Saber with a flap of the towel, “this one here’s a godsend. From now on, Christmas dinners are going to be a cinch with her around.”

Sydney regarded Saber in amusement. “Appears as if you’ve been conscripted.”

Saber grinned, happy to be included. “Suits me. Though I don’t know how I’m going to return to cooking in a normal kitchen after being in this one.” She gazed longingly around, and sighed.

“Now don’t go getting too attached, Sabe, it’s just a room.”

Saber frowned. “I bet you wouldn’t say that if it was a state-of-the-art operating theatre.”

“Well no, I wouldn’t.” Sydney shrugged. “But that place saves lives.”

Saber folded her arms over her chest. “Well, you’d also die if you didn’t eat.”

“That’s right.” Penny laughed and pointed a finger at Sydney. “And it would be a long, painful death.”

“See?” Saber smirked. “Your mother understands.”

Sydney scowled at Saber before shifting her glower onto Penny. “That’s the last time I leave you two alone together. You’re already ganging up on me.” She pouted. “And on my birthday too. Have you no shame?”

Penny shook her head and laughed. “There’s a violin in the back room, sweetie, if you want some music to go with your dramatics.”

“The cheek!” Sydney’s lips twitched with humour, but with obvious effort, she kept her frown in place. A moment passed, then she giggled. She took Saber’s hand in hers. “Come on, let me introduce you to the rest of the family.”

Saber followed along the hallway, toward the front door. The door stood open, as Anthony and Daniel were already greeting the three newcomers.

A woman who had the exact same shade of blonde hair as Sydney headed directly for them, and Saber assumed this was Caitlin. She resembled Sydney, though Caitlin was taller with rounder features.

“Caitlin.” Sydney grinned and embraced her. After a long hug, Sydney withdrew and said, “This is Saber, my partner.”

Caitlin smiled. “Now do we hug or shake hands?”

Saber chuckled. “I’ll leave that to you.”

Caitlin hesitated briefly. “I can’t decide, so we’ll do both.” She shook Saber’s hand, and then embraced her. “I feel like I know you already. Sydney’s told me so much about you.”

Saber shot Sydney an amused look. “Everyone’s said that. I’m surprised my ears haven’t burnt off by now.”

“Well between you and me,” Caitlin leaned in and lowered her voice, “my sister is a bit of a gossip.”

“Excuse me!” Sydney sounded indignant. “But I think you’re confusing me with yourself, Caitlin.”

“Uh oh.” Caitlin flashed her teeth in a grimace. “Gotta go.” She touched Saber’s forearm as she hurried by her. “I’ll leave you to deal with that.”

Saber laughed. “Gee, thanks.”

Sydney rolled her eyes at Saber, and shook her head at her sister’s back as Caitlin retreated along the hall, stopping to embrace their mother.

“Hello, you must be Saber,” a male voice sounded behind her.

Saber turned to find a distinguished looking man beside her. She shook his offered hand.

“That’s right. And you must be Thomas.”

Thomas nodded and smiled. “That’s me.”

Saber noticed Thomas’s hair was brown, unlike the rest of his siblings. He carried an air of professionalism, a trait that seemed to be shared by all of the doctors in this house.

Thomas indicated the fine-boned brunette on his arm. “And this is my wife, Paula.”

“Nice to meet you,” Paula greeted Saber. She grinned at Sydney and held up a gift bag. “Happy birthday!”

“Thanks, Paula.” Sydney accepted the bag and peeked inside. Penny came over and took the gift out of her hands. “Mum!”

“You can open the present later. Saber and I are just about to serve dinner.” Penny latched on to Saber’s arm and tugged her along the hallway. “The rest of you get yourselves settled.”

SYDNEY WAS ABOUT to follow the rest of the family into the dining room, when Thomas blocked the doorway with his arm.

“Come on outside, Syd. I want to show you something.” At Sydney’s glance toward the kitchen, Thomas seemed to sense her hesitation. “Dinner hasn’t been served, so we can spare a few minutes.”

“All right, but we have to be quick.”

“What are we doing?” Anthony asked as he joined them. He was never one to be left out.

“Going outside. Sydney close your eyes, I don’t want you to sneak a peak until we’re there.”

“Fine.” Sydney sighed. “And Mum thinks I’m the dramatic one.” She took Thomas’s arm, shut her eyes, and allowed him to lead her outside. “You’d better not let me fall.”

“I won’t.” From the direction Thomas moved, Sydney could tell he was leading her across the garden path to the driveway. “There,” he announced as they drew to a standstill. “What do you think?”

Sydney opened her eyes. A sleek new silver Jaguar XKR Coupe sat on the driveway. She’d already caught a glimpse of the car when Thomas first pulled up, so she wasn’t surprised. She didn’t have the heart to tell him though, so instead she released a low, impressed whistle.

Thomas grinned at her as he popped open the bonnet, revealing the engine beneath. “It’s five litres. V8. Does 0-60 in four point eight seconds.”

“Niiiiice.” Sydney’s own love of cars originally stemmed from Thomas, who’d taught her all he’d known on the subject. She directed a teasing smirk at Thomas. “And here I thought it was another birthday present.”

“Ha! Good one. You don’t need another car.” Thomas pointed toward Sydney’s imposing black Range Rover. “Look at that monster.”

Sydney chuckled as she got into the Jaguar’s driving seat. She caught the keys from Thomas and started the engine. Sydney examined all the latest gadgets on the brand new model. She ran her hand over the rich leather of the seats, and inhaled deeply, savouring the scent. “It still has that new car smell.”

“I haven’t had it long.”

“You know,” Sydney said as she exited the Jaguar. “Sabe loves cars even more than I do. Perhaps you could show her this baby after dinner?”

“I’d be happy to.” Thomas took his keys back from Sydney and patted the car’s silver roof with affection. “What do you think?”

Sydney ran her hand along the top of the car, transfixed by its sleek lines. “She’s a beauty.”

Thomas seemed thrilled by her praise. “Anthony, what about you?”

Anthony had been silent since leaving the house, a rare state for him, but Sydney guessed it was because he didn’t share their infatuation with cars. “It’s a nice car, but if you wanna talk beauties let’s talk women. Specifically Saber.” He copied Sydney’s earlier action and whistled. “I have to say Sydney, I’m a little bit jealous.” Anthony paused. “Okay, a lot jealous.”

“Heh.” Sydney felt perversely pleased by Anthony’s admission, and she couldn’t hold back her smile.

“I mean,” Anthony continued, “I’ve travelled the world, and I’ve never seen a woman as stunning as Saber.” He shook his head, an awed expression on his face. “Those eyes...and that figure...”

Sydney frowned and pointedly cleared her throat.

“Right. Sorry.” Anthony had the grace to appear embarrassed, though it didn’t last long. “What do you think of Saber, Thomas?”

Thomas tapped his chin in deliberation. “I can’t say too much. I am a married man after all, but I will say Saber is exceptionally attractive.”

“Well unfortunately for both of you, Saber’s taken.” Sydney’s smug smile returned, and she raised a warning finger at her brothers. “So hands off.”



“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SYDNEY,” a chorus of voices said. All around the dining table, glasses clinked together in a unified toast.

Everyone dug into their meals—duck breast with raspberry sauce, new potatoes, and roasted vegetables— and Sydney took a moment to appreciate the tableau before her. It wasn’t often her family were all together in this fashion, special occasions excluded, and she wanted to remember it. Her parents sat at each end of the mahogany dining table. Sydney sat in the middle, with Saber on one side of her, Anthony the other. Thomas, Paula, and Caitlin sat on the opposite side of the table.

The table itself was decorated elegantly, with silver candelabras and fresh flowers, no doubt from her mother’s garden. Sydney smelled the faint perfume of lavender, which she spotted amongst the other blooms. Her mother had selected all of Sydney’s favourite flowers.

The meal was also one of Sydney’s favourites, and she tucked into it happily. The raspberry sauce added a lovely tang to the succulent duck, and she savoured the delicious taste. “This is wonderful, Mum.”

Penny smiled, and it only grew as murmurs of agreement came from other members of the family. “I can’t take all the credit, Saber was a great help.”

Saber modestly shook her head. “I didn’t do much.”

“Nonsense.” Penny put down her cutlery and patted Saber’s hand. “You did plenty.”

“That’s a beautiful necklace, Sydney,” Paula said. “Was it a birthday present?”

“Yes, actually.” Sydney gave her partner a fond look. “From Sabe.”

“You see, Thomas,” Paula glanced to Thomas in the chair next to her, her tone pointed, “that’s what I mean when I say a personal gift. I don’t mean a toaster for the kitchen.”

Sydney snorted, and regarded Thomas in disbelief. “You didn’t?”

“What?” Thomas shrugged defensively. “Our toaster had broken. It was practical.”

Sydney shook her head. “I think you’re missing the point.”

Anthony raised a hand, as if in a school class. “I must be missing the point too, because I don’t see the issue.”

Thomas seemed glad of the support. “Thank you, Anthony.”

Penny buried her face in her hands. “Boys, boys.” She tutted. “Have I taught you nothing?”

Thomas wiped his mouth on a napkin. “I bet Saber would’ve appreciated an appliance for the kitchen.”

Saber nodded. “That’s true. But I’m a chef, so that *is* a personal gift to me.” She paused, as if to let that sink in. “However, the average woman wouldn’t appreciate it, and at worst some might consider it sexist.”

Thomas appeared surprised. He regarded Paula. “I didn’t mean it in that way.”

“I know that. Of course I do.” Paula took a sip of water from her glass. “But just so you know, from now on I’ll be telling you *exactly* what I want for a present.”

Thomas chuckled. “Fair enough.”

“I find that’s the best way,” Daniel said from the end of the table. “I have Penny write a list of things she wants, and I just choose from the list.”

Penny grinned. “And since we started doing that, I’ve never once been disappointed with any gift he’s bought.”

They all laughed, and returned to their meals. After everyone finished, Penny stood to clear the plates, but Paula held up a hand.

“While everyone’s together...” Paula took hold of Thomas’s hand, and stared specifically at Sydney. “Thomas and I have got you a very special gift this year,” a smile lit up her face, “you’re going to be an Aunt.”

Sydney blinked dumbly for a moment, as the news sank in. Her voice rose in excitement. “You’re pregnant?”

Grinning from ear to ear, Thomas nodded and laid a hand on Paula’s stomach. “Three months in. We wanted to be doubly sure before we told anyone, given the trouble we’ve had conceiving.”

Exclamations of delight erupted from around the table. Almost as one, the entire family stood to congratulate the new parents-to-be.

“That’s terrific news, son.” Daniel shook Thomas’s hand and pulled him close in a hearty embrace.

Penny wiped tears from her eyes. “I’m going to be a Grandma.” She bent over and talked to Paula’s stomach. “Hello, little one. This is your Grandma Penny speaking.” She smiled as she said the words. “You’ll soon get to know me, as I intend to spoil you rotten.”

Sydney hugged first Paula, then Thomas. “I’m so happy for you both. Congratulations.”

“Yes, congratulations,” Saber said, as she took her turn at celebrating with the elated couple.

Sydney watched the display fondly, thrilled by the news that there was soon going to be a new addition to the family.

## Chapter Eight

“IT’S GOOD TO be home,” Sydney said as she opened the front door and stepped inside their house. Though she’d enjoyed the time with her family immensely, and could’ve happily stayed at her parents’ place for a while longer, there was something to be said about being in the comfort of your own home.

Saber entered behind Sydney and closed the door. She leaned wearily back against it and dropped their bags. “That was a long journey.”

Sydney switched on the hall light. The ring road on the way out of the city had been closed due to road works, so they’d taken the diversion route, which added an extra hour onto the already long drive.

“Never mind. We’re home now.” Saber studied her wristwatch. “Just after eleven. An hour of your birthday left. Is there anything you’d like to do with it?”

Sydney slipped her arms around Saber’s waist, and laid her head against Saber’s chest. She yawned. “Right now I’d like nothing more than to curl up in bed with you and go to sleep.” She shook her head. “God, I must be getting old.”

Saber chuckled as she returned the embrace. “Well, you’re thirty-three today. You are old now.”

“Tch.” Sydney squeezed Saber. “I must be, because I’m too tired to even hit you.” She closed her eyes, cherishing the feel of Saber’s loving arms around her. “And I think you’re forgetting, no doubt because of the two year age gap, that you’re older than me.”

“I think you’d better lead me to the bedroom then,” Saber said in a dry tone, “in case I’ve forgotten where it is.”

Sydney giggled. “I’m sure I can manage that.” Despite her words, she didn’t move out of Saber’s hold. She didn’t budge an inch. She wanted to go to bed, but she was too comfortable to move.

A few moments passed, then Saber cleared her throat. “Uhh, Syd?”

Sydney didn’t open her eyes. “Mmm-hmm?”

“Have you forgotten how to move?”

“Are you complaining?”

“Not at all. We’ll stay here. Horses manage to sleep standing up, so I guess we can try, too.”

Sydney giggled again, then sighed in a dramatic fashion. “Fine, we’ll go up to the bedroom.” With reluctance, she stepped back from Saber and picked up one of the travel bags. Saber took the other, and they trudged up the stairs to their bedroom. They dropped the bags unceremoniously at the foot of the bed, and quickly changed into nightclothes.

Once settled under the covers, Sydney whispered into Saber’s ear, “I do have one birthday wish left.”

“Oh?” Saber said. “What’s that?”

Sydney traced Saber’s soft lips with a feather light finger. “Kiss me.”

“You never have to wish for that.”

Their mouths met in a sweet kiss, their lips brushing against each other in a gentle caress. Green eyes met blue, and twin smiles appeared. Sydney playfully rubbed their noses together, and relaxed back into the bed. She felt Saber's tall frame wrap around her, and their limbs entwined.

Moments passed, then Saber quietly said, "Did you enjoy your birthday, love?"

"I had the best birthday."

"I'm glad." Saber laid a kiss at the crook of Sydney's neck. "But I'd better warn you now," her tone turned teasing, "if you hear me moaning through the night don't think I'm having an affair—I'll be dreaming about that kitchen."

Sydney laughed. "I'm beginning to worry about you, Sabe."

SABER SHOVELLED ANOTHER load of mortar into the cement mixer. While the mixer turned, she added sand and gravel, then waited several minutes for everything to be thoroughly mixed before adding water. Once happy with the consistency, she poured the concrete into a wheelbarrow, and wheeled it over to the side of Doug's workshop, where the ground had been prepared for the concrete to be poured in. The concrete would form the base of a new extension to Doug's wood-framed workshop. Doug had mentioned on several occasions that he and his assistants required more space to work, along with extra storage room for his business. While in-between other commitments, Doug, Jeff, and Rich finally began work on the extension, and roped the rest of the Mountain Rescue team in to help.

In truth, Saber didn't mind, she enjoyed DIY, and was often the first to volunteer for such tasks. She tipped the wheelbarrow up, and its contents slid into the wooden framework, which was in place to hold the concrete base in shape until it hardened.

Sydney, Doug, and Rich spread the concrete out, getting rid of any air pockets and ensured it was level with the top of the supporting framework.

Saber knew that was the hardest job, as it was backbreaking work, and she couldn't help but tease. "Put your backs into it."

In response, three dagger-like glares were directed at Saber, and Rich raised his middle finger.

Coop, who was measuring and cutting several wood beams for making the timber walls, shook his head at the rude gesture. "Now, now. There's no need for that."

Saber smirked at Rich. "Be positive. Just think of the exercise you're getting."

Rich immediately offered his shovel. "Do you want to do it?"

"I would, but..." Saber started pushing the wheelbarrow back toward the cement mixer. "I've got my own job to do."

"I'll gladly swap with you," Rich said.

"Sorry." Saber tapped her ear and pointed to the turning mixer. "Can't hear you."

Rich obviously saw right through it, as he gave Saber the finger again.

Saber made several more trips back and forth with the wheelbarrow. Tipping a heap of concrete out, she asked, "How much more, Doug?"

Doug paused as if to assess what was needed. "One more barrow should do it."

"Right you are." Saber made short work of it, and delivered the last load.

Sydney moved aside as Doug and Rich tramped the concrete over with a long plank of wood, and came to stand beside Saber. Sydney put down her shovel and stretched out her back, then leaned in close to Saber and lowered her voice. "How's the shoulder?"

"Fine." Though Saber wasn't doing as hard a job as Sydney, she was still lifting heavy shovelfuls of sand and mortar into the cement mixer. She'd been careful to put most of the weight onto her healthy left shoulder, and her right had managed well. Saber was pleased by her progress.

Appearing equally pleased, Sydney reached out and squeezed Saber's bicep. After a moment she stretched out her back once more, wincing slightly as she did so.

Saber noticed the wince. "Have you pulled something?"

"Huh?" Sydney shook her head. "No. But I think a long soak in the hot tub is in order."

Rich's gaze snapped up. "Did somebody say hot tub? Count me in."

"You know, Rich," Coop said. "It's polite to *wait* to be asked."

"Whatever for?" Rich cast a scowl in Coop's direction. "I don't wanna be left out."

Doug groaned as he straightened, his eyes glimmering with amusement. "My back's sore too."

Saber's gaze lifted to the heavens in despair. "You're not the subtlest man, are you, Doug?"

Doug chuckled, then got down on all fours, smoothing the concrete base with a trowel where needed. Once finished, he returned to his feet. "That's the base complete. Good job, people."

Rich sidled over to Saber. "We can't do anymore until the concrete's dry." He tried to drape a casual arm over her shoulders, but since Saber was taller than him it didn't quite work. "It would sure be nice to have a hot tub right now."

Saber gave him a droll glimpse. "Do you really think that's going to work?" At Rich's doleful expression, she caved in completely. "Oh, all right. Everyone's invited."

"Yesssss!" Rich pumped his fist into the air.

Sydney shook her head at Saber. "Honey, you folded like a paper tissue."

"What can I say?" Saber shrugged. "I'm a soft touch."

Just then, Saber heard a car engine, and peered over her shoulder. A Volvo Estate drove onto the driveway, and Doug's wife, Faye, exited the vehicle, along with their two teenage children, Lauren and Michael. Lauren opened the boot of the car, and two excited Labradors came bounding out. The dogs, one so pale it was almost white, and the other brown, sprinted straight for the team, as if keen to say hello.

"Uh oh." Saber wasn't afraid of dogs; in fact she loved them, these two Labradors in particular. However, knowing them as she did, she *was* worried for the fresh concrete they'd just spent the last several hours pouring.

Saber's utterance drew Doug's attention and he yelled, "No! Don't let the dogs near here."

The warning came too late, as Salt, the pale Labrador, raced in amongst the team. Salt sprang up at Saber, slobbering and licking with enthusiasm. Before Saber was able to snatch hold of the dog's collar, Salt bounced away, making a beeline for Jeff.

The brown dog, Pepper, leapt into the fray, rushing at Coop with its pink tongue lolling out.

"Grab them!" Doug shouted. "Get them away from the concrete."

All at once everyone started to call out the dogs' names, in an effort to draw them away from the wet concrete. This only seemed to confuse the dogs, for they ran at one person, only to weave away to another at the last minute.

The team chased the dogs. Salt barked loudly and Pepper's tail wagged feverishly, as if they both thought it was a game. Coop managed to snag Salt, and keeping tight hold, he firmly made the dog sit down.

With pride, Saber clapped Coop on the back. "That recent goat-wrangling has paid off."

Coop panted almost as much as the dog, but he laughed. "I may be the eldest of the group, but I've still got it."

"No, Pepper!" Doug bellowed. "Sit. SIT!"

Pepper skidded to a halt. Unfortunately, Rich was already in midair, clearly attempting to collide midcourse with the dog. But as Pepper had now stopped, Rich went sailing past, and landed head first in the concrete.

Everyone froze. Doug appeared annoyed, while Saber shared a disbelieving stare with Coop, then they both bent double with laughter. Sydney and Jeff held their hands over their mouths in shock.

Rich spluttered up from the concrete, and swore incessantly. For once, Coop didn't reprimand him on the bad language. He was too busy laughing.

To add insult to injury, Pepper stood and padded into the concrete, sniffing at Rich in a quizzical manner. As if in protest of the scent, Pepper sneezed, then turned around and padded back out, leaving an impression of paw prints behind.

"Right." Sydney giggled, though it was clear she tried to contain her humour. "Both the dog and Rich need hosing down. Any volunteers?"

Saber, Coop, Doug, and even Jeff eagerly raised their hands. Saber knew she'd get a certain satisfaction from spraying the often-cocky Rich in the face with water. They all would.

"Well tough." Sydney gave each of them a smug glimpse. "As the doctor, I get to do it."

Saber stepped closer to Sydney and lowered her voice. "Try not to enjoy it *too* much."

Sydney smirked. "Nonsense. I'm a professional." Her smirk became a grin. "I'll need a high-pressure hosepipe of course...Just kidding."

SYDNEY STRIPPED THE duvet cover from the duvet, and tossed it into the bedroom doorway. She removed the top sheet off the bed and discarded that also, forming a pile of bed linen. She and Saber were in the middle of cleaning the house—she was changing their bed, while Saber hoovered through the rooms.

Sydney wiped a bead of sweat from her brow. The day was warm and she was relieved they'd finished cleaning the downstairs, and now only had the upstairs to do. Despite having five bedrooms, only one was occupied, so it wouldn't take long to get the rooms in ship-shape. Housework wasn't Sydney's favourite job, but she was always pleased when the task was done.

Sydney clambered onto the bed and began to take off the fitted sheet. On all fours, she stretched a hand out to unhook the sheet from one corner of the mattress, but paused mid-action as the hoover suddenly switched off.

Saber's silken voice came from the bedroom doorway. "I'll pay you to hold that pose."

Sydney peeked over her shoulder, and found Saber leaning enticingly against the doorjamb. Sydney knew her current position gave Saber a good view of her behind. "How much will you pay?"

Saber shrugged. "We'll talk money later. Let's see if you can stay in position first. For five minutes."

Confident of her willpower, Sydney said, “No worries.” As she watched, Saber’s lustful gaze raked over her figure, and Sydney forgot all about changing the beds.

Saber entered the room and slowly paced around the bed, as if wanting to see Sydney from every angle. She moved close to Sydney, and ran a hand up the back of Sydney’s calf. Her fingers tracked along Sydney’s thigh. Next she stroked Sydney’s rump.

“That’s cheating,” Sydney said.

Saber’s voice was innocence itself. “I don’t remember making any rules.”

Sydney frowned at her oversight. Still, it was only for five minutes. She viewed the neon display on the bedside clock—actually four now. She could hold her position on all fours for that long. Surely. She swallowed as Saber’s firm hands kneaded her rump, and as the massage continued Sydney felt her body respond, felt her desire building. With effort, she managed to stay perfectly still, and peeked again at the clock—three minutes left.

Saber climbed onto the bed. She lay down, rolled onto her back, and wriggled beneath Sydney. She pushed Sydney’s top up until it bunched around Sydney’s shoulders, then, reaching round to her back, Saber skillfully unsnapped Sydney’s bra and moved it aside.

Sydney inhaled sharply as Saber’s mouth found her breast, and she couldn’t help but arch her back, pressing closer to the stimulating touch. Another glimpse to the clock—two minutes—Sydney grew desperate, time seemed to be moving impossibly slow.

Saber’s tongue lightly teased Sydney’s nipple, then sucked the sensitive nub into her mouth, sucking at one breast while her hand fondled and squeezed the other.

Unbidden, a small moan escaped Sydney. Warmth flooded between her legs, and a powerful need overcame her. She detected the heady scent of her arousal in the air, and it was all she could do to remain in place, her entire body screamed at her to move. She trembled with restrained passion, and stole a frantic glance at the clock—one minute. Sydney felt like she was on fire. Saber’s torture was exquisite, but her need consumed her. She needed Saber’s touch, her mouth, and her tongue. She needed it all. And she needed it now.

As if wanting to drive Sydney to madness, Saber abruptly stopped and withdrew from beneath her. She grinned wickedly at Sydney’s loud groan of protest, then stripped out of her own T-shirt and bra and sat next to Sydney on the bed.

The clock still showed one minute left, though Sydney knew it had to be closer to thirty seconds. She couldn’t wait any longer. She launched up onto her knees, and impatiently removed her top and bra the rest of the way. She dropped the clothes in a heap on the floor. As she kicked off her jeans and panties, she was pleased to see Saber doing the same. Once naked, Sydney practically threw herself at Saber, and they met with eagerness in the centre of the bed.

As bare flesh met bare flesh, Sydney murmured, “You’re killing me here, Sabe.”

Saber gave a throaty chuckle, then, clearly taking note of Sydney’s words, stopped her teasing and gently pushed Sydney down onto her back. As Saber lay on top of her, Sydney captured her mouth in a fiery kiss, and their tongues duelled in a passionate frenzy.

Desperate for release, Sydney pressed intimately against Saber, and she whimpered in delight at the blissful contact.

Saber slowly rocked back and forth, causing a delicious friction between them.

Sydney gasped, and with a hand on Saber’s rump, she encouraged her to go faster. “Please, Sabe...”

Saber increased her speed, and her eyes locked onto Sydney’s as she moved in a steady rhythm. Seeing Saber’s lust-filled gaze only heightened Sydney’s own desire, and she pressed

harder against Saber. She felt her climax fast approaching, and as Saber released an erotic moan, the tantalizing sound pushed Sydney over the edge.

A euphoric wave crashed over Sydney, though her gaze never left Saber's, completely open to her in the most intimate of moments.

As if triggered by Sydney's release, Saber trembled. Sydney watched avidly as her face transformed in pleasure—the beauty of Saber in that moment never failed to take her breath away.

Before either woman had the chance to recover, passion overtook them once more, and their mouths latched onto each other. Saber plunged her tongue into Sydney's mouth, and Sydney hungrily sucked on it, her own tongue sliding wetly against Saber's.

Sydney flipped them, so she was on top, then made her way down Saber's long, athletic body, laying a trail of kisses as she went. She lingered to lavish attention on Saber's full breasts, but Saber's hand on her head soon encouraged her downward.

Sydney settled between Saber's legs, and ran her tongue teasingly over Saber's velvety folds. In response, Saber groaned, and her hips lifted off the bed. She lapped greedily at Saber's slick wetness, and felt Saber's hands in her hair, pressing her even closer. She locked on to Saber's hot centre with her mouth, and suckled on her clit.

Saber gasped and thrust up to meet Sydney's mouth, writhing fervently as Sydney devoured her. As Sydney sucked harder, Saber cried out, and her whole body shook in climax.

Sydney crawled back up Saber's torso and kissed her. Her own desire threatened to overwhelm her, but she waited patiently for Saber to recover.

It didn't take long. With a sensual smile, Saber rolled them both over, reversing their positions so she was on top once more. Her hand snaked its way down Sydney's toned body, and, without hesitation, she slipped her fingers into Sydney's snug warmth.

Sydney cried out as Saber slowly thrust into her, and she rolled her hips in tandem, creating a steady blissful rhythm.

With her thigh, Saber moved Sydney's legs farther apart, as if to give her better access, then she settled directly onto her hand, driving her fingers deeper inside Sydney. A guttural moan came from Sydney, and she thrust up to meet Saber. Saber drove her fingers into Sydney's slick wetness, then pulled out gradually only to delve back inside again.

“Oh, Sabe... That feels so good.”

Sydney's pleasure rose with each thrust, and soon her hips gyrated with need. She panted loudly now, completely unrestrained, and as Saber picked up her pace, rocking against her faster and faster, Sydney writhed urgently beneath her.

When Sydney's movements grew frantic, Saber soundly kissed her, sending Sydney hurtling over the edge once more. Saber swallowed Sydney's moan of release, which was long and deep, and kissed her through her orgasm.

Breathing heavily, Sydney collapsed back on the bed, completely spent. Saber sprawled across her, and Sydney wrapped her arms around her, smiling as Saber tenderly brushed some blonde hair off her face.

Once they'd both caught their breath, Saber said, “I'm afraid you don't get any money.”

Sydney's brow creased in confusion. “Money?”

Saber sounded pleased with herself. “You didn't hold the pose for five minutes.”

Sydney had forgotten all about the bet. She prodded Saber in the chest. “Frankly, given the obstacles I faced, I think I did well to last as long as I did.”

Saber grinned. “You did.”



“Besides,” Sydney lovingly brushed Saber’s cheek, “my reward was far greater than money.”

## Chapter Nine

A FEW DAYS later, the weather was still fine, so the work on Doug's workshop extension continued. After a hard morning's labour, the team took a well-deserved break, and went to the café to have lunch.

Sydney slid into the booth last, pleased to be off her feet. She planted her elbows on the table, and rested her head on her hands.

Marge quickly bustled over and took their orders, and served them their drinks.

Rich watched Saber with an expectant expression. "Aren't you going to cook?"

Saber shook her head. "Marty's perfectly able."

"His isn't the same."

"Maybe not," Sydney said. "But Sabe's been working all morning like the rest of us, she needs a break too."

Saber gave her a grateful look. She turned to Doug. "How much longer, do you think?"

Doug scratched his beard, as he appeared to contemplate an answer. "A few more days to complete the extension. It wouldn't take that long, but we've got some contract jobs to do as well." He took a swig of his coke. "We need to finish ASAP, the weather's due to change soon."

Saber nodded with confidence. "We'll get it done."

The café door opened and Sydney's eyes widened as she recognised the newcomer. "Anthony!"

Anthony grinned as he rushed over. "Hey, sis."

Sydney stood to greet him. "What are you doing here?" She grew worried. "Is everyone okay?"

"Everyone's fine." Anthony wagged his fingers in a wave. "Hey, Saber."

"Hi, Anthony."

Sydney noticed the backpack Anthony wore. Her words came back to haunt her—'You're welcome anytime.' That was merely an expression, but it seemed her brother had taken it literally. Of course, Anthony was welcome, but she'd meant an organised visit, not for him to drop in unannounced. His surprise arrival put Sydney in an awkward predicament. She didn't want to hurt Anthony's feelings by sending him away, but she didn't want to put Saber on the spot, especially as she was still coming to terms with the notion of family.

Anthony reached around and patted his backpack. "I thought I'd take you up on your offer. Stay with you a few days. You made this place sound pretty special, so I thought I'd check it out." He peered into the booth. "Saber said she'd show me some good climbs."

Saber, to her credit, didn't even blink. "That I did."

Sydney phrased her words with care. "It's a bit last minute, Anthony. And I'd rather you'd rung first."

As if sensing Sydney didn't want to back her into a corner, Saber said, "It's fine, Syd. I don't mind." She pointed at Anthony's backpack. "I hope you've come prepared?"

Anthony nodded. "My climbing gear, and everything else I need is in my pack."

“Then we’re all set. Have you eaten?” At Anthony’s headshake, Saber stood, retrieved a nearby chair, and positioned it at the end of the table. “Join us for lunch, then we’ll take you back to our place later.”

Anthony grinned and unshouldered his backpack before sitting down. “Sounds good.”

Sydney caught Saber’s eye, and mouthed a silent thank you.

Saber winked at her.

Sydney slid back into the booth, and then remembered her manners. “Everyone, this is my brother, Anthony. This is Doug, Coop, Jeff, and Rich,” she said, indicating each man in turn. “They’re all on the Mountain Rescue team I mentioned.”

“Terrific.” Anthony leaned forward. “Do you think you guys could take me out on a practice rescue while I’m here? It sounds like fun.”

Sydney sighed internally. Since Anthony had no obligations of his own, he tended to forget others actually had lives to lead, and couldn’t just drop everything at the blink of an eye. “I don’t think that’ll be possible...”

Rich cut her off. “Why not? Like Anthony says, it’ll be fun.”

Sydney sighed for real this time. It seemed Rich and Anthony shared the same point of view. She was amazed she hadn’t noticed their similarities sooner, and wondered whether she could survive the next few days with them both in the same vicinity.

As if reading her mind, Saber whispered in her ear, “Best stock up on headache tablets.”

Sydney snickered, and swatted Saber’s thigh beneath the table.

“We’ve got prior commitments, Rich.” Doug’s tone conveyed a note of authority. “We’ve got contracts to finish, not to mention the workshop extension.”

“Oh, right.” Rich frowned, seemingly disappointed. “I forgot about that.”

Sydney had no idea how Rich could just forget about his job. Her own job kept her incredibly busy, so much so she could never just forget about it. In fact, before she’d met Saber, her work had been her life. Though Sydney’s priorities had changed and Saber was her life now, she was still passionate about her job, and enjoyed the work she did.

Sydney decided it would be best to change the subject. She rested her hand on Anthony’s forearm. “How was your journey?” A thought struck her. Since Anthony constantly travelled the world, he had little need for a car in this country, so he didn’t own one. “How did you get here?”

“I borrowed Mum’s VW.” Anthony raked his fingers through his fair hair. “You weren’t kidding when you said Shirebridge was in the middle of nowhere, talk about off the beaten track. I was just starting to think I’d made a wrong turn when I saw the gated sign.” He paused. “Still, I managed. I had your address so I called there first. When no one answered I figured Saber might be at work, so I came here.”

Sydney said, “Good thinking.”

Saber smirked at Anthony. “At least we know you can follow a map.”

Anthony chuckled. “When I first began travelling I spent half of the time lost, so I thought it best to learn.”

Saber stared at him in apparent disbelief. “You didn’t think to learn *before* you set off?”

Anthony shrugged. “I was young.”

Sydney scoffed. “You’re just as impetuous now.” Her gaze flitted to Saber in despair. “That’s just how he is.”

Anthony raised his eyebrows. “I’ll have you know that I discovered some of the best places by being lost.” He halted, as if recalling a memory. Seconds passed, then a grin formed on Anthony’s face. “I once met this woman...”

Sydney strongly cut him off. "Oh no. We don't want to hear about your sordid exploits."

Rich instantly contradicted Sydney. "I do."

Jeff shuffled forward in his seat. "I don't have a problem with it."

Doug's mouth curled upward. "Let the man speak, Sydney. He is a guest here, and it would be rude not to hear what he has to say."

Sydney rolled her eyes. "You three are beyond help."

Only Coop, being the gentleman he was, seemed to agree with Sydney. He tutted at his teammates.

Anthony stuck his tongue out at Sydney, and leaned over the table as if to begin his story.

Sydney felt Saber chuckling quietly beside her, and she narrowed her eyes at her. "Don't you start."

SABER SHIVERED AS she scaled the cliff face. The mountainside was cold, due to the brisk wind, but at least it was dry. It wasn't the nicest day to go climbing, but Anthony had been keen, bordering on insistent, so she and Sydney consented.

Sydney and Anthony both awaited her at the top, since Sydney led the climb, and Anthony had followed. Saber offered to bring up the rear, not wanting to be rushed, as she was still building up her shoulder strength.

Despite the cold, Saber enjoyed herself, and her shoulder had held up well. So well in fact, she decided it was time to try some more difficult manoeuvres. She leaned back off the rock and examined the holds around her. Up to her left, was a solid outcrop to hang on to and to her right was a trickier fingertip hold. Choosing the right, she latched on to the rock with her fingers, and using her weaker arm pulled upward. She felt the slightest of twinges in her shoulder, but nothing more. She completed the move with competence, and, with a happy grin, searched for another hold.

She scoped out several to choose from, and one in particular tempted her, though Saber knew she'd be pushing her luck to try it this soon. Saber noticed there weren't any holds for her feet, so her weight would have to rest solely on her arms as she walked up the vertical rock with her stickies. Stickies were climbing shoes that offered a significant amount of traction on the rock, even though the sole's base had no moulded tread. Stickies were contoured around the foot, to give the climber a better feel of the rock.

Though Saber would've easily been able to perform such a move before, there was no escaping the fact the accident had set her back, so she swallowed her pride and selected a different, easier hold.

She climbed the cliff face and chose several awkward holds, but forced herself to keep to what she thought a manageable level for her shoulder. The climb was of a higher standard than her previous effort, and without much difficulty, Saber neared the top.

"You're getting better," Sydney said as Saber clambered up onto the level ground beside her.

Saber grinned, pleased by the words and that Sydney noticed. "I just have to be patient, wait for my shoulder to catch up with my skillset."

Anthony chuckled. "You sound like Sydney."

Sydney removed the rope from her belay. "That's exactly it, Sabe." She threw Anthony an amused glance. "I couldn't have put it better myself."

Finished with the climb, Saber stepped out of her climbing harness and put it into her backpack. She took off her helmet and switched her stickies for a pair of sturdy walking boots.

Sydney coiled up the rope, and passed it to Saber to attach to her pack. Their hands touched briefly, and Sydney frowned. "Your hands are freezing, Sabe." She dug into the side pocket of Saber's rucksack, and brought out a hat and gloves. Sydney settled the thick fleece hat onto Saber's head.

"Thanks." Saber put on the gloves, relieved to have a barrier between her flesh and the cold wind. Given the harsh chill, she would've had her gloves on already if not for the climb. But feel was important when climbing, and the chalk, which helped her to grip the rock, was of best use on bare skin.

Anthony rubbed his arms with his hands, obviously feeling the cold himself. He didn't seem deterred by the weather though, as he gave Saber a thumbs up and said, "Where to next?"

Saber ran through the mountain's various climbs in her mind. Out of the three mountains that encased Shirebridge, the one they were on, Toppling Crag, was the hardest to hike. The hardest climbs of the area were over on Scar Peak, the mountain opposite. The remaining mountain was called The Water Tower, aptly named since a waterfall flowed down from it. The falls fed into a wide stream that wound its way through the countryside, and through the centre of Shirebridge itself. Still, Saber knew Toppling Crag had several good climbs, and now she'd seen Anthony's climbing ability, one of the tougher came to mind. "I was thinking of Dead Man's Drop."

Anthony nodded with enthusiasm. "Ooo, that sounds good."

Sydney shook her head. "It's too hard, Sabe. Your shoulder's not ready for that."

Saber realised Sydney had misunderstood her intentions. "I won't climb it. I'll wait at the bottom." Seeing Sydney's hesitation, she added, "It's on our route back anyway." Saber playfully tugged on Sydney's jacket, pulling her closer. "Anthony's a good climber, Syd, I'm sure he'll appreciate the challenge. You shouldn't both miss out because of me."

Sydney opened her mouth to respond, but Anthony spoke up first. "I *would* appreciate the challenge."

Saber was gratified he appeared to be enjoying the excursion. "It's settled then." She caught Sydney's gaze. "We're both at work the next few days, so we should make the most of this trip."

Clearly eager to continue, Anthony shouldered his backpack and strode away on the mountain path.

Saber made a move to follow, but a hand on her abdomen restrained her. As she gazed questioningly at Sydney, a strong gust of wind whipped around them, and Saber shivered.

"Oh, love, you're freezing." Sydney wrapped her arms around Saber's waist in an attempt to warm her.

"I'm all right. Wind's cold that's all." Saber returned the embrace.

Sydney regarded her with a tender expression. "Thank you for doing this, Sabe. For giving up your day off to bring Anthony up here."

Saber shrugged. "I wanted to get some practice in for my shoulder anyway."

"Maybe so. But I know Dead Man's Drop is just for Anthony's benefit."

Saber lowered her voice, even though Anthony was too far away to hear. "I want him to have a good time. He's more likely to visit if he enjoys it here, and I know it'd mean a lot to you if he did."

Sydney stretched up on her tiptoes and soundly kissed Saber. "You're the best, you know that?"

Saber blinked a few times, dazed. An idea popped into her head, and a slow smirk spread across her features. “I must be cold, because I didn’t feel that.” She batted her eyelashes at Sydney. “Could you kiss me again?”

SABER WAS RUSHED off her feet. Several groups of people converged on the café at once, so there were numerous meals to prepare. As it was lunchtime, she also had her regular customers, so she was trying to juggle everything at once.

From the brief glimpse she’d got of the groups of visitors, they appeared to be climbers or hikers, certainly outdoor types. She presumed they were staying at the caravan site, which was about ten miles away. The site was open to campers as well—it was a popular place, people often stayed there while touring the area.

Saber dished out two burgers onto the prepared plates. She checked on the rest of the food. Four more meals were nearly cooked. She’d just put two pizzas into the oven, so they would need to be in for a while yet, and she had five more meals, which she hadn’t started.

Satisfied nothing would burn if she left the kitchen for a moment, Saber hastily picked up the two plates, and carried the burgers through to the dining area. On a less busy day, she would’ve taken the food over to the customers to help Marge out, but she didn’t have the time to do so now, so she set the plates down on the serving counter.

Saber caught Marge’s gaze and indicated the food she’d set on the counter. Marge nodded and Saber turned to go back into the kitchen, when she heard her name called. To her surprise, Anthony sat on one of the barstools at the counter. “Sorry, Anthony, I didn’t see you there.”

“No worries,” he said. “Hey, listen, what time do you finish work tonight?”

“Around five. I should be here till eight, but I’ve swapped a few hours with Marty, he’s the other chef.”

“Great.” Anthony sounded pleased. “We can go out on the mountain again.”

Saber shook her head. “I’m helping Doug with his workshop tonight, time’s a factor in getting it done.” As Anthony’s face fell, she added, “Sorry.”

His voice rose in disbelief. “We’re not going out today at all?”

“Sorry,” Saber repeated. “I tell you what, why don’t you help us out with the extension? The guys are a good laugh.”

Anthony pulled a face, as if offended by the suggestion. “No way. I didn’t come all this way to do DIY.”

Saber frowned, and bit her tongue. “Okay, well, Syd’ll be home at six.” She thrust her thumb over her shoulder. “I’ve gotta get back to work.”

She left Anthony at the counter and returned to the kitchen. She raced over to the oven, knowing the four meals would now be well and truly cooked. She hurriedly removed the various foods before they burned, but in her haste she caught the back of her wrist against the inside of the scalding hot oven.

Saber cursed as pain erupted from her wrist, annoyed at the careless mistake. Instead of going straight to the sink to soak her burn, Saber continued to prepare the meals. Only after she’d taken the four plates to the serving counter did she relent and soak her wrist under a fast flow of cold water. Several moments passed, then Saber took her arm out to examine the burn. A harsh red line cut across her wrist, but it didn’t appear too serious, and the pain receded now she’d given the burn a good soaking.

The incident put Saber in a bad mood, though her bad mood wasn't just because of the burn. Despite spending all day yesterday on the mountain, in the bitter wind no less, it seemed Anthony already expected more. And at the moment, Saber couldn't possibly give more. Not only was she snowed under at work, but she'd also made a commitment to Doug and the rest of the guys to help finish the workshop extension. And she was a woman who liked to keep her word. She'd even invited Anthony along, in an effort to keep him occupied, but he'd acted as if such work was beneath him.

Since Anthony refused to help with the extension, she knew Sydney would feel obligated to stay home and entertain him. Saber scowled. It seemed as if she wouldn't be seeing much of Sydney tonight.

SABER QUIETLY CHANGED into her night clothes and slipped into bed. It was late, the work on Doug's extension had run long, and Sydney appeared to be asleep.

Saber's mood had much improved. She'd spoken to Marty about a shift change, and managed to get the day after tomorrow off, so she could take Anthony climbing again. She also spoke to Doug, and found out he had a prior work commitment that day, so he didn't need any help with the workshop, which meant she was free to spend the whole day, if Anthony wanted, out on the mountainside. Since she and Sydney were both at work again tomorrow, Saber hoped Anthony would be pleased with her effort of compromise. It was the best she could do under the circumstances.

Saber pulled the duvet cover tighter around her, and was surprised when Sydney rolled over to face her. "I thought you were asleep."

Sydney said, "I can't sleep when you're not here. I miss you."

Saber replied, "Well I'm here now." She stroked Sydney's hair. "How was your day?"

"Work was fine." Sydney kept her voice low. "But Anthony's been nagging me about going out on the mountain again."

"You too, huh?" Saber hesitated an instant, and then said, "He came over to the café."

Sydney's voice lifted. "He pestered you at work?"

"No, it wasn't like that. He just wanted to go out after my shift." Saber paused briefly. "He was disappointed we couldn't go, but I've rejiggered my shifts, so I'll be able to take Anthony climbing on Thursday."

"You didn't have to do that, Sabe." She continued, sounding as if she were exasperated. "I hope Anthony appreciates how much you're putting yourself out for him." A moment passed, then Sydney took hold of the hand stroking her hair. She jumped when Saber jerked her hand away. "What's wrong?"

"I have a burn on my wrist. You just grazed it. It was hectic today, and I caught it on the oven."

Sydney sat up and switched on the bedside lamp. "Let me see." Saber sat up as Sydney lightly gripped her forearm, and studied the injury.

"It's nothing. It's just a bit sore."

"It needs a dressing." Sydney fixed Saber with a displeased scowl. "You should've put one on by now."

Saber was indignant. "When did I have the time? I never stopped all day."

Sydney smiled. “As usual, you were too busy taking care of others, instead of taking care of yourself.” She gently squeezed Saber’s hand. “It’s a good thing I’m here to take care of you.”

Saber returned her smile. “And I love you for it. I know it’s not always an easy job.”

Sydney’s eyes sparkled mischievously in the lamplight. “You can say that again.” She grinned when Saber made an insulted noise, and wrapped her arms around Saber’s neck. “But I wouldn’t have you any other way.”



# Chapter Ten

SYDNEY VIEWED HER watch, and then hurried down the stairs— eight a.m., time to leave for work. The hospital where she worked was in Gransford, an hour's drive away, so she usually set off early to avoid being late.

She'd already completed her six-mile run with Saber and the guys, showered, and eaten breakfast. She grabbed her coat off the peg in the hallway, and retrieved her bag and car keys. It was cold this morning, so she slipped the coat on. She spotted movement as she stepped into her shoes, and saw Anthony trudging sleepily down the stairs.

"Don't you two ever have a lie-in?"

Sydney chuckled. "You really don't understand the concept of work, do you?"

Anthony frowned. "You're not at work all day again, are you?"

Sydney unlocked the front door, ready to leave. "Afraid so."

"What about Saber?"

"Her too." Sydney held up a hand when Anthony opened his mouth to protest. "But Sabe's been good enough to swap some shifts around, so she's got tomorrow off. You can go climbing then."

Anthony seemed slightly appeased. "That's something, I suppose. What about you, are you coming?"

"Anthony, I can't just drop everything—"

His voice lifted. "We've only been out once. I thought you'd want to spend some time together."

Sydney felt her temper rise, and was relieved Saber was still in the shower, so she didn't have to see or hear Anthony's self-centred rant. "That's not fair. If you'd given me some notice instead of dropping in unannounced, I could've done just that." Frustrated, she ran a hand through her hair. "Believe it or not, Anthony, some of us have to work."

Anthony folded his arms over his chest. "I'm sure they could manage without you for one day. I don't see why you can't just phone in sick."

Sydney's eyebrows rose in disbelief. "Because I have people depending on me, Anthony. I'm not going to let them down so I can go off gallivanting with you."

"So you're happy to let me down instead?"

Sydney took a deep, calming breath, not wishing to say something she'd later regret. "I'm sorry you feel that way. But as I've already said, if I'd known you were coming, I could've taken some planned time off."

Anthony appeared upset. "I don't understand how I'm the bad guy for wanting to spend some time with my sister."

"I'm not saying you're..." Sydney stopped midsentence and attempted to soften her tone. "No one's the bad guy in this. The situation's difficult, that's all. We just need to find a way to make everyone happy."

Anthony sat down moodily on the stairs. "I don't see how, if you're working all the time."

Sydney scowled. She didn't remember her brother being this selfish. But she supposed since Anthony spent most of his life travelling on his own, that he was used to getting his own way. Though that was indeed a reason, it wasn't an excuse for his sulky, child-like display. Sydney reminded herself that of the two of them, she was the younger sibling. "God, you are just like Rich."

Anthony's gaze snapped up. "What?"

"Nothing." Sydney hadn't meant to say that aloud. She continued quickly, to try and distract Anthony from her slip-up. "Saber's off tomorrow, she'll take you climbing then."

"Good. I look forward to it." Anthony raised a warning finger. "But don't think I'm wasting today while you're both off at work, I was bored silly yesterday."

"I'm sure you can manage to entertain yourself." Sydney checked her watch. She was running late. "I have to go. I'll see you tonight." She was still too annoyed with Anthony to give him a good-bye hug, and it was a decision that would come back to haunt her.

LESS THAN TWO hours after his sister had gone to work, Anthony left a note for Sydney, on the off chance she returned home before he did. He was going stir crazy cooped up in the house, so he'd decided to go on a long hike up Toppling Crag. He knew from the previous excursion it was a hard mountain to hike, so his trip could take numerous hours. He'd enjoyed the last outing, but they'd only covered half of the mountain. Today, Anthony wanted to hike the remaining half.

He borrowed Saber's map, so there was no chance of getting lost, and he'd prepared a packed lunch for the journey. He was all set to go.

Anthony finished writing his note, then read it back to himself.

**'Needed to get out of the house—feeling incarcerated. Am hiking other half of TC. Left at ten a.m. should be back before you.—Anthony.'**

He held the pen uncertainly over the paper for a moment. He nodded to himself and wrote beneath his text.

**"P.S. Sorry about this morning, Sydney."**

Anthony realised he'd been a bit unfair, given he'd dropped in without a specific invite. He wanted to spend time with Sydney because she was by far his favoured sibling. And though Anthony loved his travels, Sydney was the person he missed the most while away. He didn't get to spend much quality time with her, and his wish to do so clouded his judgement. He'd allowed his heart to rule his head. Ironically, his actions served to anger Sydney, which was the last thing he wanted.

Anthony decided then and there he wouldn't try to force the issue any further, and he'd be satisfied with whatever time Sydney could give him. He intended to convey his gratitude to Saber, too, as she'd been more than generous with him.

Initially, Anthony had been jealous of Sydney for having such a beautiful woman for a partner, but over the past couple of days, he'd seen Saber was a lot more than just her looks—she was the whole package. Kind, smart, and witty, Saber was the kind of woman both men and

women alike dreamt of. He still harbored some jealousy, but he was pleased for both Sydney and Saber. They seemed exceptionally happy together.

Anthony left the note in the centre of the kitchen table, where it could be spotted easily. He shouldered his rucksack and went down the hallway. Using the spare key that had been left for him, he opened, and then locked the front door behind him.

He settled his backpack into a more comfortable position, and started his journey toward Toppling Crag.

“IT’S JUST ME, Anthony,” Sydney called out, to let him know she was home. She knew he wouldn’t be expecting her yet, since she wasn’t due back till around six p.m. and it was only mid-afternoon. It had been a quiet shift at work for a change, so she’d taken some of the lieu time that was owed her. Taking lieu time was rare for Sydney, but she felt bad about the argument with Anthony that morning, and wanted to set things right between them. She hoped that finishing early would help to make amends, as it demonstrated she did want to spend time with him, which seemed to be his biggest point of contention.

When Sydney didn’t hear a reply, she called out again, “Anthony? Are you here?” She paused, but no one answered. The house was deathly silent. She noticed the spare house keys were missing, and, with a sigh, she kicked off her shoes and hung up her coat and bag.

She recalled Anthony mentioning something about not wanting to waste the day, but she’d honestly thought the comment was just bluster. Apparently she was mistaken.

“Typical,” she muttered. “I make the effort and he’s not even here to see it.”

Sydney briefly thought about going upstairs to change out of her work clothes and into something more comfortable, but she was thirsty, so she decided to get a drink first.

In the kitchen, she noticed a note on the table. She recognised Anthony’s handwriting, and read the note.

“Needed to get out of the house—feeling incarcerated.”

Sydney chuckled at that, her brother always had been melodramatic. “Am hiking other half of TC.” It took her a moment, but she realised he was referring to Toppling Crag. “Left at ten a.m. should be back before you—Anthony.”

She smiled at the P.S. part of the message, pleased that Anthony had tried to make amends. She didn’t like to argue, especially with loved ones, and always attempted to keep the peace.

She was glad some of what she’d told Anthony about Mountain Rescue seemed to have sunk in, for he’d been sensible enough to leave a note behind. If, God forbid, something were to happen, they would know exactly where to search for him.

At that unpleasant thought, Sydney’s gaze darted back to the paper. “Left at ten a.m. should be back before you.” Anthony was right; he should’ve been back before Sydney. Though he was obviously referring to her later arrival tonight, Sydney knew Toppling Crag well as she’d hiked it many times, and Anthony had been overly generous in estimating his journey time. Though only mid-afternoon, if he’d set off at ten a.m. he should’ve been back before now.

Sydney felt a sinking sensation in her gut, and grabbed the note as she headed for the front door.

SABER LOOKED UP from the hob in surprise as Sydney hurried into the café's kitchen. "Syd, this is a nice..." Saber broke off as she noticed the worried expression on Sydney's face. She hastily lowered the temperature of the hob so the food wouldn't burn, then gave her complete attention to Sydney. "What's wrong?"

Sydney passed a bit of paper over to her. "Read that."

Saber scanned the note. She checked the clock on the kitchen wall, and frowned. "He should've been back by now."

Sydney chewed on her lower lip anxiously. "That was my thought too."

Saber stepped closer and gripped Sydney's shoulders. "Don't panic just yet. Anthony says himself that he wanted to get out of the house, so he could simply be taking his time on the mountain. He expects us both to be at work, so he's probably not keen to return to an empty house." Saber raised a questioning eyebrow. "How come you're home early?"

"Took some owed lieu time." Sydney released a heavy breath. "Why couldn't Anthony have just waited? I told him you were going to take him climbing tomorrow." She grimaced.

"Actually, it's probably my fault. We argued this morning."

Saber shook her head. "I won't have you blaming yourself. It's hardly your fault he's impulsive."

"I know. I could be overreacting, as you say Anthony could just be taking his time, but I've got a bad feeling about this, Sabe." Sydney stepped out of her hold. "I'm going to go and search for him."

"You're not going alone," Saber said. "We'll treat this as we would for every other missing hiker. I'll get on to Charlie so he can assemble the team." On her way to the phone, Saber stopped midstride and turned to Sydney. "I know the signal's terrible around these parts, but did you try Anthony's mobile?"

"I didn't think to try." Sydney slapped her forehead. She moved briskly to the phone, and typed in Anthony's mobile number. Several moments passed, then she shook her head and put down the receiver. "No good."

Saber rubbed Sydney's back, trying to console her. "Don't worry, sweetheart, we'll find him."

ANTHONY ADMIRERD THE view across the valley, from his perch on the boulder. The countryside and forest were lush and green. Shirebridge nestled, almost protectively, in between three impressive peaks, so it was indeed an idyllic spot.

Despite the lack of activities for him to do in the village itself, Anthony had become quite fond of the place—it had a quaint charm about it. He could see why Sydney had settled here. That said, he could never live in a place like this, as village life bored him to death.

Suddenly realising this viewpoint would make a great photo, Anthony removed his camera from his rucksack and snapped pictures. He'd already taken a lot of shots while on his hike, but thanks to the wonder of digital photography, he didn't have to worry about filling the film.

Once he'd finished taking photos, he returned the camera to his pack. He glimpsed at his watch and rolled his eyes. The hike wasn't as long as Anthony hoped, and he was already halfway down Toppling Crag. He still had a couple of hours to waste before Sydney was due home, despite walking at a snail's pace and spending a considerable amount of time on his photography.

Regardless of the hour, he decided he'd best get back, as he'd rather return before Sydney got home. He didn't want her to worry, and he knew Sydney was a natural worrier, like their father. Thomas too, for that matter. Anthony figured it had something to do with them being doctors, though he supposed if he saw accidents all day like they did, perhaps he too would get a bit over-cautious.

Anthony slung his pack over a shoulder, and continued his descent down Toppling Crag. He hadn't gone very far along the path when he noticed his bootlace had come undone, and he stopped to tie it.

Anthony heard a strange cracking noise from the steep incline to his left. The sound of grating stone followed, and as he looked up he saw a rock hurtling toward him.

Anthony knew he didn't have a hope in hell of avoiding the impact, and he couldn't believe his bad luck. To have stopped in the pathway of the falling rock was an unjust and cruel twist of fate. He wished he'd gone climbing today, as he would've at least been wearing his helmet.

The rock collided solidly with Anthony's head, and all went black.

# Chapter Eleven

FORTUNATELY, IT HADN'T taken long to assemble the Mountain Rescue team, as Doug and crew were once again busy with the workshop, which meant they were at the rescue station quickly.

The station was basic, but it did have heating, electricity, a phone, and Internet access. Given that it was made of wood, its dark texture made the room seem smaller than it actually was, and despite the natural light that came through the windows, to be able to see clearly, the overhead light also needed to be on.

Sydney changed out of her work clothes at home, and now wore plain black combats and a red microfibre fleece. Since the weather forecast was fine, she decided against putting her waterproof trousers over the top. She knew how changeable the weather could be on a mountaintop, so she tucked them into her backpack. She slipped into her red and black waterproof jacket, which identified her as Mountain Rescue.

As Sydney walked across the room, working her way around team members in various states of dress, Doug collected the radios that were on charge on the windowsill and handed one to her. Each member received a radio.

Sydney stopped next to the shelf that held five multicoloured helmets. Saber, always the quickest to get ready, had already taken her red helmet. Sydney selected her white helmet, which, as the medic on the team, bore a large red cross on the back, and a smaller cross on the front. She fastened the helmet to her rucksack, and shrugged the bulky pack onto her shoulders, having to widen her stance to compensate for the extra weight. The team carried a lot of equipment with them, and where possible, the weight was distributed evenly between the six packs. However, every pack still contained the necessities to survive, in case of separation, making them heavy to carry.

Sydney bounced anxiously on the balls of her feet, eager to get going. Her stomach was in knots, and her worry for Anthony grew with each passing moment. She felt Saber's hand rest on her lower back, and she drew strength from both the touch, and her partner's unwavering presence. Sydney glanced to her in gratitude.

Saber was dressed in an identical outfit to Sydney, as were all the team, the only contrast in their attire was their different coloured helmets. Charlie summoned her with a wave of his hand, and Saber joined him at the computer.

As Saber leaned over Charlie's wheelchair, Sydney couldn't help but think of how Charlie had become paralysed, Saber told her the story once, an awful accident on the mountainside. Though the circumstances were no doubt different—after all, Charlie had been on a rescue at the time, and the attempt to save two teenage boys had gone badly wrong—Sydney was unable to stop herself from picturing Anthony terribly hurt, alone and afraid on the harsh, unforgiving mountain.

“Right,” Doug said, drawing Sydney out of her depressing thoughts. “We all set?” He regarded each of the team, his gaze only moving on when he’d received an affirming nod. “Good. Charlie, we’ll keep you informed.”

Sydney led the way to the door, but before she could get there, it opened and a fatigued-looking man rushed into the station.

“Please...” He panted heavily, and had to catch his breath. “I need your help.”

The team quickly parted as Sydney led the man to a chair and sat him down. “Are you hurt?”

The man shook his head, and sucked in air. “My friend, Joe...we were up on Scar Peak...He slipped, hurt his ankle.”

Doug placed a hand on the man’s shoulder. “What’s your name?”

“Edwin.”

“Okay, Edwin. Is there just the two of you?”

“Yes.” Edwin’s voice trembled. “I didn’t want to leave Joe, but when he couldn’t walk any farther... I couldn’t carry him for long, but I managed to get him to a sheltered position. I thought it best to get help.”

“You did the right thing,” Coop said.

Sydney’s ears latched on to a specific part of Edwin’s sentence. “When Joe couldn’t walk any farther? Was he able to put weight on his ankle?”

Edwin nodded. “At least to start with.”

Sydney turned her attention to Doug. “It isn’t broken then, not if he could stand on it.”

Doug seemed to agree. “Sounds like a sprain. Edwin, could you show my team on a map where you left Joe?”

Edwin got to his feet. “Of course. But I want to go with you. Then I can show you exactly where he is.”

Doug said, “That would help a great deal, but only if you feel up to it.”

“I’m fine,” Edwin said. Coop and Jeff guided him to a large map on the far wall. The Mountain Rescue office held many detailed maps of the area, it was important they had a good grasp of the terrain.

Rich stood to the side until Doug urged him to follow the others.

Once alone with Saber and Sydney, Doug spoke up, “Now that we’ve got two incidents, and on two mountains no less, I’ll have to split up the team. Three in each group.” He paused in contemplation, and he fixed his gaze on Sydney. “A sprained ankle isn’t life-threatening. You should go and search for your brother.”

“You’re sure?” It wasn’t that Sydney didn’t want to go and find Anthony, she was desperate to in fact, but she also didn’t want to neglect her duties as the team’s doctor, especially since this was an actual incident, whereas Anthony could yet turn up unharmed.

“We are medically trained,” Doug said. “We managed perfectly well before you joined the team.”

Sydney nodded. “I know that.”

“Now Saber,” Doug’s gaze moved on to her. “I need your honest opinion. Do you think you’re ready for a rescue? I know you’re still building your strength back up.”

Saber didn’t hesitate. “I can do it.”

“We’re splitting up so there will be more pressure on you.” Doug sighed. “I’d rather your first time back be easier.”

“I can do it,” Saber repeated. “Besides, you need the numbers.”

Doug said, “Well you’re right about that.” He zipped up his red and black jacket. “The other incident sounds straight-forward enough, so I’ll come with you two.” Doug held up a hand, as if he expected them to protest. “Saber, I trust you, but I want to be on hand in case you need me. It’s best to play things safe.” He took a breath. “Sydney, this rescue’s personal for you, so I’d like to be there for moral support.”

In spite of the situation, Sydney smiled. “I appreciate that, Doug.”

“And I appreciate you not putting me on the other team,” Saber said. “I know it must’ve crossed your mind, since I haven’t done a rescue for a while.”

Sydney blinked in surprise, the idea hadn’t even occurred to her. And now that it had, she didn’t like it one bit. But as she thought, the reasoning behind such a notion became clear. Out of the two incidents, they knew one sounded straightforward. They had less information as to what the other entailed, so in that regard it made sense to put Saber on the potentially easier rescue. Though Sydney understood that, she wasn’t at all keen, for Saber was her anchor right now. She needed her steadfast support. Not only that, but she was anxious about Saber’s shoulder, and she wanted to keep a close eye on her—the last thing she wanted was for Saber to suffer a relapse.

Doug didn’t deny Saber’s claim. “It did cross my mind. But given your relationship, I feel you’re stronger together, which is important for you both right now.”

Beyond grateful for his insight and understanding, Sydney patted his arm. “You’re a good leader, Doug.”

Doug seemed pleased by her words. “I’ll just sort the others out, then we can leave.”

Sydney took advantage of the moment alone with Saber. “Promise me something?”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you won’t push yourself?” Sydney said. She knew of Saber’s aversion to asking for help, though she admitted Saber was getting a lot better at doing so. Saber’s father, a martial arts instructor, taught Saber to be strong, not to show any kind of pain, physical or otherwise, for if she did that was a weakness of her character. Saber took that lesson to heart, and to this day, Sydney knew, Saber found it difficult to voice or show pain in front of others. Sydney was the exception to that, and she was honoured to be, though it’d required time and patience to reach this stage.

Still holding Saber’s gaze, Sydney continued, “I want you to speak up if you need help, Doug or no Doug. I’m worried about Anthony, I don’t want to be worrying about you, too.”

Saber hesitated, and then nodded, in an effort to give Sydney the peace of mind she needed. “I promise.”

Sydney stretched up and kissed Saber, knowing her word could be trusted. “Thank you.”

SABER REMOVED HER jumper. She was hot with several layers of clothing on. Not wanting to waste any time, she quickly shrugged off her backpack and unzipped her jacket. She stuffed the jumper inside her rucksack.

She, Sydney, and Doug were pushing themselves hard, none of them willing to rest until they found Anthony. Toppling Crag was the most difficult mountain in the area to hike, and was a real test for Saber’s endurance, but she kept up well.

Though it was now late in the afternoon, the day was still warm, and that was the reason for her overheating. Saber actually took that to be a good sign, for it meant that Anthony, wherever



he was, wouldn't be at risk of hypothermia, which was one less thing for them to have to worry about.

When Saber slipped her jacket back on, she spotted Sydney copying her actions on the trail ahead, and was pleased she wasn't the only one sweating.

Saber retrieved her drinks bottle from her pack, took several mouthfuls of the refreshingly cool liquid, and shouldered her rucksack once more. She caught up to Sydney, and offered her a drink.

Sydney accepted the bottle and sipped from it. "It's not looking good, is it?" She shook her head in worry. "If Anthony was okay, we should've come across him by now."

Saber agreed with Sydney's logic, but she didn't think saying so would help the situation. Rather than say the wrong thing, Saber simply stepped in and wrapped her arms around Sydney. She felt Sydney cling tightly to her, clearly seeking comfort, which Saber was more than willing to give. She strengthened her hold on Sydney, securing the embrace, and they stayed entwined for several long moments.

When Sydney drew back, she smiled. "I needed that." She pointed to Doug up the trail. "Let's catch up."

IN THE MEANTIME, Coop, Rich, and Jeff made their way through the thick forest at the base of Scar Peak. The path Edwin led them along was covered in striated shadows from the tall pine trees overhead. The trees obstructed a lot of the daylight, but though gloomy, there was still enough light to see by.

Coop jumped over a small rocky stream, which gurgled through the otherwise silent forest. He tried to focus on the rescue ahead, but his mind kept wandering to Sydney. He hoped they'd found her brother by now, and that he was okay. Coop didn't know Anthony well, but he cared a lot for Sydney, so for her sake, he hoped nothing untoward had happened to him.

Coop, distracted by his thoughts, didn't notice the overhanging branch in his way until it slapped him in the face. Startled, he staggered back, treading heavily on Rich's foot.

"Yow!" Rich shouted, hopping around in a dramatic manner. "Watch where you're going. I think you need glasses."

Just then, loud squawking came from the underbrush.

Rich's eyes widened in alarm. "Jesus, what's that?"

Birds erupted all around them, as Rich's yell had obviously scared them out of hiding. The flock of grouse scattered in all directions and many scuttled on to the path, weaving their way around, between, and even over the men's feet.

"Err, get off," Rich said as one of the birds used his boot as a stepping-stone. He shook his leg, and in retaliation the bird tried to peck him. "Argh, bloody thing! Clear off."

As if understanding Rich's words, the grouse followed his companions, and soon disappeared back into the undergrowth.

Coop shook his head in exasperation. "Richard Powell, how many times do I have to tell you about your language?"

Rich's voice rose in indignation. "Cut me some slack, Coop. I was just attacked by a score of ravenous birds."

Jeff chuckled. "Actually, Rich, it was *one* bird."

Rich scowled at Jeff. "Whose side are you on?"

Jeff held up his hands defensively, though he continued to laugh. “I think that bird liked you, Rich.”

Rich scoffed. “Did you not see it peck at me?”

Jeff pointed downward. “Well it’s just that it left you a present on your shoe.”

Both Rich and Coop peeked down at Rich’s boot. On the top, lay a pile of bird muck.

Rich pulled a disgusted face. “Aww shit!”

With a smirk, Jeff said, “You got that right.”

## Chapter Twelve

SYDNEY SURVEYED THE vast mountainside with despair. She wondered where on earth Anthony could be and not knowing was slowly driving her mad. The setting sun cast shadows across Toppling Crag, and Sydney worried they were running out of time. She drew strength from the warmth of Saber's hand, which she held in her own, and she was again thankful for her partner's unwavering presence.

The trail was now quite steep in places, and to Sydney's right, was a sharp upward incline lined with a mixture of large boulders and smaller scree.

From ahead, Doug suddenly shouted. "I can see him, Sydney. I've found him."

Both Sydney and Saber sprinted ahead, closing in on Doug's position quickly. Sydney spotted a supine figure lying on the ground, and she recognised the fluorescent green backpack, which was pinned underneath him. It was Anthony.

Sydney raced over to Anthony's side, closely followed by Saber and Doug. The three of them dropped down next to Anthony. Doug unfastened the folding stretcher from his rucksack, and Saber removed the medical kit from Sydney's pack. Sydney began her routine by checking Anthony's vital signs.

"Anthony? Can you hear me? It's Sydney." She pulled out her torch from her medical kit and shone it into Anthony's eyes, checking his pupils.

"There's the culprit," Doug said, pointing to a bloodied rock not far from Anthony. He glanced and pointed up the steep incline. "Seems as if it broke free from up there."

"It must've struck his head hard, he has a serious intracranial injury." Sydney saw a large, nasty-looking gash along the crown of his head where the rock had impacted with his skull. From the amount of blood pooled around him, Sydney could tell the deep wound had bled profusely, head wounds always did, but now it just oozed slightly.

She took the offered compress from Saber, and gently held it over the injury, then rolled a bandage around Anthony's head to keep it firmly in place. She fitted a neck brace to restrict movement, and covered Anthony with a heat-retaining blanket.

Sydney faced her teammates. "He needs immediate attention. We need the rescue helicopter."

Doug pulled out his radio and moved away from them slightly as he conversed with Charlie in the Mountain Rescue Station. Sydney knew Charlie would organise everything, but it would be up to them to get Anthony to a piece of open ground, so that when the helicopter arrived the winch could be used safely, without any obstacles in the way.

"We'll get him to the hospital." Saber's tone was calm, reassuring, as she ran a hand down Sydney's arm. "Let's cut his backpack off, move him on to the stretcher."

Sydney brought out a pair of medical scissors used to cut off clothing. She drew the blanket off Anthony, and cut through one of his pack's thick shoulder straps.

From off to one side, Doug grunted in pain. "What the..."

In unison, Saber and Sydney whipped around to face Doug.

Doug rubbed the back of his leg. He bent and picked up a rock about the size of an egg off the ground. Alarm dawned on his face, and his gaze snapped up toward the steep incline. “We’ve gotta move.”

Sydney heard a loud cracking sound ringing through the still air. Pebbles rained down around them, as with absolute horror, Sydney realised what was happening—a rockslide.

She cried out when a pebble struck her upper arm, and the pain, though brief, forced her into action. Sydney continued to cut through the backpack’s straps with a new sense of haste.

“We’ve gotta move now!” Doug shouted as he raced over.

Sydney adamantly shook her head. Given the seriousness of Anthony’s injury, moving him without a backboard could cause spinal damage or worse. “Stretcher first.”

Saber readied the stretcher, moving it into position beside Anthony.

Sydney finished cutting through the first strap and started on the second one. The sound of stone grating against stone reached her ears. It was an awful noise, like fingernails on a chalkboard.

The raining stones changed from pebbles into fist-sized rocks.

“The whole lot’s gonna come down! We have to go, Sydney!” Doug pushed his way in and grabbed the stubborn shoulder strap Sydney was cutting through. Using the slit as the weak point, Doug wrapped his strong, powerful hands on either side of it, and pulled hard, tearing the fabric in two.

Saber and Sydney held Anthony still as Doug dragged the backpack out from underneath him. With haste and a well-practiced skill, they hauled Anthony onto the stretcher, and fastened him in place.

“Move! Move!” Doug yelled, as he picked up one end of the stretcher.

Sydney took the other end, as the ground beneath their feet shook. Several boulders rolled down the incline toward them, and they quickened their pace along the trail in a desperate attempt to get out of the way of the rockslide.

Saber led the way carrying Anthony’s fluorescent green pack. Sydney came next, with Doug bringing up the rear. Despite being in the lead, it was Saber who was struck by a substantial sized rock. The impact spun her savagely around, and she fell heavily to the ground.

“Sabe!” Sydney screamed, though she barely heard her own voice above the din of the surrounding rock fall. She didn’t know how, but to her unending relief, Saber clambered to her feet, staggering slightly. Sydney took hold of the middle grip in the board, so she could carry the stretcher one-handed. As she reached Saber, she encircled her waist with an arm, giving her support as they hurried along the path.

With a rumbling as loud as thunder, a sheet of stones slid down the incline, and all but washed away the trail behind them. The group kept moving, keen to put a safe distance between themselves and the threat.

A wave of nausea overcame Sydney at what almost transpired. If she hadn’t decided to leave work early, Anthony would likely be dead right now, entombed under a mass of rubble. They had nearly been buried by the rockslide. If they’d been but a minute later...Sydney shook her head, forcing her mind to stop thinking such awful thoughts. She still had a job to do, and dwelling on what-ifs wouldn’t help anyone.

An eerie stillness crept across the mountainside, as the raucous sound of falling rocks died out. A tense silence fell over the group.

Once certain they were far enough away, Sydney broke the quiet. "Let's set Anthony down here." At Doug's nod, she carefully lowered the stretcher to the ground. Sydney caught his gaze. "He needs to be closely monitored."

"I've got him," Doug said, his tone reassuring.

Sydney turned her attention to Saber, who was still on her feet. She regarded her with concern. "Sit down. Tell me where it hurts?"

Saber remained standing. "I'm fine, Syd. The rock didn't hit me."

Sydney stared at her, disbelieving. "I saw it hit you, Sabe. It knocked you to the ground."

"It struck my backpack. The force yanked me off-balance." Saber rested a soothing hand on Sydney's shoulder. "I'm not hurt."

Doug spoke up from beside the stretcher. "You got lucky, Saber. You could've ended up like Anthony here."

"I know." Saber blew out a breath. "It was a close call."

The enormity of the situation hit Sydney like a ton of rocks, and she threw her arms around Saber, beyond grateful she was unharmed.

"Hey." Saber's voice was compassion itself as she returned Sydney's hold. "We're both all right, sweetheart. We're safe now." She laid a tender kiss in Sydney's hair, and rubbed her back. "What a day."

Sydney made a sound that was halfway between a laugh and a sob. "You can say that again." She squeezed Saber, and then stepped out of the embrace and crossed to the stretcher.

Sydney knelt next to her brother and was disheartened to see Anthony was still unconscious. Though given the seriousness of his head wound, she knew that wasn't at all unusual. Sydney bent in close to Anthony and whispered soft reassurances in his ear. She stroked his cheek, wanting Anthony to know he wasn't alone, that she was here beside him.

Saber leaned over Doug's shoulder. "Did you manage to get through to Charlie?"

"Yes. The chopper's on its way."

"Hear that, Anthony? You'll soon be at the hospital." Sydney felt a tear roll down her cheek. "So just hold on. Please hold on."

ON THE WAY up Scar Peak, Coop and the others heard Doug's request for helicopter assistance over their radios, which all shared the same frequency.

Coop grimaced at that information, though he kept on walking. "That's not a good sign."

"Must be serious." Jeff's expression was sympathetic. "Poor Sydney."

"Poor Anthony, more like," Rich said. "He's the one injured."

"Let's hope he pulls through." Coop picked up his pace, striding forward with newfound determination. "Come on. Let's get Joe and Edwin taken care of, then we can find out what's going on with the others." Coop moved over to the man guiding them, and briefly touched his arm. "You're doing well, Edwin. You must be exhausted, climbing this mountain twice."

Edwin nodded wearily. "I am. But I'll feel a lot better once we reach Joe, it's not much farther now." As if spurred on by his words, Edwin put on a burst of speed.

Coop kept pace beside him, with Jeff and Rich following a mere step behind. The group continued their quick march for a while, passing by a climb that was one of Coop's favourites. The climb, called Green Treetops, was so named because when you reached the top, you had a splendid view of the forest below, at the foot of Scar Peak. He knew the climb was also one of

Saber's favourites, and he was eager for the day they could return here together, when Saber's shoulder healed enough for her to be able to do difficult climbs. Coop hoped she was managing all right over on Toppling Crag, and she wasn't pushing beyond her limits. He knew Saber wasn't a woman to give in easily. That said, neither was Sydney, so in that regard, as in many others, they were well matched to each other. Coop smiled, pleased Saber was in good hands.

Edwin pointed off to the side of the trail ahead. "There he is!" He raised his voice to a shout. "Joe, we're here. I've brought Mountain Rescue."

The three-man team hurriedly followed as Edwin led them off the path toward a small, sheltered alcove in the rock face. Coop spotted Joe in the recess, leaning back against the stone wall. Since the niche in the rock was tight fitting, only one team member could fit inside.

Coop removed his pack and squeezed in to the space, dropping down alongside Joe. "Hi, Joe. My name's Coop. I'm with Mountain Rescue." He indicated the opening of the alcove, where Jeff and Rich peered in. "These are my colleagues. Edwin told us you've hurt your ankle. Are you hurt anywhere else?"

Joe shook his head, and his surprisingly long ponytail swung from side to side. Along with his untrimmed facial hair, he had the appearance of a rock and roll wannabe. "Just my ankle. The left."

"Can you tell me what happened?" Coop asked, as he untied the laces on Joe's left boot.

"I wasn't sure whether to remove my shoe or not." Joe shrugged. "But it hurts like hell, so I chickened out and kept it on."

Coop met his gaze. "I'll be careful. But I do need to check the injury so I can treat it." At Joe's nod of acceptance, Coop slowly took off the boot. He apologised when Joe hissed in pain, but he continued and removed Joe's thick walking sock. Joe's ankle was indeed swollen, but as Coop gently felt around the injury, he couldn't detect any breaks. Satisfied, he said, "I don't think it's broken, though the hospital will likely X-ray it to make sure. I'll just wrap your ankle to give it some support, then we'll get you out of here."

Joe swallowed, as if nervous at the proposition. "I can't walk on it."

"Don't worry," Jeff said from the entranceway. "We don't expect you to. We'll carry you down on a stretcher." Jeff unfastened the stretcher from his rucksack, unfolded it, and started to prepare it for Joe.

Rich leaned into the alcove and passed Coop a medical kit. Coop thanked him, and then dug inside the kit. He removed a long roll of bandage, and wound it repeatedly around Joe's injured ankle. Coop was cautious not to make it too tight, or it would restrict blood flow to the limb.

"All done," Coop said as he finished. "Let's get the stretcher in here."

The stretcher slid into the recess, and Joe was soon on it. When he was moved out of the alcove, Edwin crossed to his side, and the two friends clasped hands.

"Thanks, Eddie. I knew I could count on you."

"No worries. You would've done the same for me."

Rich shook his head. "I never understand why people are modest in such situations." He regarded Edwin in seriousness, as if imparting words of wisdom. "You should take credit. You deserve it." Rich's gaze shifted to Joe on the stretcher. "It would've taken us a lot longer to find you without Edwin. He led us straight to you. I'd say you owe him a drink."

Joe nodded. "That I do. Hell, I may even stretch to two."

OVER ON TOPPLING Crag, Saber, Sydney, and Doug made their way to a piece of open ground, where they intended to meet the rescue helicopter.

Saber and Doug carried the stretcher, and had been for some time, so Sydney was able to monitor Anthony. Though they were all capable of that task, it was obvious Anthony's condition was critical, and she wanted Sydney to spend as much time with her brother as possible, in case the worst happened.

Despite having every intention of carrying Anthony to the pick up point, Saber had a problem—her shoulder was beginning to hurt. Anthony was a healthy, fit man, so he wasn't light to carry. The constant deadweight on her arms started to take its toll on her weaker shoulder, and she winced as the dull ache sharpened into pain. It didn't help matters that the terrain was hard to hike, without the added weight of a stretcher. Saber wondered whether she should just grit her teeth and suffer the pain in silence. They only had to get around the next bend, a few minutes at most. But then she remembered her promise to Sydney, and all thoughts to the contrary disappeared.

"Hold up." Swallowing her pride, Saber halted. "I need to switch with you, Syd. Sorry, but my shoulder..."

Sydney nodded instantly. "I'll carry him."

Saber and Doug lowered Anthony to the ground. Now without the weight, the pain in Saber's shoulder lessened considerably. She moved away from the stretcher and carefully rolled her shoulder, trying to be discreet in her actions. Her shoulder offered no protest, and Saber was relieved there were no lasting effects from the pain she'd felt.

Sydney watched her with a troubled expression. "All right, Sabe?"

Saber was quick to reassure. "Fine. Let's keep moving."

Accepting Saber's word on the matter, Sydney didn't delay any longer, and picked up the stretcher with Doug. As they continued along the mountain trail, Saber kept a sharp eye on Anthony, monitoring him closely.

The group rounded the next bend, arriving at their destination, and set Anthony down on the ground once more.

It wasn't too long before Saber heard the sound of rotors in the distance, and as the whirring of the helicopter's blades drew nearer to their position, she shared a relieved look with Sydney.

"Almost there," Saber said. "Not much longer now."

COOP SPOTTED SHIREBRIDGE as he stepped out of the thick, green forest at the foot of Scar Peak. He took the shortest, most direct route to the village, as he trekked across the countryside, leading the rest of the group toward the Mountain Rescue Station.

The three-man team took turns carrying the stretcher, and at the moment Rich and Jeff carried Joe. Coop was pleased the rescue had gone well and they'd made good time. They needed to pick up the Land Rover at the Mountain Rescue Station and drive Joe to the hospital.

They emerged at the far end of the village and crossed from uneven soil on to the flat, tarmacked road. The group passed by Sydney and Saber's house as they walked over the bridge, and Coop said a silent prayer for Anthony, in the hopes he would be okay. Coop understood how difficult it was to lose a loved one, he had firsthand experience of it when he'd lost his wife, Mary, and he didn't want Sydney to go through the same pain. It was hard enough when family

died of natural causes, but when the person was taken before their time, especially in the case of an accident, it made things immeasurably more difficult.

Coop's own wife was killed in a car accident when a drunk driver hit her. Mary had been his life, and it'd taken him a long time to work through the loss. Even now, nearly a decade on, Coop wouldn't so much as look at another woman, for in his heart he still considered himself to be married.

The loss of Mary was the grimmest period of Coop's life, but thanks to Saber he'd survived. The rescue team was tremendously supportive, as were the rest of the villagers, but Saber visited every day, cooked him meals and listened to him when he needed to talk.

Coop knew he would've likely become a recluse or worse, if not for Saber, and he was grateful that, if the worst did happen with Anthony, at least Sydney would have Saber to help her through it.

As they reached the station, the door opened and Charlie wheeled himself outside. He tossed a small bundle of keys toward Coop. Coop caught them easily, and opened the secure, corrugated garage where the Land Rover was parked.

Coop unlocked the 4x4, and opened its boot. Jeff and Rich immediately slid the stretcher into the vehicle, which was specially adapted for such purposes, then Jeff clambered in to fasten Joe in place. Edwin followed, taking the seat next to his friend.

Rich turned to Coop and held out his hand. "I'll drive."

Coop shook his head, keeping tight hold of the car keys. "I think there've been enough accidents for one day."

Rich frowned. "At least I'd get us there in this century, you drive like a pensioner."

Jeff hopped down from the car, shut the boot, and snatched the keys out of Coop's grasp. "Looks like I'm driving."

"Coop." Charlie rolled closer. "Let me know when you have any updates about Sydney's brother."

Coop nodded, knowing Charlie genuinely cared for Sydney—they all did. Though she was the newest member of the team, Sydney had quickly integrated with the group, and become a highly valued and respected member. Everyone on the team considered Sydney to be a friend.

He placed a hand on Charlie's shoulder. "I'll keep you informed."



# Chapter Thirteen

SABER TAPPED HER feet uneasily on the white, clinical tiles of the hospital floor. She and Doug currently sat in the A+E waiting room, watching the clock tick by as they anxiously awaited news on Anthony's condition. All they knew was he'd been sent for a CT scan a while ago, and Sydney, being medical personnel, had been allowed to go with him.

Saber shifted in the uncomfortable chair. She hated hospitals. Though she imagined most people did. After all, no one liked getting sick. Her gaze lifted in hope when the double doors swung open at the end of the corridor, but it wasn't Sydney who came through them. It was two nurses.

As if also disappointed it wasn't Sydney, Doug released a heavy breath. He got to his feet and crossed to a coffee machine, which stood in the corner of the room. After depositing some money, Doug pressed the button of his selection, and liquid poured into the plastic cup. He repeated the procedure once more, and then returned to his seat with two cups in hand. "Here you go." Doug passed one of the steaming coffees to Saber.

Saber accepted the drink. "Thanks, Doug."

Doug grimaced as he took a sip. "God, it's awful. But at least it's hot." He pointed to a different vending machine, this one contained snacks. "Do you want something to eat? It's well after meal time."

Saber swallowed a mouthful of bitter coffee, and shook her head. "I'll get something later with Syd."

The main entrance doors slid open, and Coop, Jeff, and Rich entered the A+E, wheeling a stretcher between them. A red-headed nurse hurried over to them, and after exchanging words with Coop, no doubt about the patient's details, she took the stretcher off their hands, leading Joe and Edwin away to a cubicle.

Once sure the matter was concluded, Saber waved a hand to catch their attention. When they spotted her, the three men quickly crossed the floor.

Coop was the first to speak. "What's happening with Anthony?"

Frustrated, Saber ran her fingers through her hair. "We don't know much yet. Just that he's been taken for a CT scan."

"He was struck on the head by a falling rock. It's serious," Doug said, filling them in on the events. "There was a rock slide while we were there, so at some point we'll have to return and shore up the rocks."

"It seems Toppling Crag was aptly named," Rich said.

Saber frowned at Rich for his insensitivity. "Now's not the time for jokes."

"Are the rest of you all right?" Coop asked, his forehead creasing in concern. "You weren't hurt in the slide?"

Doug shook his head. "No. But we were very fortunate not to be."

Coop sat next to Saber and placed a hand on her back. "I take it Sydney's with Anthony?"

Saber set her coffee cup down on a small, nearby table. “She is. I don’t think she’s supposed to treat him, given he’s family, but her colleagues have allowed her to sit in on the tests.”

Coop nodded. “That’s good. It’ll keep her in the loop. As a doctor I imagine she’d prefer to know every little detail, the negatives as well as the positives.”

Saber agreed. “I figured the same.”

Doug reclined in his chair, causing it to squeak unpleasantly. “How did your rescue go?”

Coop said, “It went fine. No mishaps.”

Jeff tipped his head toward the entranceway. “You likely saw us bring Joe and Edwin in?” At Doug’s acknowledgment, he said, “It was as expected, Joe had an ankle injury. Nothing more.”

“It was boring compared to your rescue.” Rich sounded disappointed, as if unhappy he’d missed out on nearly being crushed by a rockslide.

Saber glared at him, but forced herself to hold her tongue. Just when she thought Rich couldn’t get any more self-involved, he did. His team mates were nearly buried alive, Anthony was undergoing a brain scan for a serious injury, Sydney was no doubt frantic with worry for her brother, and all Rich seemed to be upset about, was the fact he’d missed out on an adventure. Saber leaned over and whispered in Coop’s ear, “It’s a good thing we’re in a hospital. Because if Rich continues, I’m pretty certain he’s gonna be hit in the head as well.”

AS SYDNEY OPENED one of the double doors into the A+E waiting room, she glanced to a wall clock—it was now after midnight. She’d been with Anthony for numerous hours. He’d had some serious complications, so his treatment needed to move quickly.

The A+E was still relatively busy, even though it was night, but Sydney knew there was no timescale for accidents—they happened at all hours, and illness didn’t take time to rest. Though the waiting room was far from empty, she spotted Saber, and she was surprised, but pleased to see the rest of the team had also stayed to find out Anthony’s outcome.

At Sydney’s approach, the entire group stood to greet her. “Sorry I’ve been such a long time.”

Saber dismissed it with a flick of her wrist. “Never mind that. How’s Anthony?”

Sydney inhaled a deep breath. “Not good. We’ve been monitoring his intracranial pressure, and from the force of the trauma, his brain is swelling inside his skull. Dr. Stigton, who’s a neurosurgeon here, has already drained excess fluid from inside Anthony’s skull. But after further tests, there still wasn’t an adequate drop in brain pressure, so Anthony’s been put into a medically induced coma.”

Saber stepped closer and enfolded Sydney in her arms, holding her tight. “I’m so sorry, Syd.”

Sydney took immense comfort from her partner’s embrace. The last several hours were utter torture, and she never wanted to leave Saber’s arms. She reluctantly withdrew though, when Rich asked her a question.

“The coma’s induced to protect his brain?”

Sydney nodded. “Increased pressure and swelling can cause further damage by cutting off blood flow and killing healthy brain tissue. We induce the coma to protect the brain from secondary injury, which can be more damaging than the initial injury.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how’s it done?” Jeff asked.

Sydney didn’t mind, in fact, she was pleased for any kind of distraction. She couldn’t do anything further for Anthony right now, nor could any other doctor—they’d done what they

could. It was down to Anthony now. That knowledge slowly ate away at Sydney, it made her feel useless, and she didn't at all like the feeling. "We use an infusion pump that administers precisely metered doses of barbiturate—a sedation drug."

At Rich's blank stare, Sydney explained further, "Basically, we put the brain into a deep sleep, so that it can rest and have time to heal. Anthony's breathing is taken care of by a ventilator, and other technology ensures that his blood pressure, heart rate, and oxygen levels in the blood are maintained at normal levels."

Coop touched Sydney's back in a consoling manner. "How long does Anthony have to stay in a coma?"

"Until there's improvement in his condition." Sydney shrugged. "It could be days, weeks, I can't give a timeline."

"What about brain damage?" Rich, as always, asked the insensitive question. At Saber's glower, his posture grew defensive. "What? I'm sure everyone wants to know."

Sydney rubbed a tired hand across the back of her neck. "It's difficult to know at this stage. We've performed an EEG, to help us determine Anthony's level of brain function, and so far, according to the neurosurgeon, there isn't any irreversible damage. But as I mentioned, the swelling itself could cause damage, so until that goes down we won't be sure of the extent." She sighed. "We're never exactly certain until the patient wakes up."

"Don't lose hope, Sydney." Doug enveloped her in a bear hug. "Anthony's a strong lad, I'm sure he'll pull through."

Sydney patted Doug's back, appreciating the sentiment, even though she knew they were just that—sentiments. As she pulled away, she regarded the team. "Thanks for staying, guys, but you should all go on home."

Doug nodded, clearly knowing there was nothing they could do. "I'll call in tomorrow, see how Anthony's getting on. I take it he's in the Intensive Care Unit?"

"That's right." Sydney pointed along the corridor, to the double doors she'd entered by. "Through there. Just follow the signs."

"If you need anything, Sydney, just let us know," Jeff said.

Sydney reached out and squeezed Jeff's arm. Then, wanting a private word with Saber, she took her hand and led her away from the group. "You should go with them. Once the rescue car leaves, you're stuck here for the night, since we came by helicopter."

Saber didn't seem at all enamoured by the suggestion of leaving. "What about you?"

"I'm going to stay the night. I want to be here in case Anthony's condition changes."

"I'll stay too. Keep you company."

"There's no need for us both to miss out on a night's sleep."

"There's every need." Saber gripped Sydney's shoulders and gazed deeply into her eyes. "I'm not letting you go through this alone, sweetheart, so I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

Sydney managed a small smile, the first in many hours. She hadn't remotely wanted Saber to leave, but she didn't want Saber to feel like she had to stay either—Sydney knew how her partner hated hospitals. Touched by Saber's choice to stay, and her words, Sydney lifted Saber's hand off her shoulder and kissed it. "I love you."

Saber gave a warm smile. "And I love you." She draped an arm around Sydney, and started back toward the group.

Coop met them halfway, as the rest of the team was already heading for the exit. The men waved their good-byes, then disappeared outside.

"Coop, you don't have to stay," Sydney said.

“I’d like too, if that’s all right?”

Sydney said, “Of course. That’s kind of you.”

“I know from what happened to Mary what a difficult time this can be, waiting’s always the hardest part.” Coop paused for a moment, clearly saddened by the memory. “I think it’s important to have friends and family around you.”

Saber’s eyes tracked to Sydney. “Have you had chance to contact your folks yet? I can do it if you’d prefer?”

“I’ve already rung them. They’re on their way.” Sydney fought to keep her tone level. She had to hold herself together. “Thomas and Caitlin too, though Paula’s not coming. Thomas doesn’t want her stressed, what with the pregnancy.” Sydney sighed heavily as she recalled telling her family the awful news. Thomas and her father, were the easiest to tell, so she’d started with them. Being doctors, too, they wanted to know every intricate detail, which helped to keep them focussed, so they hadn’t got overly upset. Caitlin was panicked, but eager to be off the phone, clearly keen to get to the hospital in person. Penny, had been the hardest to tell, and as she’d sobbed down the phone, it’d taken all of Sydney’s strength not to burst into tears.

Sydney swept a hand through her short blonde hair, in an attempt to neaten it before her family’s arrival. She didn’t want to appear as dishevelled as she felt—that would only serve to panic her mother further.

In unison, Saber and Coop rested a hand on Sydney’s back, as if able to see the turmoil she was in.

Drawing comfort from their touch, Sydney took a deep, calming breath. “Come on, I’ll take you through to ICU.”

SYDNEY STARED NUMBLY at the monitor screen that displayed Anthony’s vitals. He was in a critical, but currently stable condition, and she hated that all she could do was hold his hand. She was a doctor and she liked to help, to act. Sitting beside Anthony’s bed with no purpose but to wait was a slow and horrific torture, and Sydney felt as if she’d been there for days, when really it was only a matter of hours.

As Anthony was in a private room, Sydney turned when the door opened. It appeared as if her family had travelled together, for her parents and siblings all crowded into the room at once. Their anguished expressions almost unlocked Sydney’s own resolve to stay strong, and she fought back her tears as she hurried over to embrace her mother.

“Anthony’s stable for now,” Sydney said.

Penny crossed swiftly to Anthony’s bedside. As Caitlin and Thomas followed, Saber and Coop moved aside to make space.

Saber caught Sydney’s gaze. “We’ll give you privacy.”

Daniel clearly appreciated the consideration, for he patted Saber’s arm as she passed him on the way out. He then held up a hand when Sydney opened her mouth to speak. “I’ve already spoken to Anthony’s neurosurgeon, I caught him a moment ago. We all know the details of his condition.”

Sydney was relieved she didn’t have to repeat everything. Though trained to stay detached when she told a patient’s family members bad news, it was quite different when doing it with her own family, and she had a feeling that would’ve broken her control on her unstable emotions.

Thomas lifted a chair off the stack in the corner of the room and placed it near the bed. “On the phone you said a rock fell and struck him. Were you there, Sydney?”

“No. Anthony had gone hiking by himself. When he didn’t return, I went out with my Mountain Rescue team.” Sydney decided to edit the next part, not wanting to worry her family over what nearly happened with the rockslide. “The rock was next to Anthony on the trail, it’d come loose from the incline above. It was a freak accident.”

“Did you bring Anthony in by helicopter?” Daniel asked.

“We did. Time was of the essence.”

“Good. You’ve given him his best shot, Sydney, that’s all you can do.” Daniel paused briefly. “I’d like to thank the rescue team in person, are they still here?”

Sydney pointed toward the door. “Just Sabe and Coop. The rest have gone home.”

“Of course. I’m forgetting the hour.”

“They’ll probably stop by tomorrow, so you can see them then.” A thought occurred to Sydney. “You can all stay with Saber and me for as long as necessary. You can’t drive all that way every time you want to visit Anthony.”

“Is there room for all of us?” Caitlin asked.

“Yes.” Sydney fixed on her sister. “Granted, our house isn’t as big as Mum and Dad’s, but there’re enough rooms.”

Penny twisted around in her seat and faced Sydney. “That’s kind of you, dear, but didn’t you mention once that you have an hour’s drive to work?” At Sydney’s nod, Penny continued, “I’d rather be closer at hand. Surely there’s a hotel or something that we can stay in?”

Sydney knew there wasn’t a hotel in Gransford; the town simply wasn’t big enough for one. Her time spent living in Gransford—a short stay of around nine months before she moved on to Shirebridge—now served her well, for as she recalled the town’s layout, she remembered something that would suffice instead of a hotel. “I believe one of the residents runs a small &B. It’s not five minutes from here.” B

“That’s perfect. We’ll stay there.” Penny tipped her head toward Daniel. “Dad had the foresight to make sure we all brought an overnight bag.”

Daniel shrugged. “I knew we’d be here a while, it could take some time for Anthony to recover.”

Penny’s gaze went back to the bed. “It doesn’t matter how long it takes, as long as Anthony does recover.” She regarded Anthony’s slumbering figure for a long moment, then, as if the sight of him hooked up to tubes and monitors overwhelmed her, Penny burst into tears. She laid her head down on Anthony’s chest as sobs wracked her body. “Please, Anthony,” she cried. “You have to wake up. I beg you.”

Both Daniel and Caitlin moved to comfort Penny, and soon the three of them grieved together, huddled over Anthony’s supine form.

Sydney quickly stole a glimpse at Thomas, and saw that he, like she, was trying to be strong. She wasn’t sure she could maintain the façade; her heart was breaking along with the rest of her family’s.

As the outpouring of grief intensified, Sydney simply couldn’t bear the scene any longer, and quietly left the room.

SYDNEY HEADED STRAIGHT for the ICU visitors' room, hoping against hope Saber was inside. Seeing her family's distress unlocked her own, and she simply couldn't contain it for a moment longer. She needed her partner now more than ever—her entire being screamed out for Saber's supportive presence.

Mercifully, Saber and Coop were indeed inside the visitors' room, and they were the only two people present.

"Coop, could you..." Saber gestured with her head that he should leave, sensing Sydney wanted to be alone with her.

Being the gentleman that he was, Coop left quickly, and closed the door behind him in an effort to give them both some privacy.

Still in her seat, Saber held out a hand to Sydney. As soon as Sydney was in reach, she pulled her down onto her lap and embraced her. They stayed entwined for some time, until Saber gently said, "Talk to me, Syd."

Sydney's vision blurred with tears. "I feel utterly useless. I can't do anything but wait, wait to see if Anthony lives or dies." She ran her fingers through her hair, and then looked to Saber. "I feel like I'm on the edge, and I don't know what to do, how to stop myself from going over."

Saber tenderly cupped Sydney's cheek. "That's what your climbing partner is for." Her expression was compassion itself. "You can fall. I've got you."

Sydney's tears fell then, as if a dam opened. She clung tightly to Saber as she sobbed, venting all the day's pains and fears. As Saber rocked her gently, holding her close, Sydney knew unequivocally that no matter what was thrown at her in the next few days, she would come through it—as long as Saber was beside her.

SABER AND COOP walked along yet another corridor. The hospital was a labyrinth of different departments, uncountable waiting rooms, and miles of interconnecting passageways. In spite of the fact that most, if not all of the routes were labelled with directing signposts, they'd still, rather embarrassingly, managed to get lost.

Saber stopped at an intersection of hallways, and planted her fists on her hips. "I can cross any highland wilderness without mishap, but this place..." She shook her head, partly at the building, partly at herself.

"I know, it's like a maze. Why it has to be so complicated is beyond me." Coop pointed down a corridor. "Let's try this one. I can see a few vending machines along it, so at least we can get what we came for."

Saber nodded. She and Coop were fetching refreshments for everyone. She knew just how long a drive it was to get to Gransford from Sydney's family home in Wakefield, and thought everyone would be ready for a drink. It was clear none of the family wanted to leave Anthony's bedside, so she and Coop ventured out instead.

Saber's main motivation was Sydney—who'd remained behind with her family—as she knew Sydney hadn't taken a break for numerous hours, and she wanted to ensure Sydney kept her energy levels up. Though the ICU visitors' room had a coffee machine, an 'out of order' sign was stuck to it, so Saber and Coop went in search of another.

When they reached the group of vending machines, Coop peered in at the snacks, and raised an eyebrow at Saber. "What do you think they'll like?"

Saber examined the selection. Row upon row of chocolate, cereal bars, crisps, and sweets filled the dispenser. “I’d go for cereal bars. Actually, just get a mixture, then people can pick what they want.”

Saber dug into her trouser pocket and pulled out a handful of change. She gave some to Coop before moving on to the coffee machine. Saber frowned as she thought about how many coffees she needed— five—and that excluded her and Coop. How were they going to carry everything back? She was just about to ask Coop that very question, when she spotted a stack of trays leaning alongside the machine. She didn’t have to worry about the choice of coffee, as there was only black coffee available, and on the table beside it were sachets of sugar, small plastic pots of milk, and teaspoons. She took a handful of each and piled them onto a tray, then waited patiently as the first coffee was dispensed into a plastic cup.

Saber hoped they could find their way back to ICU quickly, or else the hot drinks would be stone cold by the time they arrived. She ran a hand across her temple, trying to rub away the dull ache that had settled there. The hospital would have the relevant tablets to get rid of her headache, but the issue was finding the pharmacy. Also, given the hour, Saber wasn’t entirely confident it would be open, as she knew most pharmacies weren’t open twenty-four hours. Frankly, she couldn’t be bothered to go and see, she had more important things on her mind.

She felt somewhat out of her depth, wanting to help Sydney more than anything, but unsure as to what she should do to be of use. After all, she couldn’t even imagine what Sydney was going through, since she had no experience of family herself. She just knew Sydney needed her, and Saber was determined not to let her down.

The vending machine next to Saber rattled loudly as snacks were dispensed, falling noisily to the collection point at the bottom. As Coop bent down and began to scoop the items out, Saber decided she would ask his advice on the matter. Coop had been through a similar thing with his wife, so she knew he could relate to Sydney’s situation. “Coop?” Saber waited for his gaze to meet hers before continuing. “I’m really worried about Syd.”

“It’s a difficult time for her. For all the family.”

“Exactly. You understand, given what you went through with Mary.” Saber placed a full cup of coffee on the tray, and requested another to be dispensed. “The thing is, I don’t know what I should say to Syd, or what I can do to help.”

“You don’t need to say anything, Saber. And all you have to do is be there for Sydney, as you have been.” Coop put his handful of snacks next to the coffee, then reached up and squeezed Saber’s bicep. “You’re doing everything right, don’t worry. Give yourself some credit, Saber, you already have experience at this.” At her blank stare, he said, “Just do what you did for me when Mary died.”

Saber had been so focussed on the experience she didn’t have, she’d failed to see the experience she did. She considered that as she loaded the tray with coffees, impressed with Coop for his insight. He really did know her well. Feeling both reassured, and more confident, Saber picked up the heavily laden tray and followed the signs back to ICU.

## Chapter Fourteen

THE NEXT DAY, around lunchtime, both Sydney and Saber returned to their home in Shirebridge. Sydney had been reluctant to leave the hospital, but as Saber and her parents pointed out, she was exhausted, and needed to get some decent rest. Since it could be days, if not weeks before Anthony made enough progress to be brought out of his coma, Sydney and her family decided to take shifts at his bedside, so one of them was always with him. The roster meant everyone was able to take a break, to take care of his or her own needs, without feeling guilty about doing so. Since Sydney had been at Anthony's side the longest, Saber insisted she take the first break.

As Sydney's family were staying at a B&B in Gransford, they didn't need a car to get back and forth, so Sydney used their vehicle to get back to Shirebridge, since they'd had no transportation of their own at the hospital. Sydney intended to return Thomas's Jaguar that evening, after she'd rested and freshened up. B

Now that Sydney was in the comfort of her own home, the tiredness she'd kept at bay engulfed her, and after taking off her jacket and shoes, she sat down wearily on the stairs.

"Oh no you don't." Saber quickly wrapped an arm around Sydney's waist and hauled her back onto her feet. "As soon as you stop you're going to fall asleep. I think a bed would be more comfortable than the stairs."

Sydney fought to keep her eyes open. "I don't much care at this point, Sabe."

"Well I do. You'll get muscle cramps." Saber all but carried Sydney up the stairs and into their bedroom. "The last thing you need is to add physical pain to the pain you're already feeling."

"You'd make a good doctor."

Saber sat Sydney down gently on the bed. Her blue eyes sparkled in a teasing manner as she said, "I think one doctor in the household is quite enough."

"Tch." Sydney tried to swipe Saber's arm, but in her fatigued state she missed. She lay back heavily on the bed. "I'll get you later for that."

Saber pulled the duvet up, and wrapped it snugly around Sydney. "I'll remind you." She laid a tender kiss in Sydney's blonde locks, and climbed into bed beside her.

AS SABER HEARD footsteps coming along the hall, she quickly finished sprinkling the cheese on to the jacket potatoes, squirted some salad dressing over the salads, and placed both plates on the kitchen table.

Sydney padded into the room, her short hair still damp from her shower. "Sabe, thank you, but I'm not really hungry."



“Doctors really do make the worst patients.” Saber pointed to a chair. “Sit. You haven’t eaten anything substantial since yesterday, and you need to keep your energy up.” At Sydney’s hesitation, she said, “You’re not returning to that hospital until you’ve eaten something.”

Sydney raised an eyebrow. “I’m not sure I’m keen on this bossy side.”

“Tough. It’s my job to take care of you, Syd, and I’m going to do just that.” Saber pulled out a chair for Sydney to sit on. “Please?”

Sydney sighed and sat down. She picked up her knife and fork, scooped out a chunk of potatoe, and popped it into her mouth. “There. Happy now?”

Saber’s tone was dry. “Ecstatic.” She took the chair opposite and began to eat her own meal. An awkward silence fell over the kitchen.

Sydney ate the food quickly. Though she’d said she didn’t feel hungry, her body clearly was, as she finished every last scrap on her plate. She set her cutlery down, then reached across the table and covered Saber’s hand with her own. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. It’s not you I’m angry at.”

Saber nodded in understanding. “I know that. Anthony’s accident was so unjust no wonder you’re angry.”

“That’s not the only reason.” Sydney released a heavy breath. “The last time I spoke to Anthony, we argued. I should’ve hugged him goodbye, but I didn’t because I was cross with him.” She shook her head and peered at Saber with a vulnerably open expression. “What if Anthony doesn’t wake up? What if that’s the last thing he remembers about me— that I was mad at him? What if I never get to set things right between us?”

“Sweetheart, you can’t think like that.” Saber brushed a damp lock of hair behind Sydney’s ear. “Anthony knows you love him, and that’s all that matters. That’s what he’ll remember over everything else.”

“Anthony asked me to take the day off work, to phone in sick.” Sydney’s eyes flooded with tears. “Maybe if I had, none of this would’ve happened.”

Getting to her feet, Saber moved closer and squatted down next to Sydney’s chair. She placed her hands on Sydney’s knees, and gazed into her eyes. “Listen to me, Syd. Absolutely none of this is your fault, and I won’t have you believing otherwise.”

“But...”

Saber laid a gentle finger on Sydney’s lips, stopping her protest. “But nothing. If you’re going by that logic, then it’s my fault also, since I should’ve taken yesterday off work, instead of today.”

“At least you took time off, which is more than I did.”

“Oh really?” Saber realised Sydney’s grief clouded her perception on events, and she felt guilty when she had no reason to be. Saber decided that would stop here and now, she wouldn’t allow Sydney to torture herself like this. “So it wasn’t because of you that we found Anthony in time? Because you came home early to spend time with your brother?” Saber took hold of Sydney’s face in her hands. “It’s because of you he’s still alive, Syd. And that’s a fact. I know you must feel as if someone’s to blame, but it was a tragic accident, nothing more. No one’s at fault here, least of all you.” She held Sydney’s gaze for several long moments, needing Sydney to believe the truth of her words. “Do you trust me?”

Sydney said, “With my life.”

“Then I need you to trust me when I say it wasn’t your fault. I’m not lying to spare your feelings, it’s the simple truth.” Saber didn’t release her hold on Sydney. She needed to see her agree. “All right?”

Sydney said, "Okay. I believe you."

In an effort to lighten the mood, Saber tweaked her nose playfully. "Good girl."

Sydney smiled. "I'm so lucky to have you, Sabe."

"Even when I'm being bossy?"

Sydney ruffled her hair. "Even then."

SYDNEY CHECKED HER rearview mirror for the fifth time, to reassure herself Saber was still behind her. Sure enough, Saber followed a short distance back, in her Land Rover.

Sydney was driving Thomas's new car, the sleek silver Jaguar he'd keenly shown off at her birthday party. Since she'd lent the car to go home, she was now returning it to the hospital, and Saber intended to drive them both back after Sydney's shift watching over Anthony.

Under any other circumstance, Sydney would've enjoyed being behind the wheel of such a beautiful car, and would've happily put the Jaguar through its paces, to test its performance and handling capability. Ironically, the one time she got to drive such a vehicle was the one time she couldn't take any pleasure from the experience. She peered into the mirror again, thankful Saber had offered to come with her. After all, Saber only needed to pick Sydney up after her shift with Anthony, she didn't have to sit through the entire shift with her. It seemed that thought hadn't entered Saber's mind, for she wouldn't entertain the notion when Sydney suggested it. Sydney was beyond appreciative of her partner's selfless support, and when this trying ordeal was behind her, she intended on showing Saber her gratitude.

Sydney drove around a bend in the winding country road, eager to reach the hospital, yet apprehensive at the same time. It was a strange feeling: part of her felt an almost physical pull toward her brother, wanting to be there at his bedside to assure herself he was still with them, still fighting. Another part was almost fearful of seeing Anthony in that way, hooked up to tubes, wires, and breathing apparatus, as it reminded her how serious his condition was, and they could lose him at any moment.

At that horrifying thought, Sydney shifted gears and increased the car's speed. The Jaguar handled the corners expertly, and as she checked her rearview mirror once more, she saw Saber easily kept pace behind her.

The heavens suddenly opened and it began to rain, slowly at first, but then with ever more force. Sydney switched on the wipers, the weather now a perfect reflection of her mood.

She glanced out the window. From the heavy grey clouds above, it didn't appear as if the weather was going to improve any time soon.

Sydney sighed loudly. "That's all we need."

AT THE HOSPITAL, Sydney entered her brother's room in the ICU. She wasn't surprised to find her father at Anthony's bedside, given Daniel took the first shift to watch over him, but she was surprised to see her mother, since Penny was supposed to be taking a break.

"How's he doing?" Sydney asked, as she closed the door behind Saber.

"Little change." Daniel stood and retrieved two extra chairs from the stack in the corner, then, after placing them near the bed he gestured for them to sit.

As both women sat down, Sydney regarded Penny. "Something wrong with the B&B?"

“Don’t you start,” Penny said, though not unkindly. “I’ve already had this talk with your father. I’m staying with Anthony for a while longer.”

Daniel gave Sydney an exasperated glimpse. “I tried to get her to take a break. On several occasions, in fact. I told her that’s what the rota is for, but she won’t listen.” At Penny’s headshake, Daniel shrugged. “See? She’s too obstinate for her own good.”

Sydney didn’t think she had a right to comment further. After all, if not for Saber’s insistence, she wouldn’t have left either. Despite her reluctance at the time, Sydney felt a lot better now she’d rested and freshened up, and was pleased Saber persevered with her.

Saber’s lips twitched. “It must run in the family.”

Sydney narrowed her eyes, feigning annoyance. She lightly slapped Saber’s arm. Then she did it again. “That one’s for your earlier doctor comment.”

Saber held up her hands in surrender. “I won’t say anything more.”

Sydney’s tone became skeptical. “Now that I *don’t* believe.” She affectionately took hold of Saber’s hand, and noticed her mother watching them, a soft smile playing on her features. It was the first smile she’d seen from her mother in a while, and it heartened her to see it.

A knock came on the door, and as Sydney turned she saw the Mountain Rescue team through the window. She quickly crossed to the door, opened it, and ushered the guys into the room. The fact the entire group came, even Rich, meant the world to Sydney. She knew she was blessed to have such good friends.

Doug, as he often did, took the lead and spoke up first. “How’s Anthony?”

Sydney shook her head. “Much the same.” She caught her father’s gaze and said, “Dad, this is the Mountain Rescue team.” She indicated each man as she introduced them. “This is our leader, Doug. That’s Coop, Rich, and Jeff.”

Doug tipped his head to both Daniel and Penny. “Mr. and Mrs. Greenwood, I’m so sorry for what’s happened.”

The chair scraped loudly against the tiled floor as Daniel pushed it back to stand. He moved over to Doug and held out his hand. “Penny and I are both so grateful for your part in rescuing our son. If it hadn’t been for all of you, Anthony wouldn’t be here right now. You have our heartfelt thanks.” Daniel firmly shook the hand of each team member.

“You’re welcome,” Rich said, seeming happy to take the credit even though he wasn’t actually present at Anthony’s rescue.

Sydney shared a humorous glimpse with Saber, though she didn’t point out Rich wasn’t there, as all of the team had assisted in one way or another. By splitting up and rescuing the other hiker, it had freed up Sydney, Saber, and Doug so they could go in search of Anthony. Everyone here deserved her family’s praise and gratitude, and Daniel gave it without reservation. Penny crossed the room and hugged each team member, then returned to her vigil at Anthony’s bedside.

“Does anyone need anything?” Coop asked. “Refreshments or a magazine?”

Penny nodded. “I wouldn’t mind a magazine. Anything to stop me from staring at that monitor screen.” From underneath her chair, she brought out her bag and dipped into her purse, then handed some money to Coop.

“What type would you like?”

“Whatever they have. There’s not usually a vast choice in hospital shops.” Penny paused for a moment, clearly deliberating. “Though if they have a household magazine—I enjoy reading those.”

“Right you are.” Coop tapped his wristwatch. “And if I’m not back in twenty minutes send out a search party, because I’ll no doubt be lost.”

Sydney got to her feet. "I'll come with you, show you where it is."

"WELL DONE, SYDNEY." Coop clapped her on the back as they entered the hospital shop. "You made that seem easy."

"You're forgetting that I work here, Coop," Sydney said.

"Of course I know the way."

Coop walked over to a shelf that displayed a small selection of magazines. "Frankly, I don't think I'd ever learn to traverse this maze. I mean, honestly, who designs these places?"

Sydney regarded him with amusement. "If I had a pound for every time I'd heard that, I could retire now. At every hospital I've worked in, including this one, patients always complain about the layout. But believe it or not, there is a systematic design to the structure, it isn't just thrown haphazardly together."

"Mm." Coop didn't sound convinced. "I'll have to take your word on that." He chose a magazine and held it up to Sydney. "How about this one?"

Sydney took it and flicked through the pages. Inside, were glossy pictures of stylish homes, various furnishings, and articles covering a variety of household topics. She nodded her approval. "Mum will like that." She noticed a lone copy of a gardening magazine, and picked that up also, knowing how Penny loved her garden. "Let's get this too."

It was important to Sydney that she try to distract her mother from Anthony's condition in whatever way she could. Relieve Penny's burden a little. It wasn't much, but it was all Sydney could do.

She waited for Coop to purchase the magazines, then led the way out of the shop and back toward ICU. As she walked along the corridor, she felt a hand on her back, and regarded Coop in expectation.

"You know I consider you and Saber to be family?" At Sydney's acknowledgement, he said, "So I mean it when I say if you need anything at all, please don't hesitate to ask. If you need to talk, or want me to do the shopping... Whatever it is, I'm your guy."

Sydney was pleased by the considerate offer. "Thanks, Coop." She linked arms with him. "You're such a gentleman."

"Someone's gotta keep up the male end. I've got stiff competition from Saber."

Sydney laughed, and it felt good to relieve some of her tension. "Sabe is pretty chivalrous."

"I'd like to be able to take credit," Coop shrugged, "but she was like that when I met her." His voice lifted. "She wouldn't even let me open a door for her the first six months."

Sydney laughed again. "I can just see that."

# Chapter Fifteen

TWO DAYS LATER it was still raining, and the Mountain Rescue team was back on Toppling Crag. They'd returned to the site of Anthony's accident, to shore up the rest of the unstable incline in the hopes of preventing another rockslide. Though they'd started early that morning, little progress had been made on putting the spiral wire net in place, over the precarious part of the mountainside, as it was best to remove any loose rocks or material before doing so. Most of the loose stones had come down with the slide, but their force caused other destruction, and that debris needed to be cleared.

"This is all we seem to be doing lately," Coop grumbled as he stretched out his back.

"Tell me about it." Saber rubbed her neck, already tired from the day's exertions, even though it was only a little after lunch time. She knew there was a lot of work still ahead, and tried to pace for the task.

Coop sat down on a boulder, and indicated Saber should do the same. He panted heavily, clearly ready for a break. "How did Sydney feel about you coming back up here?"

Saber perched on the rock, resting her weary limbs. "I can't say Syd was pleased at the prospect." Sydney was at work, despite the fact the hospital offered her time off if she'd so desired. Saber attempted to talk Sydney out of it, but Sydney said it was preferable to just sitting around waiting, and at least her work would keep her occupied. Saber had seen the toll the last couple of days had taken on Sydney, and realised work was probably the best thing for her right now, to distract from Anthony's condition. She didn't doubt that during her breaks and lunch hour, Sydney would visit Anthony, and likely stay back after work to keep him company as well, but at least this way Sydney was getting some reprieve from the torture of sitting around idle.

Coop said, "Well given what happened to Anthony here, and nearly to you three as well, I can't blame her for being apprehensive. In fact, I'm surprised she didn't ask you to sit this one out."

"She knows it's part of the work we do. Mountain Rescue can be perilous." Saber wiped her hands together, trying to remove some mud from her skin. "Once we start avoiding jobs because of the risk, we might as well throw in the towel."

"Fair point."

"Hey, you two," Rich shouted from the top of the incline, "stop slacking and bring up the roll of netting."

Saber's gaze fixed on Doug for confirmation. "Are we good to go?"

"Yes." Doug made his way through the rocks, weaving around some, and hopping over others. "The site's as clear as we can get it."

Saber was pleased the preparation was now finished, so they could get started on the actual task. She and Coop crossed to the roll of diamond-shaped mesh, and, with one at each end, picked up the netting and made their way up the steep incline.

Doug met them on route, and assisted in carrying the roll, though it was surprisingly light given the strength of the high-tensile steel. The jagged rocks couldn't cut the metal net, and once secure on all four sides, it would give a measure of support and stability to the unstable terrain.

Jeff and Rich were already waiting at the top of the incline, and had prepared an upper border rope, which was also metal, to fasten the wire netting on to. The border rope was held in place by long metal spikes that had been hammered deep into the ground.

Between the five of them, the netting was soon securely fixed to the border rope, by threading the rope into the net meshes, and then they rolled the mesh down the slope in a safe and controlled manner. The team then fastened the netting to the side and lower border ropes, which anchored the netting to the rock.

Now secure around the edge, the netting was pulled tight over the bedrock with further rope anchors, and wherever necessary, spike plates were used to reinforce and strengthen the netting system.

The entire process took considerable time, and Saber sat down in relief when the job was complete. She peered up at the net panel with some satisfaction, happy in the knowledge she could tell Sydney they'd shored up the rocks, and made the area safe once more. Though too late to help Anthony, it should at least prevent others from suffering the same fate, and she hoped that would give Sydney a small measure of comfort.

Doug joined Saber, and sat cross-legged on the ground. "What's your opinion on the path?"

Saber reviewed the ground to her right. The trail was all but washed away in places, and submerged under a mass of boulders and rubble in others. "It'd take an awful lot of work to clear and restore the path. It might be easier to create a diversionary route around the damage. Bypass that area, and connect the two unimpaired ends of the trail together."

Doug rubbed his face in thought. "I was considering that. But it's also a lot of work." He got to his feet. "Here, let me show you what I mean."

Saber stood, her aching body protesting the movement. She just wanted to sit for a while. She followed Doug over to the edge of the path.

Doug pointed downward, and swept his finger over to the trail on the far side of the debris. "We'd have to dig a new path into the side of the lower incline. There's nowhere else for the path to go."

Saber frowned, seeing Doug's point. Fortunately, the incline below wasn't as steep as the one above them, but its gradient would still be a challenge to work on. "Either option has its drawbacks. But I can only see the two choices."

"You'd go with the new path?"

"I would, yes."

"Since either way will take a lot of time and effort, I don't think it's fair I make the decision alone. We'll take a vote." Doug gestured for the rest of the team to join them. After a brief summation, he asked, "Clear the old path or create a new?"

Coop didn't hesitate. "New."

Jeff said, "I agree with Coop."

Rich crossed his arms over his chest. "Neither today. I'm shattered."

Doug chuckled. "Obviously not today. Whenever we're next free."

Rich seemed slightly appeased. "A new path."

"Right. The majority rules," Doug said. "We'll make a new trail. Now I know it'll be a hard job, but since we're all in agreement," he pointed to each person, "I don't want any arguments to break out."

All eyes turned knowingly toward Rich.

“What?” Rich’s voice rose an octave. “Why are you all staring at me?”

SYDNEY WAS GETTING worried. She told herself to relax, in fact, she’d been telling herself that for the last twenty minutes, but it seemed to no avail. She viewed the clock above the kitchen doorway—nearly seven p.m. Surely Saber should’ve been back by now? She knew Saber intended to spend the day with the team over on Toppling Crag, shoring up the hazardous incline, and Sydney hoped nothing untoward had happened. She desperately tried not to let her imagination run away with her, but Anthony’s unfortunate accident was still fresh in her mind, and her fears quickly surfaced.

Not for the first time, she wished Shirebridge had better mobile phone reception. In situations such as this, it would make things a whole lot easier.

Sydney drummed her fingers against the kitchen table, reasoning that the likelihood of Anthony’s fate befalling Saber, or any other member of the team, was slim, indeed, it would be like lightning striking the same place twice. Sydney frowned, knowing that rare occurrence did actually happen.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she heard the front door open, and bolted up out of her chair. Sydney all but ran down the hallway to meet Saber, and instantly threw her arms around her. “Thank God you’re all right.”

“Hey.” Saber squeezed her, then drew back to regard Sydney. “It all went fine. No hiccups. That section is now securely braced.”

Sydney said, “So you’re all done up there?”

“Not quite. The slide caused considerable damage to the path, so we’re going to dig a new one into the side of the lower incline.”

Sydney’s eyebrows rose. “That’ll take some doing.”

“I know. It’ll have to be done in stages.” Saber shrugged. “Can’t say I’m excited at the prospect, but someone needs to do it.”

“You look exhausted, Sabe.” Sydney reached up and lightly brushed her cheek, which she noted had a distinct lack of colour. “You’re a bit pale. Do you feel okay?”

Saber smiled, though it appeared a bit forced. “Just tired. It was a hard slog today.” She’d barely even finished her sentence when she swayed on her feet, and Sydney immediately wound a supportive arm around her.

“All right, sweetheart, let’s just sit on the stairs for a moment.” Sydney was glad when Saber offered no protest. Sydney sat her down carefully, then, keeping a steadying arm on Saber, she sat alongside her.

Saber blinked a lot, obviously trying to clear her vision. She shook her head a little, but that only seemed to make things worse, for she squeezed her eyes tightly shut as if the room were spinning.

Sydney gently drew Saber’s head down onto her shoulder, holding her securely in case she should pass out. “I’m here, Sabe. I’ve got you.”

Minutes ticked by as the two women sat quietly on the stairs, Sydney running her fingers soothingly through Saber’s dark locks.

Saber broke the silence. “I’m okay now.” She slowly lifted her head up, and nodded to Sydney in reassurance.

Sydney studied her for a long moment—Saber’s colour still wasn’t as she would’ve liked, but her eyes had regained some of their focus. She sighed in annoyance, though it wasn’t Saber she was angry at. “Just wait till I get hold of Doug. I told him not to push you too hard.” Frankly, she was surprised at the team leader, surprised and disappointed in equal measure. Sydney had never once questioned Doug’s leadership skills, he’d never given her cause to, but Saber had only recently returned to the team from a major injury, and she should never have been driven to the point of collapse.

“It wasn’t Doug’s fault. He often insisted I take breaks, wouldn’t take no for an answer.” Saber rested her hand on Sydney’s thigh. “It was my fault. Doug didn’t know I was running only on fumes. I’ve barely eaten since breakfast.”

Sydney frowned in confusion. “But how can that be? I saw you making a packed lunch this morning.”

“Rich forgot his, so I shared mine with him. He didn’t want a bollocking, so he asked me to keep it from Doug, which I did.” Saber tugged on her ear. “I wasn’t over-worked, I was just underfed.”

Sydney silently apologised to Doug for doubting him, and was happy to have her faith in the team leader restored. She shook her head at Saber, though it was part humour and part despair. “What am I going to do with you?”

Saber gazed at Sydney with big, soulful eyes. “I was kinda hoping you’d get me some food.”

Sydney chuckled, stood, and helped Saber to her feet. “I’m sure I can rustle up something. What do you fancy?”

“You mean excluding you?”

Sydney linked her arm through Saber’s and walked slowly along the hall. “You’re such a charmer. Even when you can barely stand, you’re still giving out compliments.”

“Only to you.”

“There you go again,” Sydney said. “Coop’s right, his position as ‘most chivalrous person in the village’ is under threat.”

“What?” Saber sounded amused. “When were you discussing this?”

“At the hospital.” Sydney crossed the threshold into the kitchen, and lightly pushed Saber down into a chair. “Now what do you fancy? Food wise?”

“Something quick. A sandwich will be fine.” As Sydney made a move for the fridge, Saber grabbed her hand and pulled her back. “Speaking of the hospital, how’s Anthony getting on?”

In all her worry over Saber, Sydney had neglected to mention the good news. “He’s making progress. His brain pressure is beginning to drop, so if it continues to fall, in two or three days we should be able to bring Anthony out of his induced coma.”

“That’s brilliant news, Syd.” Saber pulled Sydney onto her lap and embraced her. “Does this mean he’s out of the woods?”

“We won’t know one hundred percent until Anthony actually wakes up,” Sydney said. “But things are definitely looking up for him.” She experienced a sense of relief as she spoke the words, and hoped the worst of this ordeal was behind them. She returned Saber’s embrace happily, then kissed her, expressing both her love and gratitude in the touch of her warm caress.



## Chapter Sixteen

“CAN YOU BELIEVE this weather?” Marge asked as she bustled into the café’s kitchen. “I don’t think it’s stopped raining for days.”

Saber glimpsed up from the stove, her expression droll. “We are in Scotland, you know.” The area was well known for its wet climate, but that was one of the main reasons why the landscape was so beautiful, the scenery lush and green.

Marge placed her hands on her hips. “Yes, thank you, Saber. I do know where we live. I haven’t quite gone senile yet.”

Saber chuckled. “Emphasis on the quite.”

Marge pursed her lips, though her sparkling brown eyes betrayed her underlying humour. She moved closer to the countertop and playfully tapped the handle of a frying pan. “Any more cheek...”

Saber chuckled again and made a zippering motion over her mouth.

“Ha, that’ll be the day!” Marge indicated the cooker. “Once you’ve finished that food take a break, there’s a lull in customers.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Marge brought out the stool from under the countertop and sat down on it—a sign she wanted to talk. Saber knew Marge hardly ever stopped while at work, and certainly not to chitchat. She had an incredibly strong work ethic, only taking her breaks if there was absolutely nothing else to do, and even then, Marge usually found something to occupy the time.

Saber grew concerned as she regarded Marge, wondering if something was wrong. Marge seemed in good health, so her mind instantly went to her husband. “Is Bill all right?”

Without the slightest hesitation, Marge answered, “Of course. That man’s as fit as a fiddle.”

“Good.” Saber was relieved. “And yourself?”

“Why I’m even fitter than he is.” Marge wiped her hands on her apron. “Saber, stop asking your questions so I can ask mine. I’m not here to discuss me, I’m here to check that you and Sydney are okay, given what you’re going through.”

“I’m fine. Syd’s had it tough, but she’s strong.” Saber recalled the news Sydney told her last night, and said, “Actually, I meant to tell you this morning, Anthony’s improving, so Syd’s hoping he’ll soon be brought out of his induced coma.”

“Oh I’m pleased to hear that. Truly I am. I bet Sydney’s thrilled?”

Saber grinned as she remembered Sydney’s happy reaction. “She is. We both are. It’s true I haven’t known Anthony long, but I like him, he’s a good lad.”

“It always seems like it’s the good people that have to suffer.” Marge shook her head, and the speckles of grey in her brown hair caught the light. “Still, at least Anthony’s on the mend, which is the main thing.”

The bell on the serving counter suddenly rang, and Marge got up off the stool. She patted Saber on the arm, then left the kitchen and went into the dining area.

Saber watched her leave, touched by Marge's concern over her and Sydney's well being. She knew Marge wasn't an overly demonstrative woman, but she had a big heart, topped only by her generous spirit, and Saber had witnessed both many times over the years.

Moments passed, then Marge returned with a food order. She passed the slip of paper to Saber. "You should see the poor walkers who've just come in—they look like drowned rats."

Saber read from the paper—a request for two bacon sandwiches. Pleased it was a simple order, she retrieved the nearby frying pan and set it on to the hob. As she crossed to the fridge to fetch the needed supplies, thunder rolled loudly overhead.

Saber frowned up at the ceiling. The near constant rain was already bad enough, but it seemed the weather was only set to get worse.

DESPITE THE WET weather, the work over on Toppling Crag continued. It was part of the rescue team's job to ensure trails were properly maintained, and safe for the public to use. Of course, they couldn't work miracles, and in the case of Anthony's recent accident, no one could've foreseen such an unfortunate incident occurring.

The team could, however, try to make sure it didn't happen again, hence the steel wire netting that was now in place around the weakened area.

An ever-growing pile of earth sat on the old path above the team, and as Saber dug out another chunk of mud, she tossed the shovelful onto the mound of soil. She paused to examine the efforts of the team's labour, pleasantly surprised by the progress they'd made so far. There was still a long way to go, but between the five of them—Sydney was busy at the hospital—they were starting to make some headway. A path was beginning to take shape.

Saber wiped her brow, damp from both her sweat and the rain, and thrust her spade back into the dirt.

After several more shovelfuls, Coop spoke up from beside her. "I'm getting too old for this."

Rich, next to Coop, nodded. "I'm feeling it myself, Coop. So with your ancient bones you must be feeling decrepit."

Coop's rust-coloured eyebrow lifted in indignance. "Excuse me? Decrepit?"

"Yeah." Rich patted Coop's back in a condescending manner.

"It means infirm, weak, feeble."

"I *know* what it means." Coop scowled at the numerous insults Rich had just directed at him. "But for your information I'm none of those things." As if to prove his point, Coop attacked the soil with more vigour, driving his shovel in forcefully. "Decrepit indeed. I'm a long way from there yet."

Saber bit back a grin as she leaned in close to Coop and whispered into his ear, "It'll help if you picture Rich's head instead of the dirt."

"Way ahead of you," Coop muttered, stabbing the spade repeatedly into the mud.

Saber couldn't help but laugh, and her humour only increased when Rich started to dig at Coop's furious pace, obviously trying to surpass the older man's efforts. As the competition between the two men intensified, Doug came over and stood alongside them.

"That's the spirit." Doug nodded. "We'll soon have it done at this rate."

SYDNEY WAS IN the middle of her shift when the pager on her hip buzzed. She felt the vibrations, and unclipped the device so she could read the screen—"Dr. Greenwood to ICU. Room eight."

Room eight was Anthony's room. A surge of hope coursed through Sydney, but it was tempered by a dose of trepidation. She knew that Dr. Stigton, Anthony's neurosurgeon, was satisfied with the pressure levels in Anthony's brain, and had been gradually withdrawing the barbiturates so Anthony could regain consciousness.

Sydney assumed that's why she was being paged, and she desperately hoped her brother was indeed waking up. If so, this was the moment she and her family had been waiting for—the moment of truth. She'd soon know whether Anthony had any lasting effects from the head trauma, and if so, to what level his cognitive skills were impaired. Hence her anxiety.

As Sydney had been working on a patient's notes when she'd received the page, she already stood at the nurses' station. "Jodie?" She waited for the waif-like nurse to glance her way before handing the patient's file to her. "I've gotta go to ICU. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Is it your brother?" Jodie asked, sounding genuinely concerned. All of Sydney's colleagues knew of the incident, either told by Sydney herself or by workplace gossip. They'd all been very supportive, especially Jodie, who'd been through a similar experience when her husband was involved in a terrible motorbike accident. Sadly, her husband hadn't recovered well, and would need specialist care for the rest of his life.

"Yes." Sydney nodded. "I think he might be waking up."

Jodie's brown eyebrows rose. "Then what are you waiting for?" She shooed Sydney away. "Go. We can manage here."

Not needing to be told twice, Sydney took off down the corridor, leaving the nurses station behind. Taking the most direct route, she hurried toward ICU, though now she was in a rush the corridors suddenly seemed longer than usual. When she eventually arrived, though in truth it hadn't taken more than five minutes, Sydney headed straight for room eight.

The door was open, and as she approached she saw Dr. Stigton and her parents were inside, hovering around Anthony's bed. There was no sign of her other siblings, and Sydney presumed that Caitlin and Thomas were at the B&B.

Sydney entered the room quietly, not wanting to disturb Dr. Stigton as he worked. Her father noticed her arrival, and he urged her to join them at Anthony's bedside.

As Penny and Daniel made space for her by the bed, Sydney was able to get a clear view of Anthony. To her profound relief, his eyes were indeed open, and Sydney gripped her mother's hand in joy. She felt an answering squeeze, but neither woman looked at the other, both were intensely focussed on Anthony.

"Now you've told me your first name, but what's your surname?" Dr. Stigton asked.

Anthony blinked several times before answering. "Anthony...Greenwood."

Dr. Stigton nodded. "That's good, Anthony. Very good."

Sydney noted Anthony appeared a bit dazed, and was slow to respond to some of Dr. Stigton's requests, but she knew that was to be expected under the circumstances. The important thing was that Anthony *did* respond.

"Now I know you're tired, but I just want to check your reflexes." Dr. Stigton took hold of Anthony's hand. "Can you squeeze my hand?" A moment passed, then he said, "That's it. Good." He switched to Anthony's other hand. "And again." Anthony's reaction was quicker the second time, and Dr. Stigton nodded in approval. He moved down to Anthony's feet, and, after peeling back the blanket, asked Anthony to wiggle his toes.

Sydney held her breath as her gaze zoned in on Anthony's feet, willing his toes to move as if they were her own. She was relieved when his right foot twitched, and her relief grew further when the left foot followed suit.

"That's excellent, Anthony. You're doing very well." Dr. Stigton's tone was reassuring. "Now I'll leave you to get some rest."

As if by command, Anthony's eyelids began to close, drooping heavily. Despite being asleep for days, Anthony's body still had a lot of healing to do. Sydney knew the duration of time he was awake would gradually increase as the days passed. Recovery took time, so they just had to be patient.

"We're here, Anthony." Penny reached out and tenderly stroked his forehead. "Your family's here."

Anthony's eyes opened slightly, and he turned his head toward them. The slightest of smiles appeared, as if he'd only now registered their presence in the room.

"You're going to be fine, son." Daniel leaned over and patted Anthony's arm. "Just get some rest."

Sydney lifted Anthony's hand and kissed it. "Now do as Dad says for a change."

A low, almost unintelligible whisper emerged. "Syd?"

"Yes, it's me, Anthony." Sydney squeezed his hand to back up her words. "I'm here."

Anthony's smile strengthened for an instant, then unconsciousness claimed him once more.

Dr. Stigton, watching off to one side, subtly cleared his throat. As the family gave him their attention, he said, "I'm very pleased with Anthony's progress. As you saw there doesn't seem to be any damage to his physical faculties, and he was able to respond to instruction quite well. I still need to perform more checks on his memory, but he appears to know who he is, and you too, Sydney, which is a promising start." He surveyed each family member, as if to assure them personally. "The next time Anthony wakes I'll do more checks, but I'm encouraged by what I've seen so far."

Penny dabbed at her eyes with a tissue, clearly trying to hold back her tears of relief. "Thank you, Doctor."

"You're welcome." Dr. Stigton left the room, and closed the door behind him.

Overjoyed by the news, the Greenwood family embraced one another. Sydney found herself wedged between her parents, and laughed as she was tightly squeezed on both sides. Her parents soon joined in with her laughter, and Sydney cherished the moment, feeling the last of her tension slide away.

IT WAS A quiet spell in the café, and Saber emerged from the kitchen carrying the last two meals for the team. She took the food over to the corner booth, and set the steak and ale pie in front of Jeff, and the mince and dumplings in front of Coop.

Both men tipped their heads at her, and Coop said, "Thanks, Saber. This smells delicious."

Since the guys were the only customers Saber pulled up a chair at the end of the table.

"How's the workshop extension coming on?"

Doug was about to take a mouthful of his dinner, but lowered his fork to answer Saber's question. "Good." He nodded. "Not much more to do now. We should be finished this afternoon."

Saber said, "I'm sorry I haven't been free to give you a hand." She felt bad about not being able to complete the extension with them—she liked to pull her weight, and help out where she could.

Doug dismissed the comment with a flick of his wrist. "You helped plenty to start with. I know you and Sydney have other priorities at the moment. Besides, under the circumstances, it's good of you to assist with the new path."

Rich elbowed Doug, not at all discreetly. "Don't tell her that. We could've guilted a free meal out of her here." He observed Saber with mischievous eyes. "My back's killing me, what with all the extra work I've had to do, pulling in your slack."

Coop's voice rose in indignance. "You? I think not. Your back's only hurting because Saber's usually the one to take in your slack."

Rich scowled for a moment, but then, as if recognising the truth in Coop's words, a knowing grin appeared. "That's why I missed her the most."

Saber smirked at him. "It's nice to know I'm appreciated."

The café's phone rang. Before Saber could even stand, Marge bustled into view, and answered the phone on the wall near the serving counter.

"Hello? Oh hello, Sydney... Yes, she's here. I'll just get her for you."

As soon as Saber heard Sydney's name mentioned, she rose from her seat and started across the room. Taking the phone off Marge, she placed it quickly next to her ear, wondering if something was wrong. "Hi, Syd. Everything okay?"

"Everything's great. I just wanted to let you know the good news." Sydney sounded excited. "Anthony came out of his coma earlier. So far there's no sign of any cognitive impairment. His physical abilities don't appear to be damaged either. He's on track to make a full recovery."

"That's fabulous, sweetheart. I'm so happy for you. I bet your parents are thrilled."

Sydney said, "They are. Caitlin and Thomas too."

"The guys are here having lunch, so I'll pass the good news on to them and Marge." Saber hesitated briefly. "Unless you want to do it?"

Sydney's response was instantaneous. "No, that's fine. I know they were keen to learn of any changes in Anthony's condition, so go ahead."

"Do you want me to come to the hospital after work?"

"There's no need to, Anthony's still sleeping a lot," Sydney said. "In a day or two he should be awake for longer intervals." She paused for a moment. "Anyway, I'd best get back, I just wanted you to know. I'll see you tonight."

"Okay. I'll see you at home." Saber heard the line disconnect, then she hung the phone back up on the wall. Making her way over to the team, she caught Marge's arm and led her to the table booth. She wanted everyone to be present for what she had to say. "Listen up, that was Sydney on the phone. Anthony's woken up, and though it's still early days, the outlook is promising."

Delighted comments reverberated around the table as everybody expressed their relief at the news, and on her teammates' faces, Saber saw her own pleasure reflected back at her.

## Chapter Seventeen

TWO DAYS HAD passed since Anthony first awakened, and Sydney was once again at his bedside. She no longer watched the monitors with worry, and felt a lot more relaxed about his condition. Anthony was well on the way to making a full recovery, and could hold conversations when awake. He still required considerable rest, though when conscious, he awoke for longer stretches of time.

Sydney flicked over the page of the climbing magazine she read. It was part of the subscription package the team had bought her for her birthday, and she was enjoying perusing it. The magazine contained many interesting articles, as well as some good advice.

As Anthony stirred, she looked up, and saw his eyes open. As his gaze flitted around the room, Sydney anticipated his question. "I finally managed to convince Mum to go and rest at the B&B. Dad went with her."

Anthony's eyes twinkled impishly. "Does that mean I'm stuck with you?"

Sydney scoffed. "Afraid so. Though if it makes you feel any better Saber will be back in a minute, she's just gone to get coffee."

The door opened, and Saber entered. She carried two cups of steaming coffee, and handed one to Sydney before smiling at Anthony. "Hey, look who's decided to join us."

Anthony smirked. "I thought I'd make the effort, as I knew you'd be pleased to see me."

Saber chuckled. "I see the blow to your head hasn't dented your ego any."

Sydney laughed. "It'd take more than a rock to do that."

"Your bedside manner needs some work, Doctor." Anthony dramatically touched his bandaged head. "Fancy insulting an injured patient."

Sydney reached out and squeezed Anthony's hand, and they shared an affectionate look. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. The only thing I'm bummed about is my camera. I'd taken some great pictures."

"Your camera's not broken, Anthony." Sydney indicated Saber. "Sabe rescued it. It's in your pack at our house."

Anthony's face lit up. "Really?" At Saber's nod, he grinned. "That's awesome, Saber. Thank you so much. I've shared some good times with that camera."

"Well you're lucky," Sydney said. "As it'd be buried under a mountain of rubble now if Sabe hadn't picked it up." She realised Anthony wouldn't know what she was referring to, and went on to explain. "After you were knocked out there was a landslide. We only just got you out in time." Seeing Anthony blanch, she patted his hand. "Don't worry, everything worked out okay."

Anthony went quiet for a moment. "Well I'm grateful. Truly." He paused. "But could you do one more thing for me?"

Sydney rolled her eyes. "Haven't we done enough?" She relented with a chuckle. "Go on then. Name it."

Not needing to be asked twice, Anthony got straight to the point. "Can you bring my camera in for me?"

“Of course,” Saber said. “But I can’t imagine there’s much to take pictures of around here.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Unless you’re planning to take pictures of the nurses?”

Anthony sniggered. “I wasn’t going to, but I will now.” He indicated his bandage. “I want to take a photo of the hole in my head.”

Sydney groaned. “Trust you.”

“What?” Anthony shrugged as both women laughed. “I document everything. It’s a great photo opportunity!”

“I HOPE YOU don’t mind the imposition, Saber?” Penny asked from the car’s back seat. “I just thought that while we’re up this way, we might as well see where you and Sydney live.”

Saber shook her head. “Of course not.” She turned in the passenger seat so she could peer behind to Penny and Daniel. “Now that Anthony’s getting better, I was going to suggest it myself.”

Daniel peered out the window. “It’s beautiful scenery around here.”

As Sydney drove, she glanced into the rearview mirror. “When I used to live in Gransford, I often came out this way for a drive. That’s how I first stumbled across Shirebridge.”

“Speaking of…” Saber pointed through the windscreen. “There it is.”

“I’ll stop here to give the others a chance to catch up,” Sydney said.

“Good idea.” Saber checked the side view mirror, but couldn’t as yet see Thomas’s Jaguar. He and Caitlin were coming along also, but chose to take his car so they weren’t all squashed into one vehicle. It was an hour’s drive from Gransford, and on twisty roads no less, so it made sense to try and ensure the trip was at least comfortable.

Sydney pulled the black Range Rover off the road and on to the kerbside grass. When the vehicle drew to a halt, both Penny and Daniel opened their doors and got out of the car, eager to see the panorama.

Never tiring of the view, Saber stepped outside and crossed to the wooden gate that marked the entrance into the village. She ran her fingers over the bright green name that was etched into the wood, and leaned back against the gate to gaze down at the valley before her. Though there were many spectacular views around Shirebridge, too many to count in fact, this view was Saber’s favourite. Bordered by impressive mountains, the village appeared as if it belonged on a picture postcard, and the stunning waterfall, dense forest, and winding stream only added to the idyllic scene.

“Goodness,” Penny murmured quietly, as if she didn’t want to disturb the tranquil peace of the setting. “What a hidden gem.”

Daniel playfully jostled Sydney with his shoulder. “It’s enchanting. I know where I’m coming for a holiday.”

“You’re more than welcome.”

Saber moved closer to Daniel and Penny, then lifted her hand and tracked past the dozen buildings that made up the village. Her finger stopped on the large house, which sat at the very end, just after the far bridge. “That’s our house there.”

Penny took a step nearer to Saber, in an attempt to follow her line of sight. After a moment, she said, “It seems nice and private.”

Sydney nodded. “It is. We’re not overlooked at all.”

“I love the exterior façade.” Daniel’s tone was approving. “The wooden beams add a nice amount of character to the grey stone.”

Saber heard a car engine, and as she searched along the country road, she recognised the sleek silver Jaguar. “Here they are.”

As the vehicle stopped beside them, the passenger window slid down. “I thought your car was fast,” Sydney teased, smirking at Thomas.

Thomas patted the leather steering wheel with affection. “She is. But I’m still getting used to her. Besides,” he made a face, “you know these roads a lot better than I do.”

Sydney chuckled. “Kinda sounds like excuses to me. What do you think, Sabe?”

As both Thomas and Sydney regarded her in expectation for the deciding response, Saber felt her eyes grow wide. “Oh no, don’t think I’m going to get pulled into this game of sibling rivalry. I know better than that.” She passed the buck onto their other sibling, recalling a phrase Caitlin once said to her. “Caitlin, I’ll leave you to deal with this.”

In the Jaguar’s passenger seat, Caitlin’s fair eyebrows rose in surprise. Then she laughed. “Touché, Saber. Touché.”

“IT’S A LOVELY house, Sydney.” Penny sat down on the reclining sofa with a cup of tea in her hands. “I especially like the conservatory.”

“Doug, the leader of the Mountain Rescue team, has his own handyman business. He renovated the whole house. We practically gutted it from top to bottom.” Sydney shook her head. “Mind it needed doing, the previous owner had ghastly taste.” She gazed across to Saber, who sat in the armchair. “Remember that wallpaper?”

“How could I forget?” Saber grinned. “That dark stripy print almost drove you mad.”

Sydney nodded. “That wallpaper was the bane of my existence when I first moved in.”

“It’s nice you’ve managed to retain the character of the place though.” Daniel took a sip of his tea. “It adds a lot of charm.”

“Well that was important to us. And as you can see,” Sydney gestured around. “Doug’s very good at his job.”

“He certainly is.” Caitlin set her cup down on the coffee table. “It’s a shame we live so far apart, or I’d ask him to do some odd jobs for me around the house.”

“That is a shame.” Thomas’s tone was droll. “As it’d save you calling on your brother every time you want a new picture hung.”

Caitlin snickered. “That’s what big brothers are for. Besides, you shouldn’t complain, it keeps you out of trouble.”

“I don’t need to be kept out of trouble, you’re confusing me with Anthony.”

At the mention of Anthony, a hush fell over the room. From the soft smiles that appeared on the faces around her, Sydney could tell her family was thinking thoughts similar to hers. She was relieved beyond measure Anthony was recuperating, and, given the trauma he’d gone through, was amazed he was on track to make a full recovery. Though Anthony had been rather unlucky in sustaining the injury, he’d been very lucky as to the actual outcome. Sydney knew it could’ve been far worse.

Though it wasn’t the best drink to toast with, Sydney raised her cup of tea. “To Anthony. Best wishes for a speedy recovery.”

A chorus of happy voices replied, “To Anthony.”



AS SABER STROLLED casually through the village—she and Sydney were currently showing her family around Shirebridge—she pointed off to her left, to a house with a simple, but well-cared for garden. From the outside, her old house hadn't changed much, and she was pleased Rich appeared to be keeping the place in good order, and not allowing it to fall into a state of disrepair.

Saber peered over to Penny, who walked alongside her. “That’s where I used to live, before I moved in with Sydney.”

Penny stopped and regarded the house. “Who lives there now?”

“Rich.” Though Saber knew they’d been introduced, she realised it was unlikely that Penny would recall every name, especially given the fact that at the time, she’d been by her son’s hospital bed, worried sick. In ways of simple explanation, she added, “From the Mountain Rescue team.”

Penny nodded. “How long have you lived in Shirebridge?”

“Since I was sixteen. I’m thirty-five now, so nearly twenty years.”

Penny raised an eyebrow. “You’ve spent over half of your life here. You must really love it.” She turned in a circle, examining her surroundings. “Mind, I can see why. It’s very tranquil here. I bet Sydney loves returning here after a busy day at work, I imagine it’s quite a contrast.”

Saber tipped her head in agreement. She squinted along the road a short way, to where Sydney chatted with her father and siblings. Since she and Penny had stopped, the others had gained a small lead, and Saber gestured ahead to them. “Should we catch up?” She hadn’t taken two steps when Penny caught her arm, restraining her with a light touch.

“Actually, Saber, I wanted to have a private word with you first.”

“Okay.” Saber gave Penny her complete attention.

“I know the last several days have been difficult for all involved, but one thing that’s really impressed me through it all is you.”

Saber blinked in surprise. “Me? I didn’t do anything.”

“On the contrary. You’ve been there for Sydney night and day, and whatever she needed you gave, ungrudgingly so.” Penny smiled warmly. “As her mother, it makes me incredibly happy to see that Sydney’s being well taken care of, and I want you to know that your family’s loss is our gain.” She reached out and gripped Saber’s shoulders, her gaze direct, but gentle. “You’re one of us now. One of the family.”

Saber swallowed around the sudden lump in her throat. She felt overwhelmed by Penny’s kind and generous acceptance. Being welcomed into the family was a monumental occasion for Saber, since she’d practically given up all hope of ever having a family herself. She swallowed again, blinking back tears. “I…” She cleared her throat, a little self-consciously. “I don’t know what to say, Penny. Thank you.”

Penny shook her head. “If anything, Saber, it’s I who should be thanking you.” She paused, as if to let that sink in, then fondly squeezed Saber’s shoulder. “Let’s catch up to the others.”

THAT EVENING, AFTER Sydney's family returned to the B&B, Saber wept quietly in the master bedroom. Her earlier discussion with Penny, though immensely positive, uncorked a rush of emotions within her, and this was the first chance she'd had to release them.

Sitting cross-legged on the bed, crying into a pillow, Saber didn't hear Sydney's approach. She jumped as the bedroom door opened, and Sydney entered carrying a pile of freshly ironed clothes.

Sydney's face fell as her gaze landed on Saber, her green eyes growing concerned. "Sabe? What's wrong?" She set the clothes down onto a nearby chest of drawers, and joined Saber on the bed.

Saber felt an arm wind around her waist as she wiped away her tears. "There's nothing wrong. I'm fine."

Sydney gently tucked a strand of dark hair behind Saber's ear. "It doesn't look like you're fine." She leaned in and laid a tender kiss on Saber's cheek. "Why are you crying, sweetheart?"

"It's nothing bad," Saber said, in an attempt to reassure. "Penny told me I was part of the family today."

"Ah." Understanding dawned on Sydney's face. "I can see why that would upset you," she joked. "It's hard to be a Greenwood." At Saber's chuckle, Sydney became serious. "That's a big deal for you."

Saber released a heavy breath, not refuting the claim. Sydney knew her well. She answered truthfully, her expression completely open and unguarded. "It hit me harder than I thought. At this point in my life, I honestly didn't think I needed a family. I have you, Coop, Marge and Bill, and the rest of the team. Considering where I started, I've done pretty well for myself. I didn't think I needed, or even wanted more." Saber shook her head, wondering whether she'd purposely deluded herself into believing such a notion, as a form of self-protection. "But earlier, when your mother said... It meant a great deal to me, and I realised that, despite everything that happened with my own parents, deep down, I do still want to be part of a family." She smiled as a single tear tracked down her cheek. "And now, thanks to you, I have exactly that."

Sydney brushed the tear away with her thumb. "I'm so happy to hear you say that, Sabe. And I'm so proud of you for allowing my family into your heart." She cupped Saber's cheek. "I know it's an enormous step for you, since you didn't want to risk getting hurt, again. Thank you for trusting me."

Saber kissed Sydney. "Trusting you was the easy part. Thanks for guiding me in the right direction." She paused a moment in reflection, then said, "You were right, it was worth the risk."

To her credit, Sydney didn't gloat or say I-told-you-so, she simply shrugged. An instant passed, then she drew Saber in for a hug.

Saber returned the embrace, her arms wrapping snugly around Sydney. Their bodies moulded neatly together, a perfect fit. Saber ran her fingers gently through Sydney's blonde locks. "I love you."

Sydney's response was instantaneous, and the devoted affection could clearly be heard in her voice. "I love you, too"

As Sydney tightened her hold, as if in declaration that Saber belonged to her, Saber couldn't help but smile. She did belong to Sydney. They belonged to each other.

# Chapter Eighteen

SYDNEY DROVE THE shovel into the soggy mud. Since it had been raining practically non-stop over the past several days, the ground was waterlogged, and easy to cut into with the spade. Unfortunately, the downside was that the incline she and the rest of the Mountain Rescue team were standing on was extremely slippery, and they had to be very careful of where they placed their feet while digging out the new path.

She was quite impressed with the progress the team had made in her absence, the loose rocks had been safely shored up, and they'd already made a good start on creating a fresh trail.

As Sydney twisted her body to toss a shovelful of dirt on to the old, damaged path above, her foot slipped out from under her. Chunks of soil flew up into the air as she fell, raising her hands protectively to try and cushion her impact with the ground. The shovel thudded down on to the earth, and Sydney fully expected to land in the same ungraceful manner—in a heap on the squelching mud.

Warm hands suddenly grabbed her on either side, stopping her fall, and Sydney blinked as she was set soundly back on her feet.

“Careful there,” Coop said as he removed his hands from Sydney’s waist.

Saber’s grip stayed in place, clearly wanting to ensure Sydney was balanced. “You okay?”

Sydney didn’t get a chance to respond, as Jeff and Rich both cried out, and the sound drew everyone’s attention.

“Aw, Sydney!” Rich all but yelled. “Gross.”

For a second, Sydney wondered what on earth she’d done, but then she noticed both men were covered in lumps of mud, brown streaks running down their arms and faces. The soil off her shovel had obviously rained down on them.

Jeff made a show of wiping a glob of dirt off his cheek, and flicked it away. “You couldn’t have better aim, Sydney?”

Sydney giggled, though she soon stopped as twin glares were directed her way. “Sorry. It wasn’t on purpose.”

Saber and Coop burst into laughter, and Doug fought, rather unsuccessfully, to hold back a grin.

Rich’s tone was dry. “I think I liked it better when Sydney wasn’t here.” He removed a chunk of mud from his floppy brown hair. “Ew! Sick.”

Sydney chuckled, not the slightest bit offended by his comment. She knew how dramatic Rich could be.

“Oh, I don’t know.” Coop’s eyes twinkled in mischief. “Sydney’s certainly added a good dose of entertainment to this trip.”

Rich scowled. “Ha ha.” He raised a warning finger at first Coop, then Sydney. “If I wasn’t so mature, I’d cover you both in mud and see how you liked it.”

Sydney bit her lip, trying her best not to laugh. If there was one word that would never be used to describe Rich, it was mature. Rich was the complete, polar opposite of mature. And the

fact he believed himself to be mature made Sydney wonder whether he understood the definition of the word. Still, she wasn't going to be the one to burst his bubble, though she thought about buying Rich a dictionary for Christmas.

As Sydney peered around at the suddenly silent group, she saw her own amusement reflected back at her. It seemed no one knew what to say to Rich's declaration of maturity, so she picked up her shovel and began to dig once more.

"Wait, wait," Rich called out. With measured paces, he took several steps back, away from Sydney. When he drew to a halt, he gave a nod. "There, you can continue now. I don't think you can reach me from there."

Saber loaded her spade with a fresh load of mud. "Stand still and I'll test it."

"Very funny." Rich's eyes grew wide as Saber lifted the spade. "Don't you dare! Saber!" He darted out of the way as Saber heaved the shovelful of dirt in his direction. It was fortunate he did move, and he moved quickly, for the soil missed him by mere inches.

As the team laughed at his expense, Rich glared at Saber. "Are you crazy? What did you do that for?"

Saber shrugged with innocence. "I was testing the distance like you wanted."

"Like hell you were." Rich theatrically ran his hands over his body, as if to check he was still intact. "You could've killed me!"

"Oh come on, Rich." Coop shook his head at the man's dramatics. "It was hardly that bad. You need to learn how to take a joke."

"But it wasn't funny!"

"It was to the rest of us," Jeff said with a grin.

Chuckling, Sydney lightly slapped Saber's stomach in reproach. "That wasn't nice."

"What?" Saber lowered her voice. "Why should you get to have all the fun?" She paused a moment, raising an eyebrow in suspicion. "First with the hose, and now with the mud." Saber tutted. "If anything, I should be repeating that phrase back to you."

The corner of Sydney's mouth curled upward. She had no defence or comeback for that. She placed her index finger over her lips, to show Saber she'd say nothing further on the subject.

Saber gave her a cheeky grin. "And since you did both things first, your bad traits must be rubbing off on me." She winked at Sydney. "I always knew you'd be a corrupting influence."

Sydney scoffed. "Me?" Her voice raised an octave. "I think not."

"You know," Coop regarded Sydney with a serious expression, "now that you mention it, Saber, I can totally see it."

Sydney rolled her eyes. "Give over. If anybody's a corrupting influence, it's you two on me."

Coop seemed dubious. "Now that I can't see at all. What about you, Saber?"

"Doesn't sound at all plausible to me." Saber grinned at Sydney. "Seems like you're outvoted."

As Saber had done before her, Sydney loaded her shovel with mud. "If I've already been branded a corruptor, I might as well earn the name." Sydney raised the spade in a teasing manner, and laughed as Saber and Coop bolted away from her.

SYDNEY LISTENED TO the rhythmic heartbeat beneath her ear. The steady sound was soothing, and if she wasn't careful she could easily nod off. She was already laid in bed, so she was in the right place to sleep, but as it was the middle of the afternoon, it wasn't really the right

time. Still, she was exhausted after such a stressful week, and she appreciated the chance to just relax. The warmth emanating from Saber underneath her was particularly relaxing, and Sydney raised her head off Saber's chest so she could regard her. "How'd you feel about a holiday?"

Saber's hands paused in their actions for a moment, and then they continued to lightly stroke Sydney's hair. "Good idea." Her blue eyes sparkled. "I hear Switzerland is nice this time of year."

Sydney chuckled. "The photos were pretty impressive." She hugged Saber. "But since you've never been abroad, I think you should pick where we go. There must be somewhere you've always wanted to visit?"

Saber gently brushed Sydney's cheek with the backs of her knuckles. "As long as you're there, I don't much care where we go."

Sydney beamed. Saber said the most beautiful things to her, even when she least expected them. "You're such a sweetheart." She raised herself up on her arm. "And that comment earns you a kiss." Sydney leaned in and playfully rubbed their noses together, and then captured Saber's lips in a slow, sensual kiss. "So what do you think?"

Saber blinked, appearing somewhat dazed. "Wonderful."

Sydney giggled, gratified she had that effect on Saber. "Not the kiss. About the holiday."

Saber still seemed confused. "What about it?"

Another giggle. "Is there somewhere particular you want to go?"

Saber shrugged. "I can't say I've given it much thought, as I've never had the money to go abroad. I'll have to think about it."

"We'll get some travel brochures, and peruse through together."

"Ooo, I know," Saber said dryly. "Let's go to the arctic."

"What?" Sydney's voice raised an octave. "Don't you think it's cold enough in Scotland?"

Saber grinned. "Just kidding. It might make a nice change to go somewhere hot."

Sydney ran her fingers across Saber's taut stomach. "I vote for somewhere sweltering, so you have to wear less clothes."

Saber chuckled. "Stop that thought there, before it goes any further. I'm not going to a nudist colony."

Sydney grunted in disappointment. "Spoil sport."

"That said, I do like the idea of you walking around in a bikini." Saber's hand slipped beneath Sydney's T-shirt, and stroked the soft skin of her back. "So I think we've decided on somewhere hot." She chuckled, low in her throat. "Maybe I should turn the heating up in our house, so you wear a bikini around here."

"I wear one in the hot tub." Sydney smirked. "At least until you take it off me."

"As if I can resist." Saber tickled the nape hairs on the back of Sydney's neck. "But that doesn't count 'cause you're in the water, so I can hardly see the bikini." She regarded Sydney with a serious expression, though her twinkling eyes betrayed the underlying humour. "I think you should wear one while doing housework, it'll make the jobs a lot more fun."

Sydney raised an eyebrow. "I don't see how."

"Not for you. For me!"

Sydney giggled. "I don't think it'll be very practical, cleaning in a bikini."

"You've just hit on a good business slogan there." Saber laughed. "You'll be full with client requests by the end of the week." She patted Sydney's rump. "Namely me. I want every slot you have."

“Hmm.” Sydney drew closer and stopped a hair’s breadth away from Saber’s full lips. “I’m not sure you can afford me.”

“Listen to you.” Saber shook her head. “First you had no interest, but after a little attention you’re already hiking up the prices.” Her head tilted in thought. “You really *are* a business woman.”

“I’m not sure whether that’s intended as a compliment or not, but I’m going to take it as such.”

“Well just so you know, I have my own ways of bartering with you.” Saber caught Sydney’s lips and kissed her soundly. “That being one of them.”

Sydney tried to return the kiss in kind, but Saber was having none of it. She kept turning her head away at the last possible moment. After her third unsuccessful attempt, Sydney sighed, in the hopes Saber would take pity on her and relent.

Saber did the opposite. “Ah ah. Don’t think you can sway me that easily. Not until we’ve come to some sort of deal over the bikini.”

Sydney found she had no willpower in this—she simply wanted Saber to kiss her. Saber held the trump card, and used it to crushing effect, knowing Sydney couldn’t resist her charms. The words tumbled out of Sydney with little thought, as she caved in completely. “Fine. I give. Whatever you want.”

Saber lifted a dark, elegant eyebrow. “Now who folded like a paper tissue? If you’re going to be a business woman, you should understand the art of negotiation.”

“The best business woman in the world couldn’t negotiate with your kisses, Sabe.” Sydney fondly cupped her cheek. “They’re too distracting.”

Saber relented and tenderly brushed their lips together.

“Ah-ha!” Sydney pumped her fist into the air. “I’ve got you now, flattery is your weak spot.”

Saber burst into laughter. “Damn it. I thought I had you there.”

Sydney locked her gaze onto Saber’s. “You’ve always had me. Ever since we first laid eyes on each other.”

“Aww, likewise, love.” Saber kissed Sydney once more, and it was long and sweet.

When they parted, Sydney grinned, rather pleased with herself. “That’s two for two. Do you want to try negotiating again?”

Saber quickly shook her head. “I know when I’m beaten. Besides,” she ran a hand down Sydney’s face, “I’d rather just keep on kissing you.”

Sydney couldn’t have put it better, so she repeated Saber’s earlier sentiment. “Likewise, love.”

## Chapter Nineteen

BENNY WAS VERY excited. In fact, he didn't think he'd ever been so excited in his life. And at fourteen years old, that was a long time. Today was the day when he was finally going to graduate from the indoor climbing arena, and do some actual outdoor climbing on a real mountain.

In Benny's opinion, it was about time, for he was a skilled climber for his age—he was the best in his climbing class—and he felt like he'd outgrown the indoor arena. He was ready to face new and exiting challenges.

After some persistent pestering on Benny's part, his parents eventually agreed to take him out on the mountainside to try a real climb. Between the three of them, they'd chosen a climb called Blind Summit, which, according to his father, resided near a small, remote village called Shirebridge. Personally, Benny had never even heard of the place, but his dad assured him it was a good place for climbing, and he trusted his judgement. Both of Benny's parents were keen climbers themselves, and been on numerous ascents over the years, so if his dad said that Shirebridge had a good range of climbs at all skill levels, Benny believed him.

In a way, Benny was pleased his first climb was to be in a remote location, without many people, if anyone, around to watch. Though he was quite confident of his abilities, he was still nervous, and could think of nothing worse than embarrassing himself in front of a group of gawking spectators.

"Benny." His mum's voice came from the other side of his closed bedroom door. "Time to get up. I know it's early, but we have a long drive ahead of us."

Before she'd even finished speaking, Benny eagerly threw back his duvet cover and jumped out of bed. "I'm up, Mum. I'll be ready in a few minutes."

"Okay, honey. Remember to put on a warm jumper."

Benny rolled his eyes. He was perfectly capable of dressing himself. As he surveyed the pile of clothes, which he'd laid out in preparation last night, he sheepishly noted he hadn't put out a jumper. He moved to the cupboard and selected a warm blue fleece, then tossed it on top of the other clothes.

Benny caught his reflection in the mirror on the cupboard door, and, with a sigh, attempted to flatten out his unruly, curly mop of black hair. He wanted nothing more than to shave it off, but his mother wouldn't let him. She said it made him look cute. Frankly, that was the last thing Benny wanted. He would never get a girlfriend if he looked like some wussy kid. It was bad enough he was tall and gangly for his age, though at least his extra height was of use when it came to climbing—it made things a lot easier when you could take your pick of holds.

After putting on his deodorant, getting changed, and running a comb through his hair, Benny left his bedroom and headed for the stairs. He made a quick pit stop in the bathroom, and then bounded downstairs and into the kitchen, where his mother busily cooked a full English breakfast.

Benny sniffed the air in appreciation—the scent of bacon tempted his taste buds, and his stomach rumbled in anticipation. “Smells good, Mum.”

His mother, Sally, was a librarian, and she had a bookish countenance about her. Wire-rimmed glasses framed her face nicely, and her long auburn hair, which normally tumbled down around her shoulders, was tied back in a tidy ponytail. Sally gestured with a slim arm for Benny to take a seat at the kitchen table. “It’s important we have a substantial meal inside us. We’ll need the energy for the climb.”

As he sat down, Benny rubbed his hands together, both at the prospect of the day ahead, and in readiness for the hearty meal his mother dished out onto his plate.

“Morning kiddo,” Matt said as he strode into the kitchen. On the way to his seat, he ruffled Benny’s dark curls.

“Dad!” With exasperation, Benny pushed his father’s hand away. “You of all people should know how difficult it is to keep this hair in line.”

Matt chuckled. “That’s your mistake right there, trying to tame it. You should just let it do its thing.” As if to demonstrate, he swept his fingers casually through his curly locks, which were the same shade as Benny’s.

“That explains why you always look like a homeless surfer,” Sally said with a laugh. She finished dishing out the food, then, as she joined them at the table, she leaned over and brushed Matt’s hair back into some semblance of order.

“Homeless surfer.” Benny sniggered. “Good one, Mum.”

Matt made a face at them both, but it was obvious from his lightheartedness he wasn’t at all offended. After taking a bite of his crispy fried bread, he stared at Benny with a serious expression. “Have you packed everything on the list I gave you?”

Benny nodded. The evening before, his father had given him a detailed list of things he would need for the excursion today. He’d been surprised by the length of the list, but realised a lot of the items were precautionary measures, which he’d never had to bother with before, as he’d always been in an indoor arena. As he packed the supplies into his rucksack, it’d dawned on him how different this climb was going to be. He would no longer be in a safe, secure indoor environment, and instead would be in unknown terrain, and exposed to the elements on the open mountainside.

Benny met his father’s awaiting gaze. “I’ve checked and double-checked as you always tell me.”

Matt tipped his head. “Good lad. It’s vital you re-check your gear at all times when we’re out today. Safety first.”

Sally reached over the table and took Benny’s hand in her own. “I know you’re excited for today, but it’s important to remember what you’ve been taught. Focus on what you’re doing, don’t get carried away and try to rush things. The last thing any of us wants is to have an accident.”

“That reminds me,” Matt said. “We’ll have to call in to Mountain Rescue beforehand and file a route plan with them.”

“I hear what you’re saying, I’ll be careful.” Benny shovelled the last of his breakfast into his mouth, and then eagerly jumped up from his seat. “I’ll fetch our backpacks and load up the car. This is going to be so great!”



“MY GOD,” CHARLIE said in shock. “Has it actually stopped raining?”

Saber tilted her head, then stood perfectly still to listen. She could no longer hear the drumming of the rain on the rescue station’s roof. “Sounds like it.” Though she spoke the words, she didn’t really believe them, as it felt like it’d been raining forever. She couldn’t even remember a day in the past week where it hadn’t rained heavily. Wanting to see the proof with her own eyes, Saber moved out from behind the computer, crossed to the window and peered outside.

The rain had indeed ceased to fall. And better yet, as she watched, the grey clouds were starting to disperse. “Yes, it’s stopped.”

Charlie rolled over in his wheelchair and stopped beside Saber. After a tense moment of silence, he chuckled. “Well thank God for that. Much more rain and we’d have had to deal with overflowing rivers, and the subsequent flooding.”

Saber nodded in agreement. They were fortunate the village itself had never flooded, given that a wide stream ran right through the centre, but the stream was banked on either side, and that rising slope kept the water from going off-course. When water levels rose considerably, which did happen from time to time, the stream tended to overflow farther down the valley, where the embanking borders weren’t as pronounced. When that occurred, the outpouring of water usually submerged part of the access road, which could be a nuisance, but the Mountain Rescue team were usually able to divert the water elsewhere.

As Saber focussed in on the stream, she saw the water level was raised, but she didn’t think it was yet high enough to cause flooding farther down the valley. She patted Charlie on the shoulder. “Given what happened with Anthony, the rock slide, and the fact we’re having to create a whole new path, I think we’re about due some good luck. Don’t you?”

Just then, a maroon BMW pulled to a halt outside the Mountain Rescue Station. Three people, two adults and a teenage boy stepped out of the vehicle.

“We’ve got visitors.” Charlie wheeled over to the door and opened it for the new arrivals.

“Thank you,” the woman said, tipping her auburn head to Charlie as she entered the rescue station. “Is this the place where we file a route plan?”

Charlie nodded. “It certainly is. Come on in and I’ll take all the details.” He held out his hand. “I’m Charlie. And this here is Saber.”

“Sally.” She grasped Charlie’s hand and shook it. “This is my husband, Matt, and our son, Benny.”

Saber noticed Benny seemed somewhat hesitant, and he blushed when he glanced her way. She smiled at him to try and alleviate his obvious discomfort, which only caused him to redden further. His gaze wandered around the walls, clearly curious as to what went on here, but apparently to shy to ask outright.

“Hey Benny, while your folks sort out the route plan with Charlie, would you mind giving me a hand? I’ve gotta perform an equipment check.” He nodded, and Saber indicated the rucksack nearby him. “Bring that pack over, would you?”

Benny attempted to lift the pack one-handed, but it barely moved an inch. Surprise crossed his face, and, now using both hands, he managed to carry the rucksack to Saber. “It’s heavy. What’s in there?”

“Open it and see.” At his pause, Saber nodded in reassurance. “Go ahead.”

A pleased expression appeared as Benny squatted down and emptied the rucksack. He peered closely at each item, and, growing in confidence, regarded Saber with newfound fascination. “Do you carry all of this every time you go on a mission?”

Saber knelt down next to Benny. “We call them rescues. But yes, we have to try and be prepared for every eventuality,” her lips curled upward, “hence the reason that the packs weigh a ton.”

“How many are on the team?”

“Six,” Saber said. “Four men and two women. Myself included.”

Benny continued to search through the rucksack. “And you all have to carry one of these packs?”

“That’s right. Sometimes we have to split up into smaller groups to search and locate missing climbers or hikers, so we each need to carry the appropriate equipment with us.” Saber unfastened the folded up stretcher from the backpack. “Check this out. Unfold that part there.” She waited patiently for Benny to do as she instructed. “Snap it into position.”

Benny’s eyes widened as the aluminium board unfolded into a stretcher. “That is so cool. Do you carry people down on this?”

“If necessary.” Saber couldn’t help but smile at the enthusiasm in Benny’s voice. “If the person’s hurt badly enough, we sometimes use the chopper.”

Benny’s dark eyebrows rose up toward his hairline. “A helicopter? I’ve always wanted to go up in one of those. I’d be rooting for that option.” He frowned, as if realising how that sounded. “Not for the person to be hurt badly, I didn’t mean—”

Saber interrupted him. “I know what you meant, Benny.” She leaned in close and whispered, “I enjoy riding in the chopper too.”

Benny grinned at her. “It’s my first outdoor climb today.”

“Is that so? I bet you can’t wait to get out there?” At his eager nod, Saber asked, “How long have you been climbing?”

“About a year. I wanted to go out sooner, but Mum and Dad insisted I waited, to make sure I was ready.”

“That’s smart.” Saber wished all people had the same sense. It would make her job a whole lot easier. “Which climb are you doing?”

“Umm, it’s called Blind Summit.”

“That’s over on The Water Tower.” Seeing Benny didn’t understand, she added, “Did you notice the mountain with the waterfall coming down it? Well that mountain’s named The Water Tower. That’s where you’re headed.”

Benny seemed pleased at that information. “Awesome.” He finished emptying the rucksack, and shook his head at the contents that were now strewn across the floor. “I thought my backpack was heavy. I’m so glad I don’t have to carry all this stuff.”

Saber chuckled. “You get used to it after a while.”

Benny asked, “Now what do we do with the equipment?”

Saber grinned at his earnestness. “We have to check every piece for signs of damage or wear and tear and replace them if needed.”

“Got it.” Benny picked up an item and examined it with care. “Do you have to do this after every rescue?”

“Yes. It’s imperative the equipment is sound. We hold people’s lives in our hands.” Saber pointed to a chart stuck on the wall. “Though we have a rota in place here, so we take turns performing the checks.”

Benny lifted up the stretcher and studied it closely. “This is lighter than I thought it would be. But I suppose it’s heavy enough when you add the weight of a person.” He peeked across

surreptitiously to his parents, and then dropped his voice. “Have you ever had to carry a really fat person? Like obese fat?”

Saber shook her head. “We mainly rescue outdoor types, and they’re usually in good shape.” Benny appeared to be disappointed. “But if you’re talking weight, on one occasion we had to rescue a bodybuilder.” Benny leaned keenly forward, and Saber took that as a sign to continue. “This guy was huge, around six foot six, with arms the size of my waist. Even with a man at each corner of the stretcher, we still struggled to move him. Unfortunately, he was near the peak of the mountain, so we knew we wouldn’t be able to carry him all the way back down.”

Benny’s eyes were as round as saucers. “What did you do?”

“In the end, we had to call in the helicopter.” Saber was quick to reassure Benny. “The man made a full recovery, everything worked out fine.

“Has anyone ever died on these mountains?”

Saber wasn’t quite sure how to answer that. After all, Benny was just a teenager, about to undertake his first climb on a mountain. She didn’t want to scare the boy. However, it was also important for Benny to understand mountainsides could be dangerous places, especially if he didn’t respect his surroundings. She decided to tell Benny the truth. “I’m afraid so.”

“Were they climbers?”

“Some. Others were lost hikers.” She specifically didn’t mention the group of schoolboys who’d died, since they’d been of a similar age to Benny. Saber paused a moment, trying to shake the unpleasant images from her mind. “But don’t worry, those few are in the minority. As long as you’re careful, and listen to your parents you’ll be fine.” She smiled to back up her words.

Benny returned her smile, not appearing at all fazed. “I will. I can’t wait until my next climbing class, they’ll be so jealous to know I spent time with Mountain Rescue.”

Saber laughed as she stood. She crossed to the desk and plucked a small metal badge out of a round wicker basket. Returning to Benny’s side, she handed him the token. “So they believe you.”

Benny read the writing on the badge aloud. “I support Mountain Rescue.” He beamed at Saber, and fastened the pin proudly onto his blue jumper. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Saber was genuinely growing to like this kid, and she hoped he had a good experience on the mountain. “Have fun today. That climb you’re going on—Blind Summit—it’s good, I think you’ll enjoy it.” Saber understood why Benny’s parents selected that specific climb. It was one of those rare finds, suitable for all abilities, from beginner to expert—it just depended on which route you took. Only one thing bothered her, a small niggle in her gut—Blind Summit was quite close to the river’s edge, and given the amount of rainfall lately... She decided to voice her concerns.

Saber waited until Charlie wrapped things up with Matt and Sally, and then she said, “We’ve had an awful lot of rain this last week, so I’d advise you all to take extra care around the rivers.”

Matt said, “We’ll be cautious.”

Saber was reassured by the look in Matt’s eye—he didn’t appear to be a man who would take unnecessary risks, especially not where his family was concerned. “Good. Well, enjoy yourselves.”

As the family moved toward the door, Benny hesitated and turned around. He peeked up at Saber timidly. “Dad thinks we should be finished with the climb and back down the mountain by two, so if it’s all right I could call in and tell you how it went?”

Saber smiled at him. “Sure thing, Benny. I’d like that.”

## Chapter Twenty

BENNY BOUNCED EXCITEDLY on the balls of his feet. He stared up in wonder at the cliff face before him—Blind Summit looked awesome. His father would lead the climb, and his mother would bring up the rear, so Benny would be wedged protectively between them. In this instance he didn't mind the mollycoddling, it rather soothed his nerves to know his parents were close at hand.

He stepped into his climbing harness, and fastened it snugly around himself, but not so tight it would impede his movement. He swapped his walking boots for his stickies, and he straightened in readiment when his father came over to check on him.

Benny rubbed his hands together eagerly. "I'm all set."

Matt shook his head. "You've forgotten something."

Benny peered down at himself in confusion. He worked his way up from his feet, checking over everything in an attempt to discover what he'd missed. He was already wearing his stickies and harness, so they weren't the issue. He examined the items attached to his harness, figuring he'd overlooked something there. His belay was present, along with several karabiners and quickdraws. As Benny grew more advanced he knew more equipment would be added to his harness, such as nuts and hexes, but for now that was all he required.

Seeing nothing was missing, Benny raised his gaze, wondering if he was being teased.

As if reading his mind, Matt said, "I'm being serious. It's something important."

Benny frowned and checked over the items again. What had he forgotten? Something important? That wasn't like him. He forced his mind to focus on this specific task, pushing out all of the other distractions. He concentrated, and as he stared down at his hands, the answer suddenly dawned on him. His hands went quickly behind his back. "My chalk bag, I haven't..." Benny stopped midsentence as he found the small pouch attached to his harness.

Sally came over and stopped alongside them. "It's not your chalk bag, Benny."

Benny shrugged in bewilderment. "Then I don't know." He sighed, annoyed with himself. "I can't see what I've missed."

As if taking pity on Benny, Sally ruffled his dark, curly locks. She raised her eyebrows and stared specifically at his hair. "Should I have been able to do that?"

Benny's frown cleared instantly. "My helmet!" He dug into his rucksack and pulled it out, making a disgusted face as he did so. "You idiot, Benny," he scolded himself. "I can't believe I did that." He blushed self-consciously. "You were right, Dad, it was something important. I'm sorry."

"We learn as we go, Benny," Matt said in reassurance as he took the bright yellow helmet and put it onto Benny's head. He fastened it securely in place. "And until then, your mother and I will keep you right."

Benny tapped his helmet. "It's a tough job, but someone's gotta do it."

Sally laughed. "Come on, smart alec, let's rig a belay for your dad."

Benny nodded, determined to get this task right. He wanted to prove himself. After the fiasco of the helmet slip-up, this job was now doubly important, and he had to show he was capable. He'd been the one who'd talked his parents into going on this excursion, who'd insisted he was ready for the outdoor stage, instead of practicing further at the indoor climbing arena.

Benny took a breath as he retrieved a coil of rope and passed it to his mother. He was ready. He could do this. He had no intention of letting either himself, or his parents down.

As Sally took up position at the foot of Blind Summit, Benny anchored her securely to the rock face. Since Sally was a lot lighter than Matt, she needed to be fixed in place in case Matt fell, so she wouldn't simply be pulled off her feet and up the rock.

When Sally had the belay rigged, Matt fastened himself to the rope using the figure-eight loop. He then regarded Benny. "Any questions before I go up?"

Benny thought for a moment. "No, I'm good."

"Okay then. Remember to take your time. It's not a race." Matt slapped Benny's helmet in play. "See you at the top."

Benny grinned, feeling his excitement rise. When his father reached the top, it would be his turn.

Matt nodded to Sally. "Climbing now." With that simple phrase, Matt started up Blind Summit, climbing nimbly up the cliff face.

Benny took several steps away from the wall so he could watch easier. He studied his dad's technique closely, simultaneously noting which holds he used, and also watching for any pointers that might assist in his own learning. Benny hoped that with time, he would grow to be as skilled as his father, for he was impressed by his climbing abilities.

As if able to read Benny's thoughts from his face, Sally said, "With enough practice, son, you'll surpass us both."

Benny lowered his gaze to her, and his eyebrows lifted in disbelief. "You really think so?"

"I don't see why not." Sally fed out more rope from between her hands, giving Matt some slack to climb with. "You've started early enough. I didn't begin to learn until I was in my twenties, so you've already got a good lead on me."

"I wonder how old you've got to be to join Mountain Rescue?"

Sally gave Benny a knowing glimpse. "That lady was nice, huh?"

"Her name's Saber." Much to Benny's chagrin, he felt his face heat up. "And yes she was, but that's not the only reason I'm interested." At his mother's doubtful expression, he said, "It's not! Saber told me some of what she... I mean what Mountain Rescue does, and it sounded interesting, that's all."

"Mm-hmm." Sally clearly wasn't convinced.

"Saber showed me the equipment they carry, you wouldn't believe how much their packs weigh—I could barely lift it." Benny gestured animatedly with his hands. "Ooo and they get to ride in a helicopter. How cool is that?"

"That is pretty cool." Sally chuckled. "You do know they don't get paid for what they do?"

Benny's face fell. "Seriously? What a bummer." After a moment he flicked his wrist in dismissal. "Well money isn't everything. And I suppose the adventure of the rescue more than makes up for it. You'd be a hero to people."

Sally shook her head. "I think you're seeing this through rose-tinted glasses, honey." She giggled. "Or should I say Saber-tinted?"

Benny felt the warmth spread across his face, again. "Mum!"

“I’m sorry,” Sally said, though she didn’t appear particularly apologetic. “You have to see the whole picture, Benny, not just the fun stuff. Mountain Rescue have to go out in all weather conditions, deal with horrendous, and I imagine even fatal accidents—”

Benny interrupted. “They do. Saber told me that.”

“There you go then. And on top of that they have to keep up with the latest training, first aid for example, and complete other courses in their spare time.” Sally met Benny’s gaze directly. “It’s hard work being a hero in real life, it’s not like it is in the movies.”

“I know that. I do.”

As if doubting his words, Sally continued, obviously determined to get her point across. “Everything tends to work out in the movies.” She paused briefly. “Well, depending on what type of movie you’re watching. Real life doesn’t always have a happy ending, and Mountain Rescue will get a front row seat, no matter the outcome. Though I think very highly of the rescuers themselves, for being so brave and selfless, I can’t say that I would like to do it myself.”

Benny fell silent as he considered his mother’s point of view. “I’m not sure that it’s for me,” he finally admitted. “I don’t know that I’d be very good at dealing with the sad endings.”

“That’s what the training is for. However, it does take a specific type of person to do such a job, and if, when you’re older, you’re still interested in joining, your father and I will support you.” In a clear effort to back up her speech, Sally smiled at him. “But it is important you know the facts first.” She nudged Benny playfully with her hip.

“Perhaps when we call back into the rescue station, you could get some more details off Saber?”

Benny blushed, but this time it didn’t dampen his grin. “This is shaping up to be the best day ever!”

SABER HUNG HER jacket up on the peg in the hallway. She’d just finished all the equipment checks with Charlie over at the Mountain Rescue Station. They’d gone through all six backpacks of apparatus, which was not a quick job. And now she’d returned home to see what Sydney was up to. She headed along the hallway toward the kitchen, and as she approached she heard Sydney singing softly. The sweet, tuneful voice brought a smile to Saber’s face, and she lingered in the doorway for several moments, content just to listen.

As she leaned casually against the doorjamb, the movement seemed to attract Sydney’s attention, for she turned Saber’s way and jumped in shock. “Jeez, Sabel!” Sydney held a hand to her chest. “Must you sneak up on me like that?” She tugged on her earlobe somewhat selfconsciously. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Not long.” Saber’s smile became impish. “I liked the song you were singing though.”

Sydney’s cheeks took on a pale rosy hue. Her bashful demeanour only made her more endearing to Saber, who crossed to Sydney’s side and took her face in both hands.

“You have an enchanting singing voice, I love listening to you.”

Sydney kissed Saber, and then indicated the kettle, which had just begun to boil. “That was good timing on your part, fancy a cup?”

“I’ll make it.” Saber retrieved two mugs from the cupboard and set them on the counter. Popping a tea bag into each cup, she waited for the kettle to finish boiling, and poured the piping hot water into the mugs.

Sydney fetched the milk from the fridge and added a drop to both cups. “Did you get everything sorted at the station?”

“I did. And I met the nicest boy and his family. They were going climbing, called in to file a route plan.” Saber took a sip of her tea. “Benny, that’s the teenage boy, was so excited because it’s his first mountain climb today.”

“I remember feeling that way. Though I was also incredibly nervous, and I threw up on the car journey to the climb.”

Saber’s eyebrows lifted. “You didn’t?”

“Afraid so. My first outdoor climb was far from ideal. Midway up the cliff face it started to pour down, and I mean like torrential rain, not just a brief shower. I slipped on the wet rock and gashed my knee open, but fortunately it wasn’t very deep.”

Saber sat down at the kitchen table, the heat from the mug warming her hands pleasantly. “I’m surprised that experience didn’t put you off from continuing.”

“I probably would’ve given up if it hadn’t been for Anthony nagging me to try again.” Sydney took a mouthful of her drink, and shook her head. “In the end, I did it just to shut him up, and I’ve never looked back since. The second trip was everything the first should’ve been, and when I reached the top of the climb...that view...I was hooked.” She pulled out the chair next to Saber and settled into it. “What about you?”

“My first climb was pretty special,” Saber said, turning reflective. “It was just me and my dad, and he took me to one of his favourite haunts, which, like Shirebridge, was in the middle of nowhere. We drove for hours, to the point where I started to suspect we were lost, before reaching the climb. My dad didn’t believe in mollycoddling, so the easiest part of the climb was at the top of my abilities—at least at that time. He told me it would be difficult, but it wasn’t beyond my capabilities, and he fully expected to see me at the top.”

Sydney reached across the table and linked her hand through Saber’s. “Your father was a hard man.”

Saber didn’t refute it. “In a lot of things, yes, but in this instance it worked to my benefit. I was sweating buckets by the time I reached the summit, it was a strenuous climb for a novice, but I got there. I made it.” A smile appeared. “It was one of the few occasions where I recall my dad being proud of me, and my triumph of that summit gave me great belief in myself as a climber. From then on, I was never afraid to challenge myself or to try something new. And when I came up against things I couldn’t do, well...” Saber shrugged. “I kept practicing until I could. It may have been a trial by fire, but in the long run I’ve reaped the rewards several times over.”

Sydney squeezed Saber’s hand. “I can’t argue with that. You’re a phenomenal climber.”

“It’s merely practice, and starting at a young age obviously helps.”

“How old was Benny would you say?” Sydney asked curiously.

“I’d say mid-teens. Fourteen maybe.”

“Which climb are they doing?”

“Blind Summit.” Saber paused for an instant, and then added, “Over on The Water Tower.”

Sydney said, “Well it’s less trial by fire than your first, and the weather’s better than mine was—did you notice it’s finally stopped raining?”

“I did.” Saber’s relief came through in her tone. “Though it’s not before time.”

“Anyway, where was I?” Sydney hesitated before continuing. “Right, first climbs. Let’s hope Benny’s first outing on the mountain is a good one. One to remember.”

Saber tipped her head, wholeheartedly agreeing with the sentiment. “They’re due down by two, so Benny’s gonna call back into the station and let me know how it went.”

“Sounds like this Benny’s rather taken with you.” Sydney raised and kissed the back of Saber’s hand. “The kid’s got good taste.”



## Chapter Twenty-one

BENNY FELT LIKE he was on top of the world. He was already higher up than he'd ever been on an indoor climbing wall, and he'd only just passed the halfway point of the climb.

He stopped his ascent, and reached around his back for the chalk bag. He dipped his fingers inside and they came out coated with white powder. Now with a better grip, he continued up the rock face.

Benny was thrilled by how well he was doing, and his nerves all but disappeared. He focussed intently on each hold, and before committing himself to the manoeuvre he weighed the pros and cons, then moved upward with great care. Benny wasn't particularly afraid of falling, after all that's what the safety rope was for, but if possible, he intended to complete this climb without any assistance from his tether. He wanted to reach the top of Blind Summit knowing his own skills got him there, that the achievement was his and his alone.

When Benny reached a narrow ledge, he took the opportunity to study his surroundings. Behind and below him was a wide river, and even from his height he could hear the roar of the water as it surged past. Even if Saber hadn't mentioned it, Benny would've known the area had had a lot of rain recently, as the river appeared swollen, and in certain places it'd leaked over onto the riverbank. Fortunately, they were only small pools of leakage, and hadn't blocked the pathway to Blind Summit, so Benny and his parents were able to pass by unhindered. The climb itself was directly above a section of the riverbank, so if the river had flooded, they wouldn't have been able to reach the climb at all.

As his gaze followed the water downstream, Benny realised that from his viewpoint, it appeared as if the river suddenly halted in midair. The water grew more and more turbulent near that edge, and a lathering of white froth revealed what it was—a waterfall. From the substantial height they were at, Benny guessed it was the same waterfall you could see from the village, the one that gave The Water Tower its name.

Benny turned back to the rock face, and after flexing his wrists to try and loosen the tight muscles in his forearms, began to climb once more.

Though he'd always enjoyed climbing at the indoor arena, there really was no comparison between that artificial environment and where he was now—this mountain was the real deal. Benny imagined after today's experience the indoor arena would seem quite tame, maybe even boring in comparison, so when they got back home he intended to start searching for different outdoor climbs they could visit.

As Benny reached up for the next hold, a strange groaning sound caught his attention. The noise came from below, off to his right side. The crunch of snapping twigs and branches sank into Benny's consciousness, and when he gazed upstream, his jaw dropped as he saw a large tree being carried along by the rushing water. The tree appeared to be relatively intact, but despite its substantial size, the powerful surge of the river tossed it around in an effortless fashion, like it was nothing more than a ragdoll in a washing machine.

“Sally!” Matt's voice sounded frantic. “Climb. Get out of there. Climb now!”

Horror dawned on Benny as his father's words sank in. The tree headed straight for the riverbank where his mother stood. "Mum! Climb. Hurry!"

Time seemed to go in slow motion as Sally turned around to face the river, clearly wondering what they were shouting about. She bolted into action a mere instant later, but the tree moved too fast, and the sheer force of the current drove the tree directly into the riverbank.

From his vantage point, Benny watched in terror as the tree exploded right through the bank, sending masses of dirt into the air. For a second, the crash of the impact even drowned out the loud roar of the river, though Benny heard little over the thundering of his own heartbeat. The tree kept on going, creating a deep trench as it powered through the mud toward Sally.

Benny was dimly aware that he and his father were shouting desperately, but the words didn't register, as his mind was in utter turmoil.

Sally didn't get a chance to try and climb out of the tree's destructive path, she didn't even get close to the cliff face. The tree converged on her and buried Sally beneath it before it slid to an unceremonious halt on, and partly in, the riverbank.

Benny blinked several times, straining to see his mother through his tears. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't locate her—all he could see was the damn, god-awful tree. A high-pitched, unrelenting noise broke through his awareness, and Benny realised the sound came from him. He was screaming.

BENNY WAS LITERALLY jerked back to his senses as his rope was abruptly hauled on, pulling him off the rock face, then the rope was let out, and he found himself being lowered in a hasty, frighteningly quick descent.

He didn't care about himself; he just wanted to get down, to find out what happened to his mother. Was she still alive? Was she badly hurt? A multitude of questions ran through Benny's head, and though desperate to know the answers, he was equally terrified to discover them. He knew his father had to be panicking also, but Matt couldn't do anything until Benny was off the belay rope. No doubt that was the reason for the speed at which Benny was being lowered. Benny assumed his father would simply rig another rope for himself and abseil down as fast as possible.

He wasn't even close to the ground—there was about thirty feet still remaining—when he jerked to a sudden halt. Since he'd been descending at such a quick pace, the jolt caused him to careen toward the rock face. Benny swiftly raised his hands and managed to cushion the blow some, though pain still shot through him as his softer body collided with the unyielding stone wall. His helmet vibrated strongly as it smacked into the rock, and Benny was beyond grateful for his parent's reminder to put the protective headgear on. Without it, he'd likely be unconscious now, and be of no use to anyone.

Benny's gaze snapped upward, up the cliff face to his father, wondering why he'd stopped reeling out the rope. "I'm not down yet," he yelled. "Lower me farther!"

"I can't." Matt's frenzied voice came back. "The rope's snagged!"

MATT WAS FURIOUS with both himself and the situation. As soon as the tree engulfed Sally, he'd been quick to act, and Benny's screams of fear only encouraged him to move faster.

However, since he was above Benny rushing to reel out the slack, the coil of rope kinked, twisting in on itself, and that part had gotten snagged in the belay, fouling up the descent.

Matt cursed himself for his careless oversight. He should've been paying closer attention to the outlaying of rope—he was ashamed to admit he hadn't even been watching it—his gaze busy searching for Sally below. Scanning for any sign of life or movement. He kept his fury contained, not wanting to freak Benny out any more than he already was—the last thing his son needed now was to see him lose control.

Matt struggled mightily to free the snag, but to no avail—he knew Benny's weight needed to be lifted off the line so he could pull the rope back through the belay, straighten it out, and then release it once more.

“Benny, I need you to climb up! Give me some slack so I can free this snag.”

WHEN THE CACOPHANY of breaking branches ended, and the ear-splitting rumble of the tree tearing through the earth faded away, Sally finally dared to open her eyes.

Frankly, she was amazed she was still alive. When she'd seen the broad tree bearing down on her, she'd fully expected to be crushed to death by its overpowering might and weight. The driving force of the surging river added an even greater lethality to the situation, and she glanced around in an attempt to understand how she'd survived.

Sally couldn't make sense of her surroundings for several moments—mud was all around her, and she appeared to be in some sort of gully. One of the tree's branches was directly overhead, and through its mangled foliage, what was left of it anyway, Sally was able to see the sky. She realised then what must've happened. The tree swept her up in its path, but as she'd been forced beneath it she'd somehow ended up in the trench the tree had made as it'd surged through the mud.

Sally couldn't quite believe her luck, though her feeling of relief vanished as she tried to move. A sharp pain erupted through her left leg, and when she peered down she noticed her calf was pinned tightly to the ground by the tree's trunk. The trunk itself was at an angle, so its weight wasn't resting directly on her leg, which was fortunate, for her calf would've likely been crushed under such strain. Still, the trunk was firmly holding Sally in position, and her calf appeared badly bruised. Her lower left leg wasn't straight, it twisted at an odd angle, and she hoped it wasn't fractured or broken.

She assessed the rest of her body, but apart from numerous bruises and scrapes, she felt relatively intact. She tried to sit upright, but the unnatural slant of her leg meant she couldn't rise up very far before it became too painful for her to continue. She gave up, and lay flat on her back once more.

Sally heard frantic shouts over the roar of the river, and it dawned on her both Matt and Benny would be worried sick, likely thinking the worst had happened. Since she couldn't see them, she knew they wouldn't be able to see her, not trapped in the gully the way she was, with the branch above obscuring her from view. Not wanting to prolong their torment any further, Sally yelled loudly. “Matt. Benny. I'm okay. I'm all right.”

“Mum!” Benny's relief and delight could be heard in that single exclamation, and despite the situation, it brought a smile to Sally's face.

“Sally, are you hurt?” Matt asked quickly. “Where are you? I can't see you anywhere.”

“I’m underneath the tree. In a kind of channel.” Sally waved her hands back and forth, to give Matt a chance to locate the movement. “My leg’s pinned down by the trunk. I’m not sure if it’s broken, it hurts a lot. Otherwise, I’m okay.”

“All right, just hold on,” Matt said. “We’re trying to make our way down to you now.”

It wasn’t so much Matt’s words, but rather his tone that soothed Sally—he sounded collected, and relatively calm. She knew the worst thing in such situations was to panic, though it was obviously easier said than done, and she was pleased Matt seemed to be holding things together—for Benny’s sake as much as hers.

Her own panic level rose when cold liquid touched her bare ankle, and when she peered down she saw a slow, but steady stream of water making its way along the trench toward her. The river was evidently leaking into the gully.

Icy tendrils began to pool around her legs. If, or rather when the trench flooded, if Sally was still trapped, she would drown. Recognising time was critical, Sally cried out in fear. “Matt, you have to hurry, the channel’s filling up with water!”

BENNY SEARCHED FRANTICALLY for a hold. He hunted for a handhold, foothold, fingertip hold, anything. He couldn’t find a single one. The rope had snagged and jerked him to a halt at the most inconvenient spot imaginable. He had to move upward so his dad could free the snag in the belay. He managed to get himself back on to the rock face, so his weight was off the rope, but he couldn’t see a way to move upward.

He’d been immensely relieved to hear his mother’s voice, but that relief had been short-lived upon hearing of the predicament she was now in. The channel that had presumably saved her life could now be her undoing, if he and his dad couldn’t get her out in time.

Benny’s gaze ran desperately over the rock face, scanning for a hold, anything he could use. His eyes finally located a small piece of rock jutting out above him, but despite his tall stature, he knew he’d have to leap up in an attempt to reach the hold.

Benny didn’t hesitate, bending his knees he sprang up like a tightly wound coil. His fingers scraped over the hold, clawing desperately at the rock to try and find purchase. His grip slipped off the hold, and he fell back onto the rope, bouncing slightly as the line jerked in adjustment to his weight.

“Climb up Benny!” his father yelled down the cliff face. “I need to free this snag!”

“I’m trying!” Benny shouted back, frustrated by his lack of progress. His mum needed them both desperately, and he was the person keeping that help from getting to her. The fact it was unintentional didn’t matter to Benny—he was the obstruction, and he had to somehow fix that.

Rather than look up the rock, he surveyed off to the side instead, to see if anything there could be of use. There was nothing suitable to his right, but on his left, Benny spotted a decent-sized ledge. It was big enough for him to stand on, and a plan formed in his mind. Though his idea was far from the perfect solution, it was at least *a* solution, and frankly it was the only one he could come up with.

Knowing what he had to do, Benny pushed sideways against the wall, and began to swing himself from side to side. His arms scraped painfully against the rock, but he was building momentum, and with each attempt, he swung ever nearer to the ledge. He pushed himself faster, ignoring the stinging sensation in his forearms as his skin rubbed raw. He wasn’t at all surprised

when blood seeped out from several of the worst grazes, and smeared across his arms in crimson streaks.

Shoving off with all his might, Benny surged toward the ledge, hands outstretched in readiness to lock on to the rock. His legs collided with the ledge, but Benny managed to gain a good grip on its surface, and pulled himself onto the ridge.

As soon as he was upright Benny unfastened from the rope. Since he couldn't raise himself up so the rope could be unsnagged, the next best thing was to get off the rope completely, which would allow his father to lift the line—without Benny's weight on it—and the outcome would be the same.

Benny was in such a hurry to be off the rope, he unthinkingly released it, and it swung away from him, out of his grasp. Since he'd swung over to the left, the rope corrected itself, stopping in a vertical line, straight beneath the outlay of rope from above.

"Dad, I'm off-rope. Free the snag." As he spoke the words, he realised it no longer mattered, as he couldn't reach the rope to be attached to it, so could no longer be lowered down. Though incredibly frustrated over his mistake, at least his father was now free to rig a new line and abseil down. At least his father would be able to help his mum.

"Stay where you are, Benny." Matt's voice was a mixture of annoyance and relief. He was clearly annoyed Benny had gone off-rope, which he'd been told never to do, but Matt sounded relieved he could now be of use to Sally. "Don't move. I'll come back up for you once I've seen to Mum."

"Just help Mum. Hurry!" Benny yelled. He was careful to keep a hand fixed on to the rock face at all times—the last thing he wanted was to fall, then he'd be of no use to anyone. He didn't at all like the feeling of being off-rope, he felt very exposed and vulnerable.

"Matt, hurry!" Sally shouted, her voice filled with panic. "The water's rising."

Benny gazed down fearfully at the tree, but no matter how hard he tried, he still couldn't see his mother. Under the circumstances, he wasn't sure whether that was a blessing or a curse, as his imagination went into overdrive, conjuring all sorts of horrible scenarios, each one worse than the last.

On tenterhooks, Benny glanced impatiently up the cliff face, wondering what was taking his father so long. Where was he?

SALLY WAS PARALYSED with fear as the cold, icy water crept along the length of her body. All her mind could focus on was the creeping sensation of the river as it flowed into the gully and around her body.

When the chilly water pooled around Sally's head, she snapped out of her trance-like terror. Time wasn't on her side, so she couldn't just lie there and wait for help to come to her. She had to do something.

With her free leg, she kicked frantically at the trunk of the tree, trying to push it off her pinned calf, but it didn't move an inch. Knowing she had no hope of shifting its solid weight, she gave up, and began to search for another solution.

The issue now wasn't about freeing herself, but about keeping her head above the ever-rising waterline. If she could just raise her upper body, and get her head out of the gully, that should keep her face above the waterline. She knew once the river filled the trench, it would simply spill over and flow away onto the surrounding bank.

The answer was directly in front of her—the branch above. Though it didn't appear particularly sturdy, she had little choice but to try and pull up on it, and hope it would hold her weight.

Stretching her arms upward, Sally grabbed the limb, and slowly lifted herself out of the water. She bit her lip as a bolt of pain shot through her leg, but she persevered, determined to succeed.

Her muscles quivered as she hoisted her body up and her arms strained as her weight rested solely on them.

She felt a surge of triumph when her head broke through the branch's foliage, but despair hit her when she saw that both Matt and Benny were still on the cliff face, nowhere near her. Her body was tilted at an angle, and she wondered how long she could hold this position.

"Quickly, Matt," Sally shouted, hearing the desperation in her voice. "I need you!"

She needn't have worried about her arms getting tired, for there was suddenly a loud crack, and she gasped in shock as the branch snapped. She suddenly plunged back down into the icy cold water, which was now alarmingly deep. She was submerged for a moment, and came up spluttering.

As Sally floundered helplessly, she released the branch, and it drifted away from her. Without its support, she couldn't keep herself out of the water, and she struggled to float on the surface. Since her body wasn't level, buoyancy was immensely difficult, and the starkness of her situation hit home—she was now staring death in the face.

SINCE THE BRANCH over his mother had been dislodged, Benny could see what was happening to her, and he now knew that witnessing it was by far worse than his imaginings. The frantic terror on his mother's face was more than he could bear, and as the water pooled dangerously high around her, Benny found he was unable to wait any longer.

Though his father specifically told him to stay put, he knew his mother was in grave danger, and he'd rather risk his father's anger, than not do anything. The fact Benny was risking his own life barely registered, all he cared about was reaching his mother. Benny started to climb down off the ledge.

AS SOON AS Matt finished rigging the line, he leapt off into midair, and began to abseil down Blind Summit as fast as he was physically able.

Picking up speed quickly, he soon neared Benny's position. As Matt glanced to the ledge, he was alarmed to find that Benny was no longer on it. Aghast, he spotted Benny climbing down on the far side of the ledge, untethered. Given the distance, Matt knew he couldn't reach him on this rope. He briefly considered shouting at Benny, to tell him to return to the ledge, but he worried his voice might startle Benny, and cause him to fall.

Matt had no time to consider how to help Benny, as a quick look to his wife took the situation out of his hands. Sally's body was now completely submerged, and her face was barely above the waterline.

Horrified, Matt let the rope slide through his hands even faster, oblivious to the burning sensation in his palms. As his feet came into contact with the level ground, he unfastened the rope from his harness and sprinted across the riverbank to his wife.

Dropping to his knees, Matt lifted Sally's head up out of the water, relieved beyond measure that he was in time. Coughing and spluttering, Sally greedily gulped in air, gripping his arm tightly as she clung to him for dear life.

"Can you sit up?" Matt asked frantically. "Can you support yourself so I can try and free your leg?"

"No, I can't sit upright. My leg's trapped at an awkward angle, so this is as far up as I can go." Sally's pain was evident in her voice, so Matt didn't raise her any further.

With Matt's support, Sally's head was now above the sides of the trench. Seconds later, the gully filled completely, and the water overflowed onto the surrounding riverbank.

Fortunately, since the water was no longer contained, it couldn't raise any farther, and simply spread across the level ground and back into the river.

As long as Matt could hold Sally up, she was out of imminent danger—at least she wouldn't drown.

IN THE MEANTIME, Benny was making good progress down the cliff face. In any other situation, he would've been pleased by the headway he'd made. As he glimpsed down, Benny estimated there was still twenty foot or so remaining, and at his current pace, he didn't think it would take him long.

He peered down once more, immensely relieved to see his father was now at his mother's side. Since Sally was still in the trench, he assumed his father was unable to free her by himself, and needed his assistance to release her leg.

Benny hastily stepped down to a lower foothold, and shifted his weight onto it before ensuring it was suitable. As he'd been distracted watching his parents, his hands were no longer in the best position for such a move, and as his foot slipped, his grip faltered and gave way. His hands clawed desperately for purchase, but it was too late, he was already peeling off the rock.

He fell backward, the air rushing past him as he plummeted toward the ground at a frighteningly fast speed.

Benny's young life flashed before his eyes, and then everything went black.

## Chapter Twenty-two

FOR THE THIRD time in as many minutes, Saber peered worriedly out the window. There was still no sign of Benny and his family, and it was past two p.m.—they should've been back by now. Even if Benny had forgotten about calling back into the station to tell Saber about his first climb, which she doubted, his parents would still inform Mountain Rescue they were down safely, since they'd been sensible enough to file a route plan with them.

Saber continued to pace the rescue station's floor, but she was forced to stop when Sydney blocked her path, and placed a halting hand on her stomach.

"Sabe, you're wearing a groove into the floorboards."

"Sorry." Saber checked her wristwatch, and then regarded both Sydney and Charlie, her mind made up. "I think we should assemble the team."

Neither of them offered any protest. As Sydney nodded her agreement, Charlie wheeled over to the desk and picked up the phone.

"I'll ring the guys now."

THE MOUNTAIN RESCUE Land Rover roared up to the base of The Water Tower, and skidded to a halt. The six team members jumped out of the vehicle, and collected their equipment from the car's boot.

As Sydney shouldered her heavy backpack, adjusting her stance slightly to compensate for the extra weight, she turned to address Saber, but found she was no longer beside her. Sydney spotted her—Saber strode with purpose toward the trail, visibly keen to be on the move. She caught up with her climbing partner, and linked her hand through Saber's. It was clear to Sydney that Saber was quite fond of Benny; even though they'd only just met that morning, and she hoped nothing bad had befallen either him or his family. Obviously something had happened for them to be overdue, but she hoped the reason was a straightforward one, like they'd simply taken the wrong trail and lost their way.

Clearly appreciative of the contact, Saber squeezed Sydney's hand. "They could just be lost," she said, although it was apparent she was trying to convince herself as much as anyone.

Sydney nodded in an effort to reassure. "You read my mind."

Both women began the ascent up The Water Tower, with the rest of the rescue team in tow.

MATT FELT LIKE he was being torn in two. He desperately wanted to go and check on Benny—who hadn't so much as twitched since he'd fallen from the cliff face. He'd dropped around twenty feet, so Matt knew it was a survivable distance, it all depended on how Benny landed.



Sally kept begging Matt to go and check on Benny, but she couldn't stay afloat without his support, so if he moved she would drown. He was a fast runner, but he couldn't cross the distance needed to reach Benny and return before Sally would run out of breath. He was faced with the harshest choice imaginable—his son or his wife.

He prayed that Benny's helmet had protected him, and he was merely unconscious from the fall. In which case, Matt hoped, Benny should awaken of his own accord, given time. There was a chance, though small, that Benny would be perfectly fine without his assistance. Sally would die if he left her. That stark truth made Matt's decision for him—he chose to stay with Sally.

Since Sally's body was submerged in icy cold water, she shook badly, and her hands and lips were starting to turn blue.

Matt glanced to his wristwatch, which thankfully was waterproof, and was relieved to see the time. "It's past two. Mountain Rescue will know we're missing by now. You just need to hold on, Sally. Okay? You need to hold on for Benny and me."

"I'm not going anywhere." Sally's smile trembled. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm kinda stuck here."

Matt forced himself to laugh at her joke, in an attempt to lighten the mood. He was pleased she still had the spirit to jest, and leaned down to kiss her forehead, both for her efforts, and to give what little comfort he could.

Feeling Sally shaking against him, Matt worried over how long it would take for hypothermia to set in. Examining the gully, he wondered whether he could squeeze into the narrow space alongside Sally to try and free her leg. But as he'd have to go underwater to do so, he wouldn't be able to hold Sally afloat at the same time—he urgently needed an extra pair of hands.

Matt's gaze darted across the riverbank to his unconscious son. "Benny!" he yelled loudly, trying to rouse him. "Benny, you have to wake up!"

IN THE LEAD, Saber pushed onward at a brisk pace, not letting up for a rest. Given the team's high fitness levels, she knew they could all tolerate such strain, so she continued up the inclining trail without delay. Her own fitness levels were improving nicely, and though Saber knew she wasn't yet back to her full-strength, she at least was gaining ground on that goal.

Due to the fast ascent, and taking a few shortcuts where necessary, the team made short work of the mountain, and they were already a good way up The Water Tower.

Saber chewed on the inside of her lower lip, and spoke her fretful thoughts aloud. "I hope Benny's all right, he seemed like such a nice kid."

"We'll do what we can for him, Sabe, you know that."

"I do."

"And I need you to remember that." Sydney's eyes locked on to Saber's. "No matter what happens."

BENNY AWOKE TO the sound of his name being yelled. Over and over, like a broken record. He lifted a hand groggily to his head. He didn't feel his hand's touch, which worried him. The texture beneath his hand wasn't right either—it was smooth, almost like a helmet. His

climbing accident came flooding back, along with the events that led up to his fall. He recalled his mother, trapped beneath a tree, and hastily rolled on to his front to try and see what was happening. His vision blurred at the movement, and dizziness enveloped him for a few seconds.

Benny heard his name again, and he recognised his father's voice. Matt sounded quite hoarse, and he wondered how long his dad had been shouting. How long had he been unconscious?

Benny hurt all over, but he pushed both the pain and his lightheadedness aside, as he was desperate to get to his mother. He rose slowly, first to his knees, then on to his feet. He swayed, and paused a moment while he waited for his vision to right itself.

Benny staggered in the direction of his parents, thankful none of his bones seemed to be broken. Although he was in pain, he was still able-bodied, and given the height he'd fallen, realised how fortunate he'd been.

When Benny neared the gully, his parents seemed overjoyed to see him, and they both asked the same question at once, speaking quickly. "Benny, are you okay?"

"I'm a bit sore, but I think I'm all right." Benny knelt next to his mother, reaching out to her with a frantic hand. "What about you, Mum? Are you all right?"

"I'm hanging in there." Sally smiled weakly. It was obvious she was trying to reassure Benny, but from her appearance—her skin was ashen with a tinge of blue, and she shivered uncontrollably—he could tell she was struggling. He suspected she had hypothermia.

"Benny," Matt said. "I need you to hold your mother's head up while I try to free her leg."

Benny moved into position, taking his father's place. As he carefully cradled his mum's head, he was shocked by the iciness of the water.

Matt dropped down into the gully alongside Sally, inhaling sharply as he lowered his body into the water. "God, it's freezing in here!"

"Really, Matt?" Sally's tone was dry. "You're telling me that?"

"Right." Matt chuckled. "Sorry." He took a deep breath and disappeared beneath the murky water.

Benny tenderly stroked his mother's face as they waited for Matt to re-emerge. Despite his effort to stay strong, tears ran down Benny's cheeks. The mere thought of losing his mother was unbearable, and as his emotions threatened to overwhelm him, he gritted his teeth and forced himself to think positively. To reassure himself, as well as his mother, Benny said, "Don't worry, Mum, we'll get you out of this."

Matt chose that moment to break the water's surface, and after catching his breath, wiped the excess moisture from his eyes. He shook his head. "It's no good. The space is too tight. I can't get in to free your leg. The awkward position of the limb prevents me from getting to where I need to be."

Despair engulfed Benny, and his gaze anxiously flitted back and forth between his parents. "What can we do now? Should I go for help?"

Matt studied his wristwatch for several moments, clearly thinking the question over. "Mountain Rescue will be on their way by now. It's best if we stay together, the last thing anyone needs is for you to get lost."

Knowing all he could do was wait for the Mountain Rescue team to arrive, Benny sent a silent prayer up to the heavens, urging them to hurry.

“THERE THEY ARE!” Saber shouted, pointing toward the riverbank at the foot of Blind Summit. She and the rest of the team made their way over to the family, then quickly took in the scene.

“We’re Mountain Rescue,” Doug said, taking charge as always. “We’re here to help you.” Matt swiftly told the team what had happened.

Saber was relieved to see Benny appeared unharmed. After Jeff took over in supporting Sally’s head, Saber gently guided the teenager aside, in an effort to spare him any further distress.

Without any hesitation, Sydney climbed into the gully with Sally. “I’m a doctor. My name’s Sydney. Are you hurt anywhere else except your leg, Sally?”

“No.” Sally’s teeth chattered as she spoke. “But I’m so cold, I can’t even feel my leg anymore.”

Sydney turned to Doug, who was clearly waiting for her medical opinion before proceeding. “We’ll have to move quickly. She needs to be out of this water.”

Doug gave orders, and the team worked as a well-oiled machine, each member knowing what was required of them, and doing the task without question.

As the team, excluding Sydney and Jeff, assembled around the trunk of the tree, Matt and Benny joined them in order to help with the job at hand. Given the size of the tree, Saber had a feeling their assistance would be needed, and taking hold of the trunk, she made sure she had a firm, unshakeable stance.

“Ready?” Doug asked. He surveyed each individual, then, when he seemed satisfied, he added, “On three. One.”

Sydney went under the water, manoeuvring into position to free Sally’s trapped leg.

“Two.”

Everyone braced in readiment.

“Three.”

Groans of strain filled the air as the trunk of the tree ever so slowly began to rise off the ground. They managed to raise it several inches, then Sydney’s head popped up out of the water.

“Move her back, Jeff.” As her teammate did as instructed, Sydney carefully supported Sally’s legs. She called out over her shoulder, “She’s free.”

Before the group could lower the tree back to the earth, there was a loud cracking sound as a large branch snapped, and swung down directly toward Benny.

Benny yelped, and staggered backward several steps to avoid being hit by the swinging branch. Losing his balance, he stumbled, and was unable to stop himself from tumbling headfirst into the fast flowing river.

By far the closest to Benny, Saber released her hold on the tree and ran for the river’s edge. She quickly stripped out of her backpack and jacket, knowing the bulk would weigh her down, and jumped into the surging river after him.

The strong current swept Saber quickly downstream, and she scanned the water desperately for Benny. She knew each minute was vital as a waterfall lay ahead, and if she didn’t get herself and Benny out in time, they would both plummet to their deaths.

The gushing river was freezing cold. Saber swam powerfully into the centre, where the current was strongest, so it would carry her along at a faster pace—she needed to catch up to Benny. Though he’d only entered the river a few seconds before Saber, the brief delay meant Benny was now farther downstream than she was.

Surprisingly, as the river heaved and rolled around her, she was able to spot Benny ahead of her. His bright yellow helmet shone like a beacon in the dark, cloudy water, so Saber was able to keep track of him, as they were both pushed forcefully downstream.

She could see Benny was trying to fight against the unrelenting current, his arms cutting quickly through the water, but he made little headway. Still, his efforts allowed Saber to catch up with him, and she latched on to Benny, making sure she had a firm, unbreakable grip.

“Saber.” Benny coughed and spat out a mouthful of liquid. “The waterfall!”

“I need you to swim, Benny. As hard as you can.”

Benny’s eyes were wild with fear. “I don’t want to drown.”

Saber shook her head, hoping she appeared more confident than she felt. “I’m not going to let that happen. But you have to swim.” She gave him an encouraging tug. “Right now.”

Turning into the current, Saber attempted to swim against it, not to go upstream, but to try and get to the riverbank. If she could just get them both out of the central current, the main driving force of the river, they stood a chance of getting out of this.

Saber put her all into it, her entire being focussed on nothing else but her goal—reaching the riverbank. Swimming with determination, even when her body began to tire, she tried to see if anyone was on the riverbank. She didn’t doubt the team would be working hard in an effort to reach them, they too would know of the impending threat of the waterfall, but as of yet, she couldn’t see anyone close by.

Saber kept on swimming, not giving up, and with relief noted Benny was doing the same.

As the river grew ever more tumultuous, she recognised the sign for what it was—they were drawing nearer to the falls. Whatever assistance the rescue team planned on providing, Saber knew it would have to come soon, or it simply wouldn’t be in time.

## Chapter Twenty-three

SYDNEY WAS FINDING it immensely difficult to concentrate. Despite her years of medical training, her mind kept wandering worriedly to Saber. Was she all right? Had she managed to reach Benny? Had the team managed to get them out of the turbulent river?

As if reading her thoughts, Jeff, who was the only person that'd remained with her to help and tend to the injured Sally, spoke up quietly, "Don't worry, Sydney. They'll get her out." He peered down at Sally. "They'll get them both out."

Sydney took a deep breath, focussing on the task at hand. Though she wanted nothing more than to run after the others, to go and help Saber, she had a job to do, and it was vital she did it. Sally and the rest of the team were counting on her.

Between she and Jeff, they'd gotten Sally onto a stretcher, and after cutting off her cold, soaking wet clothes they'd covered her with a heat-retaining blanket. As Sydney examined Sally's badly bruised leg, she was somewhat surprised the injury wasn't worse than it appeared, given what had happened. The excessive discolouration indicated the leg might be fractured or broken, but Sydney couldn't feel anything protruding or out of place, so it didn't seem to be a particularly bad injury. She strapped the leg down to keep it immobile, then nodded in reassurance to Sally. "It'll need to be X-rayed at the hospital, but from my assessment I can't find any breaks." She shook her head in disbelief. "You're incredibly lucky."

Sally stared off toward the direction of the river. "Let's hope I haven't used all the luck up."

Sydney nodded. Since both of their loved ones were in mortal danger, she couldn't have put it better herself.

SABER FELT HER weaker shoulder start to protest as she swam against the persistent onslaught of the river. She could tell Benny was beginning to tire also, as his efforts were weakening. The icy water drained their strength, and Saber felt her energy levels waning. As the cold seemed to seep into her very marrow, her limbs grew heavier, and each stroke became more and more taxing on her body.

Suddenly, Saber spotted movement on the riverbank, which was much closer than she'd expected. She was pleased, but somewhat surprised to find she'd actually succeeded in getting them out of the central current, though she knew they were far from safe yet. Her efforts bought them some time—they weren't moving as quickly downstream. She'd hoped once they'd escaped the driving force she'd be able to power through to the riverbank itself, but due to the excess rain recently, even the lesser current at the side was still incredibly strong. Her energy all but depleted from the relentless struggle, Saber wasn't sure she was making any farther headway toward the bank.

Fortunately, she didn't need to. The movement she'd spotted turned out to be the rescue team, and in between the rolling swells of water, Saber saw them forming a line, as Doug threw a

rope out into the frothing river. Doug's aim was good—he'd thrown it slightly upstream of Saber so that it washed down toward her.

Saber tracked the rope with a careful eye, knowing that as the roar of the waterfall grew ever louder, she may only have one chance to get this right.

"Benny, grab on to me from behind. I'm going to need both hands for the rope." Saber felt Benny latch on, getting a secure grip around her shoulders.

As the rope sailed closer on the water's surface, she grabbed hold, but her hands were growing numb from the cold, so to ensure she didn't lose contact with their lifeline, Saber wound the rope several times around her hands, then held on tight.

"Got it," Saber yelled, hoping her voice would carry above the din of the water to the riverbank.

On the shore, Doug, Coop, Rich, and Matt heaved in unison, and the rope snapped taut.

Saber and Benny were jerked to an abrupt halt. Finding resistance, the swell of the river surged higher, almost covering them as it pounded strongly against their bodies, as if determined to wash them downstream.

Saber was relieved she'd thought to wrap the rope around her hands, as she wasn't certain she could've held on for long against such a battering. Water got into her mouth, but as she tried to spit it out more got in, and she ended up swallowing the icy liquid. Her immediate reflex was to cough, but she fought to restrain the urge, knowing it would only allow more water into her mouth. She heard Benny coughing and spluttering behind her, so he was obviously having the same problem.

Just when Saber began to worry the men were unable to draw the rope in against the powerful current, she and Benny were tugged through the water in a rough haul. They slowed for a moment, but this time didn't stop as another heave dragged them onward. Now that they were moving, the hauls became more evenly spaced, as the men clearly found their rhythm. As Saber cut through the water with Benny hanging on to her shoulders, she got a glimpse of the men's faces, and the strain it was taking to pull them in against the might of the river. Even with four strong men on the end of the rope, the water was a fierce combatant, and it seemed it wasn't willing to release them easily.

Saber clenched her jaw as the pain in her shoulder increased, but she knew she had no choice but to hold on to the rope. She glanced up to check on their progress—they were closing in on the riverbank, not much farther now.

Benny's grip started to loosen, so Saber shouted encouragement at him, "Hold on, Benny. We're nearly there."

The last few metres seemed to take forever, but then Doug was there, holding out his meaty hand. Saber reached out and clamped on to his wrist, as he locked on to hers. She met his unwavering gaze and knew in that instant she was safe—Doug was a man who could be counted on.

Doug said, "I've got you. I won't let go." He glanced behind to the other men, who were still holding the rope. "One last pull to get them onto the bank. Now."

As the three men heaved on the rope, Doug dragged Saber and Benny out of the river and up onto the bank. Once they were clear of the water, both Saber and Benny collapsed in a heap on the ground, exhausted.

Matt came quickly over to Benny and embraced his son, tears streaming down his face. He regarded Saber with heartfelt gratitude. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

Saber was too tired to speak. Seeing her team's anxious faces, and feeling Coop's concerned touch to her arm, she gave a thumbs up to let them know she was all right, then laid flat on her back to catch her breath.

With a grin, Doug patted Saber on the stomach. "Well I'd say you're back on top form."

Rich whistled. "Hell yeah, she is! That was awesome, Saber!"

"Awesome though it was," Coop placed a hand over his chest, "please don't ever do that again. I don't think my heart can take it."

Saber managed a nod, having absolutely no intention of ever repeating such a feat. "I'll do my best."

AS SOON AS Sydney caught sight of the team coming along the riverbank she ran toward them. Her gaze scanned the group quickly, searching intently for Saber.

Given Saber's height, she was easy to spot, and Sydney hurried through the team to get to her. Saber was at the rear, walking slowly alongside Coop. Sydney rushed over and threw her arms around her partner, relieved beyond measure she'd gotten out of the river.

"Thank God you're all right, Sabe." She held her tightly and rubbed Saber's back in an effort to get some warmth into her cold body. Though Saber had a heat-retaining blanket draped over her shoulders, Sydney could see the clothes beneath were soaking wet, so the blanket wouldn't be of much use. She glanced across to Benny, pleased to see he was wearing dry clothes. The clothes were far too big, so she assumed they'd been lent to him from a member of the team—they all carried spare outfits, in case of such incidents. Sydney had changed into her spare clothes, for after being underwater in the gully she'd been soaked through.

Sydney plucked at Saber's sodden jumper. "Why haven't you changed?"

"I suggested that." Rich suddenly appeared, clearly he'd been listening to the exchange. "After all, I'd brought along her backpack, but she rejected my offer of help."

Coop's tone was droll. "I wonder why."

Rich scoffed. "Please. I'm a professional. I was just trying to do my job and help out a colleague."

Saber rolled her eyes. "Of course you were."

Rich harrumphed and walked away.

Saber turned to Sydney, "Does that answer your question? My hands are still a bit numb so I couldn't change myself, and I wasn't comfortable with one of the guys helping. Well, that's not true. I was fine with Coop helping but," she indicated Coop's blushing face, "he wasn't comfortable with it, so..." Saber paused briefly. "Would you mind helping me change?"

"Of course not." Sydney reached up and softly brushed Saber's cheek. "Let's do it now, you're trembling."

"That's my cue." Coop quickly strode away, following the rest of the group. "Don't worry, I'll make sure you have your privacy."

"Thanks, Coop," Saber said. "I appreciate that."

When they were alone, Sydney dug into Saber's backpack and removed her spare clothes. Between them, Saber was soon changed into dry clothes, and after removing her helmet, Sydney slipped a thick hat onto Saber's head for extra warmth. As she fastened the helmet back into place, she noticed the grin playing on Saber's features. "What? What's that look for?"

"I love you, that's all." Saber leaned down and kissed Sydney.

Sydney returned the kiss, and smiled. “I love you too, Sabe.” Her mouth twitched impishly. “Though I haven’t decided yet whether to be immensely proud of what you just did for Benny, or to throttle you for it. You scared me witless.”

Saber tenderly stroked Sydney’s blonde locks. “My preference is the first.” Blue eyes met green. “I’m sorry for scaring you, sweetheart.”

Sydney released the last of her tension in a heavy breath. “I know it’s the job we both signed up for.” She laid a hand on Saber’s upper arm. “How’s your shoulder?”

“It started to hurt quite a lot in the water, but I think that was the constant use—I was either swimming or straining to hang on to the rope.” Saber carefully rolled her shoulder, testing its motion. After a few movements, she seemed pleasantly surprised. “I don’t think I’ve pulled anything, as it’s nothing more than a dull ache now.”

“Good,” Sydney said. “Only your second rescue back, and you’re already performing miracles.” For several moments, she regarded Saber with awe. Saber was phenomenal. “And if I wasn’t blessed enough to be dating you already, I’d ask you out right here, right now.”

Appearing flattered, Saber chuckled. “I see you’ve decided on the first option, pride over throttling.”

“Seems like it.” Sydney grinned, and cupped Saber’s face in her hands. “Now kiss me, hero.”

SABER LENGTHENED HER stride so she could catch up with Benny. She wanted to speak with him before the car journey to the hospital, and since they were descending the lower part of The Water Tower, she decided it was now or never.

She felt a lot better now that she’d regained her normal body temperature, and was pleased she had no lasting effects regarding her shoulder. She closed in on Benny’s stretcher—given what he’d been through, first with the fall off the rock face, then the ordeal with the river, Sydney thought it safest to stretch him down until he could be checked over thoroughly at the hospital. Sally was also in a stretcher, being monitored by Sydney, and the four men on the team were carrying the two stretchers between them.

Saber caught Benny’s gaze. “How are you holding up, kid?”

“Saber.” Benny appeared glad to see her. “I’m okay. Just embarrassed I’ve gotta be carried down like this.”

Saber waved a hand in dismissal. “Don’t be. It’ll add to the drama when you tell your friends at climbing class all about your first trip out on the mountain.”

Benny’s eyes widened, then he nodded keenly at the suggestion. “Good idea. Boy, am I going to have a story to tell them!”

“You certainly do.” Saber paused briefly, becoming serious. “I’m sorry your first climb didn’t go better. Though it’s true mountainsides can be dangerous places, I want you to know that what you went through was a freak occurrence, and you shouldn’t let it put you off climbing altogether.” She leaned down and patted Benny on the shoulder. “I realise it may take you some time to put this incident behind you, it was quite an ordeal, but...” Saber broke off at his headshake.

“No. I mean yes, obviously it was, but I’m not going to let it put me off. I reached the halfway point of Blind Summit before the accident, and that part of the climb was amazing.” Benny’s eyes went distant for a second, as if recalling the memory. He smiled and nodded at Saber. “I won’t let it put me off. I’ll keep climbing.”



“Good for you. You’re a brave kid, Benny. Truly. Your parents should be proud of you.” On his stretcher, Benny blushed, though he grinned from ear to ear. “Thanks. And thank you for saving my life. I owe you one. I’ll have to join Mountain Rescue now!”

Saber chuckled, but shook her head. “No. Don’t join up because you feel indebted to do so. Only join if you honestly want to.” She paused to let her words sink in. “Besides, you can repay me by going out and living your life, that’s all I need in return.”

Benny nodded happily. “I can do that.”

SYDNEY JUMPED AT the sound of applause as she entered her brother’s hospital room, with Saber in tow. She blinked in surprise upon realising her whole family—parents and siblings—were present.

“What’s all this?” She regarded Saber in question, but she appeared just as startled as Sydney.

Sitting up in his bed, Anthony read aloud from a newspaper. “Local Mountain Rescue team saves family of three.”

Growing self-conscious, Sydney moved toward the bed. “Give me that.” She tried to snatch it out of Anthony’s grasp, but he leaned to the other side of the bed so he was out of reach. “That rescue was two days ago, you’d think they’d have new things to write about by now.”

Visibly enjoying himself, Anthony cleared his throat and moved the paper up, obviously choosing select parts to read from. “The medic on the team—Dr. Sydney Greenwood—had to work quickly to save a victim’s limb, as the ever-rising river water threatened to drown her patient.” Anthony grinned at Sydney. “I’m so proud of my little sister.”

Penny nodded in agreement. “We all are.”

“Yes, well done, Sydney.” Daniel pointed to the newspaper. “I’m going to frame that article.”

Sydney flushed in embarrassment. “Must you? It’s not like I was the only one there, the rest of the team were just as involved.”

“I’m getting to that.” Anthony snapped the newspaper straight, and began to read once more. “Kelly Saber, a veteran climber on the rescue team—”

Saber interrupted, pulling a face. “Veteran? That makes me sound old.”

Anthony sniggered, then read it again as if to rub it in. “...A veteran climber on the rescue team, had to use all of her expertise when a fourteen year old boy was washed into a surging river above a substantial waterfall. In a true display of bravery, she jumped in after the boy, and the rescue team were able to get them both out safely.” Anthony took a breath. “Thanks to the fast and efficient response of all on the Mountain Rescue team, the family of three will make a full recovery.”

As Sydney’s parents and siblings clapped again, Saber bashfully tugged on her earlobe. She gazed beseechingly to Sydney, as if willing her to stop it.

“All right, all right,” Sydney said, holding up a hand. “Thank you for your praise, but I think both Saber and I are embarrassed enough.”

Everyone laughed, and thankfully Anthony put down the newspaper. “Actually,” he said. “I’m kind of jealous that I missed it. I was hoping to see a rescue in action.”

Sydney shook her head. “There’s no pleasing some people. You wanted to see a rescue, well we did you one better—you were part of one.”

“You went in a helicopter,” Saber added, “the whole works.”

Anthony frowned. “Except I was unconscious for the entire thing, so I missed all the cool stuff.” He threw his hands up in despair. “Typical.”

“I think you should just be grateful you’re going to make a full recovery, Anthony,” Daniel said wisely. “Let’s not be greedy.”

Anthony nodded. “True. And besides, I can always go out with the team in the future.” He stared at Sydney in expectation. “Right?”

Sydney grinned. “Only on the condition you always wear your helmet, whether you’re climbing or not.”

As the room erupted into laughter, Anthony chuckled along with the rest of his family. “Don’t worry, I won’t ever take it off.”

# Epilogue

SABER SMILED AS Sydney came into their bedroom carrying a breakfast tray, which overflowed with cereal, toast, and a pot of coffee. She sat up eagerly in bed, and accepted the tray onto her lap. “This is a nice surprise. Thank you, sweetheart.”

Sydney brushed her lips softly against Saber’s, then moved around the bed and clambered in beside her. “I thought it’d be a good start to our weekend off.”

Saber nodded as she took a sip of her coffee. Setting it down, she noticed the other cup was empty, overturned on the tray. She assumed Sydney had forgotten to fill it, so she reached out for the cup. Sydney stopped her mid-motion, and Saber regarded her questioningly. “Don’t you want coffee?”

“Not just yet. I want to talk to you first.”

“Okay.” Saber ignored the breakfast and gave Sydney her complete attention. “Go ahead.”

Oddly, Sydney seemed somewhat nervous, and her hands fidgeted in her lap. “I know we’ve had our fair share of drama lately, what with Anthony’s accident, and I just wanted to let you know I couldn’t have got through it without you. More than that though, I wouldn’t have wanted to. You’re the most important person in my life, Sabe, and I feel like a part of me is missing when I’m not with you.” She gazed at Saber. “We’ve been through a lot already, and I feel that every challenge we face just brings us closer to each other.” She took a deep breath. “What I’m trying to say is, whatever life has to throw at us, I want to face it with you by my side. Together.” Sydney tapped the overturned coffee cup.

Saber could barely make out the cup through her tears. Sydney’s speech touched her deeply, and her hand trembled as she lifted the coffee cup off the tray. Underneath it was a small velvet box. Wasting no time, Saber quickly put the cup aside and opened the box.

Inside, lay a white gold engagement ring. Saber liked it instantly—it was simple yet elegant, and suited her tastes perfectly.

Sydney lovingly cupped Saber’s cheek, drawing her gaze. “Would you do me the honour of becoming my wife?”

Through overjoyed tears, Saber beamed at Sydney. “The honour would be all mine.” She moved the breakfast tray onto the nightstand, and embraced Sydney heartily. “Yes! Yes, I will marry you.”

Sydney laughed, and looked positively radiant as she slipped the ring on to Saber’s finger. Their lips met, and the kiss was filled with love, devotion, and promises of their future together.

The End

## About the Author

Sky was born and raised in England. From a young age writing has been her greatest joy, and she likes nothing more than to immerse herself in whatever story she is working on. She also has a passion for the outdoors, and enjoys long walks at the beach or in the countryside. Ideas for several more stories are rattling around inside her head, all of which are just waiting to be written.

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Can Jayce get Tiara to realize she belongs in Silver Waters, that they belong together?

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by Brenda Adcock

Joan Carmichael, a successful New York businesswoman, lost the love of her life ten years earlier. Alone, she raised their four children, always cherishing her deep love for her wife. Her memories of their life together come back even stronger as one of their daughters prepares to marry. Joan and her four adult kids fly to Virginia to meet the groom's family and attend the ceremony at the small horse farm owned by the mother of the fiancé.

Evelyn "Evey" Chase, also a widow, has secrets in her past, and her memories of her dead husband aren't pleasant. She's concerned about meeting her future daughter-in-law's family, certain that she and her three kids will have little in common with the wealthy New Yorkers. Besides, the thought of two women in a relationship bringing up a family together makes her uncomfortable, even though her daughter-in-law assures her that lesbianism is not hereditary or catching.

When the two women meet they are drawn to one another in a way neither anticipated, and the game of denial begins. Evey fights her attraction and doesn't realize the effect she has on Joan. Joan tries to shake off her feelings, seeing them as a betrayal to the memory of her wife. Besides, isn't Evey Chase straight? After Evey and Joan share an intimate moment at the wedding reception, they are both emotionally terrified and Joan flees. Will Joan overcome the feeling of betraying her former mate and stop denying her desire to be happy again? Can Evey finally face her past in order to accept the love of another woman and the desire to live the life she had once dreamed of?

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