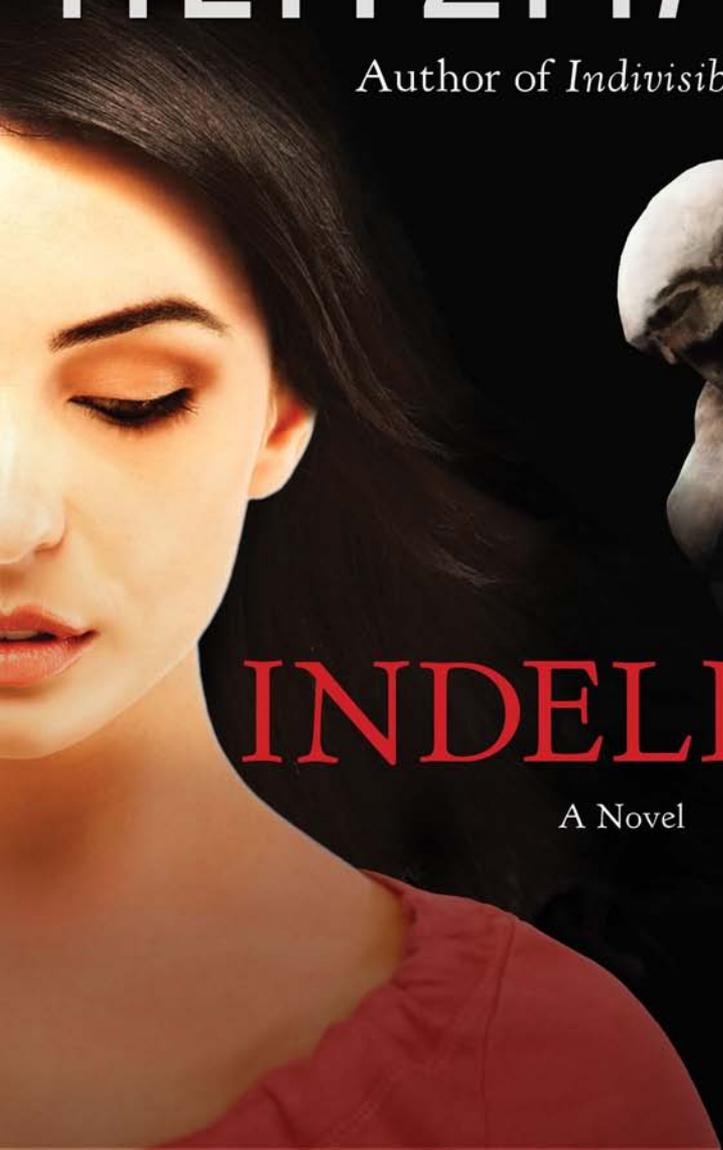


KRISTEN HEITZMANN

Author of *Indivisible*



INDELIBLE

A Novel

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INDELIBLE

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*Dedicated to
Alfred Otto Heitzmann (1913–2011),
who enriched my life by his presence.*



The unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield.

Into his mind came thoughts. Sparks. Bright points of fire seared with blistering clarity. He touched the scars and found truth. Goodness and purity, like scales, fell away. He had cowered in shame and impotence, hating in silence. Now he walked to where the other lay, unsuspecting in sleep. His gaze slid from the slack face to his timid hands and what they held. All things wicked began in innocence.

One

A veined bolt of lightning sliced the ozone-scented sky as Trevor plunged down the craggy slope, dodging evergreen spires like slalom poles. Rocks and gravel spewed from his boots and caromed off the vertical pitch.

“Trevor.” Whit skidded behind him. “We’re not prepared for this.”

No. But he hurled himself after the tawny streak. He was not losing that kid.

“He’s suffocated,” Whit shouted. “His neck’s broken.”

Trevor leaped past a man—probably the dad—gripping his snapped shinbone. Whit could help there. Digging his heels into the shifting pine needles, Trevor gave chase, outmatched and unwavering. His heart pumped hard as he neared the base of the gulch, jumping from a lichen-crusting stone to a fallen trunk. The cougar jumped the creek, lost its grip, and dropped the toddler. Yes.

He splashed into the icy flow, dispersing scattered leaves like startled goldfish. After driving his hand into the water, he gripped a stone and raised it. Not heavy, not nearly heavy enough.

Lowering its head over the helpless prey, the mountain lion snarled a spine-chilling warning. There was no contest, but the cat, an immature male, might not realize its advantage, might not know its fear of man was mere illusion. Thunder crackled. Trevor tasted blood where he’d bitten his tongue.

Advancing, he engaged the cat’s eyes, taunting it to charge or run. The cat backed up, hissing. A yearling cub, able to snatch a tot from the trail, but unprepared for this fearless challenge. Too much adrenaline for fear. Too much blood on the ground.

With a shout, he heaved the rock. As the cat streaked up the mountainside, he charged across the creek to the victim. He’d steeled himself for carnage, but even so, the nearly severed arm, the battered, bloody feet...

His nose filled with the musky lion scent, the rusty smell of blood. He reached out. No pulse.

He dropped to his knees as Whit joined him from behind, on guard. He returned the boy's arm to the socket, and holding it there with one trembling hand, Trevor began CPR with his other. On a victim so small, it took hardly any force, his fingers alone performing the compressions. The lion had failed to trap the victim's face in its mouth. By grabbing the back of the head, neck, and shoulder, it had actually protected those vulnerable parts. But blood streamed over the toddler's face from a deep cut high on the scalp, and he still wasn't breathing.

Trevor bent to puff air into the tiny lungs, compressed again with his fingers, and puffed as lightly as he would to put out a match. *Come on.* He puffed and compressed while Whit watched for the cat's return. Predators fought for their kills—even startled ones.

A whine escaped the child's mouth. He jerked his legs, emitting a high-pitched moan. Trevor shucked his jacket and tugged his T-shirt off over his head. He tied the sleeves around the toddler's arm and shoulder, pulled the rest around, and swaddled the damaged feet—shoes and socks long gone.

Thunder reverberated. The first hard drops smacked his skin. Tenderly, he pulled the child into his chest and draped the jacket over as a different rumble chopped the air. They had started up the mountain to find two elderly hikers who'd been separated from their party. Whit must have radioed the helicopter. He looked up. This baby might live because two old guys had gotten lost.



In the melee at the trailhead, Natalie clutched her sister-in-law's hands, the horror of the ordeal still rocking them. As Aaron and little Cody were airlifted from the mountain, she breathed, "They're going to be all right."

"You don't know that." Face splotched and pale, Paige swung her head. Though her hair hung in wet blond strands, her makeup was weatherproof, her cologne still detectable. Even dazed, her brother's wife looked and smelled expensive.

"The lion's grip protected Cody's head and neck," one of the paramedics had told them. "It could have been so much worse."

Paige started to sob. “His poor arm. What if he loses his arm?”

“Don’t go there.” What good was there in thinking it?

“How will he do the stuff boys do? I thought he’d be like Aaron, the best kid on the team.”

“He’ll be the best kid no matter what.”

“In the Special Olympics?”

Natalie recoiled at the droplets of spit that punctuated the bitter words. “He’s alive, Paige. What were the odds those men from search and rescue would be right there with a helicopter already on standby?”

“We shouldn’t have needed it.” Paige clenched her teeth. “Aaron’s supposed to be recovering. He would have been if you weren’t such a freak.”

“What?” She’d endured Paige’s unsubtle resentment, but “*freak*”?

“Let me go.” Paige jerked away, careening toward the SUV.

Natalie heard the engine roar, the gravel flung by the spinning tires, but all she saw was the hate in Paige’s eyes, the pain twisting her brother’s face as he held his fractured leg, little Cody in the lion’s maw, the man leaping after...

She needed to clear the images, but it wouldn’t happen here. Around her, press vans and emergency vehicles drained from the lot, leaving the scent of exhaust and tire scars in the rusty mud.

Paige had stranded her.

“*Freak.*” Heart aching, she took a shaky step toward the road. It hadn’t been that long a drive from the studio. A few miles. Maybe five. She hadn’t really watched—because Aaron was watching for her.

Off the roster for a pulled oblique, he had seen an opportunity to finalize her venture and help her move, help her settle in, and see if she could do it. She’d been so thankful. How could any of them have known it would come to this?



Trevor’s spent muscles shook with dumped adrenaline. He breathed the moist air in through his nose, willing his nerves to relax. Having gotten all they were going to get from him, most of the media had left the trailhead, following the story to the hospital. Unfortunately, Jaz remained.

She said, “You live for this, don’t you?” Pulling her fiery red hair into

a messy ponytail didn't disguise her incendiary nature or the smoldering coals reserved for him. He accepted the towel Whit handed him and wiped the rain from his head and neck, hoping she wouldn't see the shakes. The late-summer storm had lowered the temperature enough she might think he was shivering.

"Whose idea was it to chase?"

"It's not like you think about it. You just act."

Typing into her BlackBerry, she said, "Acted without thinking."

"Come on, Jaz." She couldn't still be on his case.

"Interesting your being in place for the dramatic rescue of a pro athlete's kid. Not enough limelight lately?"

"We were on another search."

She cocked her eyebrow. "You had no idea the victim's dad plays center field for the Rockies?"

"Yeah, I got his autograph on the way down." He squinted at the nearly empty parking lot. "Aren't you following the story?"

"What do you think this is?"

"You got the same as everyone. That's all I have to say."

"You told us what happened. I want the guts. How did it feel? What were you thinking?" She planted a hand on her hip. "Buy me a drink?"

He'd rather go claw to claw with another mountain lion. But considering the ways she could distort this, he relented. "The Summit?"

"I'd love to." She pocketed her BlackBerry and headed for her car.

Whit raised his brows at her retreat. "Still feeling reckless?"

"Sometimes it's better to take her head on."

"Like the cat?" Whit braced his hips.

"The cat was young, inexperienced."

"You didn't know that."

"There was a chance the child wasn't dead."

"What if it hadn't run?"

"If it attacked, you'd have been free to grab the kid."

"Nice for you, getting mauled."

"If it got ugly, I'd have shot it."

"Shot?"

He showed him the Magnum holstered against the small of his back.

Whit stared at him, stone-faced. “You had your gun and you used a rock?”

“I was pretty sure it would run.”

“Pretty sure,” Whit said. “So, what? It wouldn’t be fair to use your weapon?”

It had been the cat against him on some primal level the gun hadn’t entered into. He said, “I could have hit the boy, or the cat could have dropped him down the gulch. When it did let go, I realized its inexperience and knew we had a chance to scare it off. Department of Wildlife can decide its fate. I was after the child.”

“Okay, fine.” With a hard exhale, Whit rubbed his face. “This was bad.”

Trevor nodded. Until today, the worst he’d seen over four years of rescues was a hiker welded to a tree by lightning and an ice climber’s impalement on a jagged rock spear. There’d been no death today, but Whit looked sick. “You’re a new dad. Seeing that little guy had to hit you right in the gut.”

Whit canted his head.

“I’m just saying.” Trevor stuffed his shaking hands into his jacket pockets. The storm passed, though the air still smelled of wet earth and rain. He drove Whit back, then went home to shower before meeting Jazmyn Dufoe at the Summit. Maybe he’d just start drinking now.



Arms aching, Natalie drove her hands into the clay. On the huge, square Corian table, two busts looked back at her: Aaron in pain, and Paige, her fairy-tale life rent by a primal terror that sprang without warning. She had pushed and drawn and formed the images locked in her mind, even though her hands burned with the strain.

No word had come from the Children’s Hospital in Denver, where the police chief said they’d taken Cody, or from the hospital that had Aaron. Waiting to hear anything at all made a hollow in her stomach.

She heaved a new block of clay to the table, wedged and added it to the mound already softened. Just as she started to climb the stepstool, her phone rang. She plunged her hands into the water bucket and swabbed them with a towel, silently begging for good news. “Aaron?”

Not her brother, but a nurse calling. “Mr. Reeve asked me to let you know he came through surgery just fine. He’s stable, and the prognosis is optimistic. He doesn’t want you to worry.”

Natalie pressed her palm to her chest with relief. “Did he say anything about Cody? Is there any news?”

“No, he didn’t say. I’m sure he’ll let you know as soon as he hears something.”

“Of course. Thank you so much for calling.”

Natalie climbed back onto the stool, weary but unable to stop. Normally, the face was enough, but this required more. She molded clay over stiff wire-mesh, drawing it up, up, proportionately taller than an average man, shoulders that bore the weight of other people’s fear, one arm wielding a stone, the other enfolding the little one. The rescuer hadn’t held both at once, but she combined the actions to release both images.

She had stared hard at his face for only a moment before he plunged over the ridge, yet retained every line and plane of it. Determination and fortitude in the cut of his mouth, selfless courage in the eyes. There’d been fear for Cody. And himself? Not of the situation, but something. . .

It came through her hands in the twist of his brow. A heroic face, aware of the danger, capable of failing, unwilling to hold back. Using fingers and tools, she moved the powerful images trapped by her eidetic memory through her hands to the clay, creating an exterior storage that freed her mind, and immortalizing him—whoever he was.



The Summit bar was packed and buzzing, the rescue already playing on televisions visible from every corner. With the whole crowd toasting and congratulating him, Jaz played nice—until he accepted her ride home and infuriated her all over again by not inviting her in.

He’d believed that dating women whose self-esteem reached egotistical meant parting ways wouldn’t faze them. Jaz destroyed that theory. She was not only embittered but vindictive. After turning on the jets, Trevor sank into his spa, letting the water beat his lower- and mid-lumbar muscles. He pressed the remote to open the horizontal blinds and to look out through the loft windows.

Wincing, he reached in and rubbed the side of his knee. That plunge down the slope had cost him, but, given the outcome, he didn't consider it a judgment error. That honor went to putting himself once more at the top of Jaz's hate list. He maneuvered his knee into the pressure of a jet. When he got out, he'd ice it. If he got out.

He closed his eyes and pictured the battered toddler. The crowd's attention had kept the thoughts at bay, easy to talk about the cat, how mountain lions rarely attacked people, how he and Whit had scared it off, how DOW would euthanize if they caught it, how his only priority had been to get the child. He had segued into the business he and Whit had opened the previous spring, rock and ice climbing, land and water excursions, cross-country ski and snowshoe when the season turned.

That was his business, but rescuing was in his blood, had been since his dad made him the man of the house by not coming home one night or any thereafter. At first, the nightmares had been bad—all the things that could go wrong: fire, snakes, tarantulas, tornadoes. They had populated his dreams until he woke drenched in sweat, cursing his father for trusting him to do what a grown man couldn't.

The phone rang. He sloshed his arm up, dried his hand on the towel lying beside it, and answered. "Hey, Whit."

"You doing okay?"

"Knee hurts. You?"

"Oh sure. You know—"

"Hold on. There's someone at the door."

"Yeah. Me and Sara."

Trevor said, "Cute. Where's your key?"

"Forgot it."

Gingerly, he climbed over the side, then wrapped a towel around his hips, and let them in.

"You mind?" Whit frowned at the towel, although Sara hadn't batted an eye.

She came in and made herself at home. Whit carried their two-month-old asleep in his car seat to a resting place. Trevor threw on Under Armour shorts and a clean T-shirt, then rejoined them.

"So what's up?"

“Nice try, Trevor.” Sara fixed him with a look. “I especially like the practiced nonchalance.”

He grinned. “Hey, I’ve got it down.”

“With Jaz, maybe. No claw marks?”

“Too public.”

Whit rubbed his wife’s shoulder. “We knew you’d worry this thing, so Sara brought the remedy.”

She drew the Monopoly box out of her oversize bag with a grin that said she intended to win and would, wearing them down with her wheeling and dealing. *“I’ll take that silly railroad off your hands. It’s no good to you when I have the other three.”*

He rubbed his hands, looking into her bold blue eyes. “Bring it.”

The mindless activity and their chatter lightened his mood as Sara had intended. She knew him as well as Whit, maybe better. Each time he caught the concern, he reassured her with a smile. He’d be fine.

Whit played his get-out-of-jail card and freed his cannon. “Hear what’s going in next door to us?”

“No.”

“An art gallery.”

“Yeah?” Trevor adjusted the ice pack on his knee.

“Place called Nature Waits.”

“Waits for what?”

Whit shrugged. “Have to ask the lady sculptor.”

“Won’t exactly draw for our kind of customer.”

“At least it won’t compete.” Sara rolled the dice and moved her pewter shoe. “Another outfitter could have gone in. I’ll buy Park Place.”

Both men mouthed, *“I’ll buy Park Place.”*

She shot them a smile.

Two hours later, she had bankrupted them with her thoughtful loans and exorbitant use of hotels on prime properties. He closed the door behind them, and it hit. He raised the toilet seat and threw up, then pressed his back to the wall and rested his head, breathing deeply.

The shaking returned, and this time he couldn’t blame adrenaline. He had literally puffed the life back into that tiny body. If that child had died in his arms...



Midst came their mighty Paramount, and seemed
Alone th' antagonist of Heaven, nor less
Than Hell's dread Emperor, with pomp supreme,
And god-like imitated state.

Child snatched from lion's jaws. Two-year-old spared in deadly attack. Rescuer Trevor MacDaniel, champion of innocents, protector of life. Cameras rolling, flashes flashing, earnest newscasters recounted the tale. "On this mountain, a miracle. What could have been a tragedy became a triumph through the courage of this man who challenged a mountain lion to save a toddler attacked while hiking with his father, center-fielder..."

He consumed the story in drunken drafts. Eyes swimming, he gazed upon the noble face, the commanding figure on the TV screen. In that chest beat valiance. In those hands lay salvation. His heart made a slow drum in his ears. A spark ignited, purpose quickening.

Years he'd waited. He spread his own marred hands, instruments of instruction, of destruction. With slow deliberation, he closed them into fists. What use was darkness if not to try the light?

TWO

Natalie draped a damp sheet over the statue and washed her hands. Daylight bathed the studio. Bringing her arms together, she stretched her back, fatigue finding every muscle with pinching fingers. She stepped outside, squinting in sunshine so bright and clear it mocked her fear and anxiety. She checked her phone. No missed calls.

Metallic doors closed to her left. Turning toward the van several yards away, she felt a shock run through her.

The man behind the vehicle said, “Are you okay?”

“Sorry. I was just...” She swallowed hard. “That was my nephew. The little boy you saved.”

He cocked his head. “Really? How’s he doing?”

“I’m waiting to hear. But he’s alive. Thanks to you.” She crossed the distance. “Everything was so crazy and awful out there. I didn’t even get your name.”

“Trevor MacDaniel. My partner’s Paul Whitman.” He nodded toward the store.

There’d been another man, but she hadn’t even seen him. “You’re the outfitters?”

“That’s right.”

Her business neighbors were the angels on the mountain. A shiver went up her back. “I’m Natalie Reeve.” She crisscrossed her arms, collaring her neck with her hands. “I wish there was some way... Can I make you something?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Um...”

“That sounded weird. What I meant was, I’m an artist—a sculptor. When I’ve unpacked, come take a look. If you like my work, I’ll do a special order. My thank-you.”

“Oh. Look, uh...Natalie. Search and rescue is a service.”

“You saved my nephew’s life. I want to give something back.” Anything to ease the burden.

“Well, the sheriff’s department welcomes donations.”

“I can’t do anything in cash right now, but I could donate a sculpture.” She didn’t look into his face, but felt his scrutiny.

Hands on his hips, he said, “I’m taking a crew kayaking. We’ll be on the water until three or so, assuming it’s as swift as I hope from the rain. I’ll have to stow equipment, but I can stop by after that.”

“Perfect.” She clasped her hands. “Thanks.”

She watched him walk away. Trevor MacDaniel. Paul Whitman. She called Aaron’s cell phone, praying Paige wouldn’t answer. When no one picked up, she left both men’s names on the message so her brother would know who saved Cody.

Trevor was every inch the avenger-protector she had fashioned out of clay from the image in her mind. If he saw it, he’d be stunned by the accuracy, but she didn’t show anyone those sculptures. She knew better.



Trevor found Whit wielding a box cutter by a shelf near the front of the store. Flakes of cardboard and packing foam littered the floor, and cardboard dust scented the air. “Just met the sculptor next door.”

Whit cocked a glance over his shoulder as he pulled aside the box flaps. “Yeah?”

“It was her nephew yesterday.”

“No kidding.” Whit settled on his haunches.

“I think I saw her in the parking lot when Jaz was hassling me, maybe on the trail—that part’s a blur. But at the trailhead she looked lost.”

“Shaken up, I’m sure.”

“Yeah.” But the woman had stumbled as though dazed. “She wants to thank us with art.”

“How does that work?”

“I suggested a donation to the sheriff’s department. I guess they can auction it or something.”

“That’s good.” Whit reached in for the shipping ticket and checked it against the dehydrated food pouches in the box. “What’s she like?”

“Hmm?”

“The sculptor.”

“Oh,” he said. “Grateful.”

“Yeah, you covered that.”

He frowned. “She’s kind of . . . evasive.”

“Shy?”

“Maybe.” But that didn’t feel right. “Anyway, I see the first of today’s crew arriving.” He watched a Jeep pull in, carrying a top-of-the-line kayak. These were die-hard sportsmen—correct that. The kayaker climbing out of the Jeep wore chin-length graying blond hair. He smiled, recognizing her. Die-hard, still fit.

Whit bobbed his chin. “Give ’em a good ride.”

“You know it.”



Natalie pressed her hands to her lower back. Sleep would have to wait, because the delivery truck would be arriving any moment. They’d compressed the time line to fit Aaron’s scant availability, and she couldn’t change it now.

After taking the tool chest from the back of her car, she went into the studio that occupied the riverside half of the building. Two-story windows revealed the breathtaking vista behind the gallery, dark pines framing a craggy rock face with spring water streaking and sparkling down.

She might have more foot traffic in Redford’s Old Town or near the golf, ski, and gift shops at the Kicking Horse resort center. But she couldn’t find better inspiration than what she saw outside these windows. And what she saw, or didn’t, meant more than people knew.

The truck arrived, and the professional delivery men Aaron had hired unloaded and assembled her kiln. They positioned the platforms where she instructed and handled the larger sculptures—impressionistic clay and glass renderings of nature. Even she didn’t know how the finished work would come out of the giant kiln with the glass melting into the glazed or sometimes unglazed clay, with the contrast of rough and smooth, of hues melding.

She ran her hand over a china blue and turquoise mountainscape with green bottle glass melted into the slopes. Her pieces had been accepted by

a co-op in Santa Fe and a gallery in San Francisco. One had been shown in Manhattan and created a buzz. She had not lightly offered a gift to Trevor MacDaniel. But what he'd done for Cody was priceless.

Aaron had tried out there on the mountain, but she'd been worthless. She closed her eyes, then, at the sound of the door, blinked back the welling tears. In the light shafting through the windows, Trevor filled her doorway. Hints of copper tinged the brown hair that curled around his ears and neck, glinting on his suntanned arms. His image seared into her visual field, functioning like a blind spot when she looked away.

She stepped around the mountain sculpture. "You're here."

He said, "Too soon?"

"No, please. Look." In the edges of her vision, she watched him move through the gallery.

"I have to tell you, I didn't expect anything like this. I thought you meant a souvenir."

"That wouldn't be much of a donation."

He studied the fall of glistening glass flowing from an S-shaped cluster of boulders, then looked around. "Nothing's priced."

"Not yet."

"I won't know the value."

She said, "Whatever you choose, it won't equal my nephew's life."

He stopped at an elongated wolf forming the tunneled base of a cobalt and violet glass-coated mountain. "Does it have to be a special order?"

She had planned on opening with her current inventory, but told him no. He could take whatever he wanted.

Circling the piece, he bumped the shop sign waiting to be hung over the door. He steadied it and asked, "What *does* nature wait for?"

"The revealing of the sons of God. The touch of the Creator and care of its stewards."

"Aha." He nodded. "What would the ticket on the wolf be?"

"Eighteen hundred." In the New York gallery, it would get twice that.

"Then that's the donation I'll make."

"You'll make?"

"I want it."

She frowned. "Then you're paying for what you did. I meant—"

“I know. But everyone wins this way. The department gets reimbursed, you’ve expressed your gratitude, and I get the wolf.”

He didn’t want anything for what he’d done on the mountain. “I could sell it and earmark the profit for search and rescue.”

“Then I wouldn’t get my part.”

Glancing into his eyes, she saw beneath the charismatic veneer to the tight control of something deeper, and that image joined the first, like looking twice at the sun and carrying the dots burned into the retinas. “Let me get a crate.”

Together, they loaded the wolf mountain into his hybrid SUV. As he positioned it, she watched the water flowing behind their lots, dissipating the trapped glimpses of him. Kayaking that creek would not be a restful glide. It frothed up where boulders protruded. Trevor’s tour had probably started higher up, where the water was white—and fast enough to suit him.

What other kind of man could have saved Cody?

Digging into her pocket for her ringing phone, she turned away from the vehicle. “Aaron?”

All day with no response to her calls had her half crazy.

Not Aaron, but her high-strung, angry sister-in-law. “You need to stop calling. We have enough to deal with.” Her voice broke.

“What’s wrong, Paige? Is it Cody?”

“They’re taking off his arm—that’s what.”

“But I thought—”

“The surgery failed.”

A sharp wind off the mountain chilled the back of her neck, but a deeper chill spread inside her. She’d been so sure...

“Just leave us alone. Aaron has nothing to say to you.”

Her phone dangled from limp fingers as that statement sank in.

“Natalie?”

She couldn’t turn, couldn’t move. Cody was losing his arm. And Paige would keep her away.

“Hey.” Cody’s angel spoke.

“They can’t save his arm.”

“Oh...” His body slackened. “It looked bad, but I thought there was a chance.”

In the shock of almost losing Cody, she'd been grateful for his life alone. Even now, she knew it a miracle that he'd been saved, but that didn't stop this hurt. Little Cody with only one arm. Paige and Aaron blaming her. Without thinking, she looked into Trevor's face. Eyes that had stared down a mountain lion now held a raw empathy. She looked away.

"You going to see him?"

"They don't want me there."

"Why not?"

She swallowed the lump filling her throat. "It's my fault."

"That's crazy. It was an animal attack."

"Aaron was using his injury leave to help me move in. Now his season, his future could be in jeopardy. And his son..."

"You want to go somewhere and regroup?"

Another gust of wind scudded ash-colored clouds across the sky. Her mind felt just as cloudy, a storm of tears held back by throbbing pressure.

"Come on." Trevor opened the passenger door and she climbed in.



Watching her take the call, he'd thought the rescue failed, that they lost the child after all. Not that bad, but bad enough. He said, "Think you could eat?"

She tilted her head. "It's...not dinnertime."

"It helps, though. Ask any cop." Carbohydrates were natural tranquilizers.

"Were you a cop?"

"My brother is."

She stared out the window. "Saving people runs in the family?"

"His work is mostly making people pay."

Thunder cracked as another afternoon storm moved in, sudden, sharp rain, driving into the windshield.

"Is it just the two of you?"

"Five—" He swallowed. "Four boys."

She didn't ask him to clarify.

He headed toward Old Town. "Are you all settled in?"

"We set up my studio before anything else." She rubbed the fingers of

one hand with the thumb of the other. “Then Paige wanted to get the house unpacked, but Aaron suggested a hike. He told her I needed the big picture, to get outside so I didn’t hyperfocus.”

Not sure what she meant, he said, “You’re set up at the gallery, but not at home?”

“I haven’t been home since Cody...”

“Where’d you spend the night?”

“My studio.”

He hoped she meant sleeping, but the bruised look of her eyes argued otherwise. He parked as close as he could get to the bakery bistro, turned off the engine, and eyed the rain. “You want to go in, or should I grab sandwiches to go?”

She blinked. “What?”

He said, “Sit tight. I’ll be back in a minute.” He left the low-key Ratatat CD on and locked the doors. He jogged beneath the awnings as much as possible, then ducked inside, bought each of them a turkey with Brie on sourdough ciabatta, and hustled back. Stashing the bag between them, he said, “Show me where you live.”

She directed him to a dark red, single-story house overgrown with aspen, the sidewalk buckling from the interconnected roots. Her front room was stacked with boxes, a few pieces of furniture in place, others waiting to be assembled. In the kitchen, an open packing box had released only a single plate, glass, and mug. The only other thing on the counter was a Bible.

As he pulled another plate from the box, she filled two glasses with ice and water. Her visual avoidance was making him feel like a ghost she might sense but couldn’t see.

He unwrapped the sandwiches, releasing a rich aroma as he put them on the plates, and said, “Where should we start?”

“Start?”

“Unpacking.”

“No, don’t.” She pressed her hand to her eyes. “It’s too risky.”

“Risky?”

“Paige said all this happened because Aaron wanted to help. There must be some karmic—”

“You don’t believe that. There’s a Bible on your counter.”

“She’s pretty convinced.”

“She’s reacting.” He nudged the plate, saying, “Try the sandwich. It has orange and fig chutney.” He took a bite of his. She wasn’t multitasking in her condition.

“I’m reeling. I won’t pretend I’m not. But I’ll get through.”

“Not without eating.”

She took a bite, chewed slowly, and swallowed. It occurred to him she’d been alone, dealing with this since the attack. No wonder she looked shell-shocked at the trailhead and acted strange when they met. Emotional shock had probably drained what energy she had, and today’s news was another blow.

He couldn’t stop seeing the little arm hanging by a thread.

Gripping the back of her neck, she said, “I thought it was going to be okay.”

He’d hoped it would.

She took another bite. “I mean...you guys were there.”

“Keep that in mind, okay? There’s good here.”

“I know.” She nodded. “I do.”

“So eat your sandwich and let’s get to work.” With his plate empty, he drained the water glass and brought them to the sink. She finished her food and thanked him with a quick glance aimed at his chin. She had yet to look at him directly.

He scanned her home. If the bedroom matched the rest, she didn’t have anything to sleep on. “Let’s get the furniture assembled.” Bending one hand and then the other, he cracked his knuckles. “Rain canceled the bouldering I had scheduled, so I have plenty of time.”

“Okay.” Following him into the bedroom, she asked, “What’s bouldering?”

“Climbing without equipment.”

“No ropes?”

“You’re only three to five meters off the ground. Over seven, you’re free-soloing or you have a highball problem.”

“Like an alcoholic.”

Her deadpan made him laugh. Nice to see a sense of humor, but it

was short-lived. Pain and worry crept back like the flu, draining the animation from her face.

Moving to the windowsill, she handed him the hardware for the bed that leaned in parts against the wall and said, "Do you also climb with ropes?"

"Of course. But bouldering's the best way to get a feel for the rock. You should try it."

"Oh no."

"Fifteen feet max, and you'd have a crash pad and spotter." He positioned the side rail to the headboard, and she held it while he tightened the bolt.

"You think you can catch me from fifteen feet up?"

"It's not catching. It's directing your fall."

"That's so much better."

He grinned. "We wouldn't start you higher than I could handle."

She shook her head. "I'm no monkey."

"Your hands are strong. They'd have to be for sculpting."

"Yes, but—"

He moved on to the other side rail and said, "I'll teach you to crimp and flag and smear—what do you say, unpack today, boulder tomorrow?" Distraction was the best way he knew to deal with stuff. And she had stuff.

She pulled a clip from her pocket and pinched it into her hair. "I'll think about it."

With her hair up, she seemed like the little sister he never had. Or like Sara. Yeah. Now he could fit what he was doing into a comfortable place.

They connected the footboard, placed the box spring and mattress, and moved on.



The rain had stopped, the sunset burning the ragged remains of cloud when she stopped and surveyed her home. "Wow. It's done."

"A few boxes to unload. But not bad." He checked his watch. "Uh-oh. Whit's expecting me."

"Go." She motioned him toward the door, then said, "Wait."

He turned.

“Unless you want to pick me up in the morning, I need my car.”

“Oh. Right. Let’s go.”

Whit was waiting in the narrow delivery lot behind their businesses with Sara wearing Braden in a sling. “Dude, where’d you go?”

“Gave Natalie a hand moving in.” He turned to her. “Natalie, Paul Whitman.”

“Whit,” he said and shook her hand. “Only my granny calls me Paul.”

“No, that’s Paulie.” Laughing, Sara said, “Nice to meet you, Natalie. I’m Sara. This is Braden.”

The baby had one fist pressed into his cheek, the other under his chin. Natalie’s tears welled up. “He’s perfect.”

He’d done a good job of distracting her, but he could see it rushing back in. “Her nephew lost his arm. They couldn’t save it.” He would gnaw that all night, wondering what more he could have done.

Whit and Sara offered sympathetic responses.

Looking at neither, Natalie said, “I should go. Thanks again.”

“Bouldering tomorrow. Twelve o’clock.”

She hurried toward her business. As soon as she’d gone inside, he told them, “Her brother and his wife think blaming her makes it better. They don’t want her at the hospital, which is what she needs.”

“That’s messed up.”

Sara shifted the baby. “How is it her fault?”

“They were here to help her move in.”

“And?”

“And nothing. They took a hike and that lion changed their lives.”

“That’s cold,” Whit said.

“Yeah. So I figured I could help her unpack the house.”

“That was nice.” Sara cocked her head.

“I’m a nice guy. Up for bouldering? It might take her mind off things.”

Sara’s gaze intensified.

“She’s in a rough spot.”

“So it’s a rescue.”

He shrugged.

“I can read you like a book.” She gave him her Sara smile, then made mommy eyes at her waking infant.



If thou beest he—but O how fallen! how changed
From him who, in the happy realms of light
Clothed with transcendent brightness, didst outshine
Myriads, though bright!

No strife exists but what pits good and evil, brothers of one cloth, one light, the other dark, seeking his opposite. Running fingers over the spiraled ridges and furrows of his flesh, he pictured the other face, unmarred, untested. Awe quickened. A purpose as old as time. Spurned and Chosen vying.

Was it fate that made one cursed, another blessed; that fickle hand sowing fertile ground and also barren stones? For two seeds fall and one grows strong, but the other is snatched by greedy beak, cracked open and devoured.

As water finds the path of least resistance, so misfortune finds the weak. But the feeble, broken, can be tempered, snapping chains of inhibition. The weak can become the strong.

Gathering what little he had—hoods and capes, tape, and, most importantly, the tome—he prepared himself as a warrior for battle. Everything had led to this, every dark and tortured moment, every fear, rage, and fury. The hunger. The need. He felt them all inside, coursing like blood through his veins.

He had not slept since the idea formed, had no need to slumber. Energy coursed through him, electrified, as he sought what he needed and there—lock freed—wires touched. Engine roars! Nimble fingers, crafty mind. Invincible.

He slipped inside the rusted shell—newer cars too complicated for a simple hot-wire, but not this. He revved the engine, a great silent laugh

inside him. He felt himself an arrow drawn back to the taut, quivering point of release.

In the passenger seat, a duffel bag became his unspeaking companion. From its neck he took the book, set it between them, then fixed his gaze forward. Those behind heard nothing of his leaving. Those approached sensed nothing of his coming. Stealth and cunning bore him, as the breath of plague seeping over sleeping souls.