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SUSAN MAY
WARREN

TRACK *of* COURAGE



CALL OF THE WILD

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Soli Deo Gloria

1

AT THIS RATE, he'd never walk again.

Dawson Mulligan lay back on the padded bench of the leg lift machine, sweat dripping into his ears, his body soaked, his leg burning, his breaths a little vocal as they emerged from his chest. He even sounded like a guy who'd hit the mattresses.

He shook his head and glanced at his adopted dog, Caspian, who sat with his back to him, watching the front door, like he might be on duty or something. Why the dog didn't sprawl on the gym floor like every other mutt he'd owned, he hadn't a clue. He looked over at the Doberman-Labrador.

"C'mon, Casp, do me a solid. Fetch me my towel. It's right there, on the bench press seat." He motioned toward his towel, which was hanging on the red seat.

Caspian looked over at him and sighed, the equivalent of an eye roll.

"Nice. I'm not entirely sure why I keep you around."

The dog's tail thumped once, twice.

Dawson moved his foot so that it rested on top of the pad, set his watch, then closed his eyes against the burn and let his knee sink down to a straightened position.

Three minutes of burning hellfire raking through him, the crowning finale of his daily—no, three-times daily—PT.

Country music played on the loudspeakers of the workout gym in the Tooth, aka, the headquarters for his cousin Moose's Air One Rescue team. A local radio station playing, of course, a hit by country music favorite Oaken Fox. The smell of his recently nuked pepperoni Hot Pockets lingered in the air, along with the reek of his sweat. He probably should have waited to down the bottle of Gatorade until after his workout.

It wasn't like he was running any marathons anytime soon. But now his gut ached, and frankly, he'd put on ten pounds since the shooting.

Two more minutes. He should probably add a few sit-ups, work up a real sweat.

Pain sweat didn't count.

He moaned as he sat up, his heart thumping as his knee turned to flame. Caspian glanced at him, then came over and set his head on Dawson's lap.

He ran a hand over the dog's head, not sure why the animal became needy every time he finished PT. Dawson could barely take care of his own emotional chaos, but fine. "Yeah, yeah, I'm almost done." He pushed the dog away and leaned forward into a stretch. His leg started to tremble. One minute.

"Hey, boss."

Caspian let out a bark as his former partner, Flynn Turnquist, walked through the door, her copper hair pulled back in a tidy bun, her green-eyed gaze taking Dawson in. She held up her hands, glancing at Caspian, then over to Dawson's knee—probably landing on the thick vertical scar that ran from his thigh to his shin—and then back to his face. She forced a smile. "Not sure why he barks every time I come in. He knows me."

"I don't know either." He put a hand on the dog's head, and Caspian sat, his tail swishing again.

Flynn wore a pair of black pants, boots, and a heavy wool jacket that she unbuttoned. “Looks like you’re having fun.” She scooted his towel over and sat on the bench press, taking off her leather gloves.

“So much. It’s a party. Tell me they convicted Ravak.”

She sighed. “Hung jury.”

He closed his eyes, bit back a word.

His watch buzzed. Three minutes. He moved his leg off the rack and eased back on the bench. He’d have to put it on the floor, bend it at the knee, but maybe not quite yet. His watch beeped, an elevated heart rate alarm. No duh.

At his feet, Caspian whined, put a paw on his knee.

He again put his hand on the dog’s head, ran his thumb around the floppy ear. “I agree. Not fair.” He looked at her. “What happened?”

“They couldn’t agree on the charge. First-degree murder is hard to prove—not without motive.”

“His motive was revenge.”

“Doesn’t prove premeditation. Could have been a crime of passion.”

“I saw his eyes. He wanted us to watch.” Wanted *Dawson* to watch. “So he waited until I got there. Until the chief told SWAT to go in—”

“Are you saying he *made* it look like he panicked and shot the girl?” Flynn asked.

“I’m saying . . .” He put his leg down straight, then closed one eye as he moved it into a ninety-degree angle. Tightened down a groan. “I should have made us go in. I knew Ravak. What he was capable of. We only spent six months watching him.”

She got up and handed Dawson his towel. He glanced at Caspian and raised an eyebrow.

Yeah, bud, that’s how it’s done.

Caspian set his head on his knee. No shame.

Flynn patted the dog. “He’s so sweet.”

“He sleeps with my shoes, carries my socks around the house when he’s lonely, drinks out of the toilet, sneaks my steak off the counter when I’m not looking, and sleeps in my bed. Sometimes in the middle of the night, he sleeps *on* me. Wakes me out of . . .” Well, he didn’t want to say the rest.

Because then Flynn would go all psychology on him and call him damaged on the inside too. That’s what happened when he partnered up with someone who specialized in criminal profiles.

“So, you two are getting along, then.” She grinned and leaned down, giving the dog a face-to-face. “Good boy.”

“When Shep said he was trainable, I thought that maybe I could get him to, I don’t know, fetch something. Maybe stay when asked. But no. The dog suddenly appears out of nowhere when I get up, right there to trip me. Or lean against me. I’ve never met such a needy animal.” He rubbed the top of his knee. “So, will there be a retrial?”

“Yes. I talked with the prosecutor. But”—she reached down as if to help him up, but he didn’t need help, thank you.

He pushed up from the bench. “Don’t start.”

“You should testify. Tell them—”

“What? That I had a gut feeling the guy was going to try and kill his own daughter?” His throat burned even as he said it.

Flynn drew in a breath, her mouth tight.

“Yeah,” he said. “Not a lot of evidence for my hunches.”

“Except ten years on the job.”

He refused to reach for the edge of something to balance himself and instead tried to walk without a limp.

Ha.

Caspian got up and walked next to him. At least he wasn’t getting in his way.

“If the chief didn’t believe me, I don’t think a jury will,” Dawson said.

“It’s hard to justify a headshot made on a hunch.”

He glanced at her, his gut tightening. “Might have saved a five-year-old her life.”

She sighed, nodded.

Caspian, however, nudged up against him. This dog. He petted him a moment and then hobbled out of the workout room, down the hallway, past Moose’s dark office and the empty locker room, all the way to the kitchen area.

A granite-topped island held a couple paper plates of unfinished sandwiches. The uneaten lunch before the team left.

He slid onto a bench at the counter and started to reach for the plates to clean them, but Flynn beat him to it, dumped them into the garbage, and began clearing the lunch debris.

Caspian sat down beside him, his back to him.

The sun hung low, casting the last of the golden light into the day, an early twilight given it was still the first week of March. Outside, fresh snow layered the ground, although a plow had shoved most of the frosting away from the tarmac and the parking area, piling it into massive drifts around the airfield.

The icy pavement made walking with his bad knee ever so fun.

“Maybe I should take Moose’s advice and head down to Florida for a while, do PT in the sunshine.”

“Oh, but then you’d have to be all bright and sunny, and that would seriously jeopardize the dark funk going on.” She picked up the Hot Pockets wrapper, raised an eyebrow, and then dropped it into the garbage.

“I think that belonged to Axel.”

“I’m a detective, Dawson. I can spot a lie.”

He managed a slight smile. “How are things down in the Special Victim Unit?”

“Lonely. Busy.” She wiped the island with a sponge. “There’s a BOLO out for Conan Sorros. He escaped custody on his way to Juneau a month ago.”

“That’s right. I can’t believe he got away after waiting all this time for trial.”

“The case against the family took a while to put together. It involves the murder of a DEA agent, not to mention a slew of other trafficking and drug crimes. One of the brothers had a plea deal in exchange for testifying, but he was murdered a couple months back. Rumor is that the DA is bringing in a secret key witness to get their testimony secured.” She held out a piece of leftover cheese to Caspian.

The dog just looked at Dawson, as if asking permission. “Go get the cheese, pal.”

Caspian stood up and moved over to Flynn, his entire body wagging. She fed it to him, petted his head. “Did Shep ever figure out who he belonged to?”

“Some guy in Minnesota, but his cell phone has been disconnected. So, he’s ours, at least until we can track down his original owner.”

“Did you get a breed on him?”

“Part black Lab, part Doberman. You can see the Doberman in the brown markings on his face. And his body is leaner than a Lab.”

Flynn crouched in front of the dog and rubbed both her hands behind his ears. Caspian leaned to one side and let out a groan. “Sounds like Axel when I give him a shoulder rub.”

“That’s too much information. I don’t need any details about your romantic life. I get enough TMI being his cousin, thanks.”

She rolled her eyes and got up. “Listen. The DA’s office will be calling you. If you want Ravak for first-degree murder, you’re going to have to testify. Otherwise, they’ll be downgrading to voluntary manslaughter. Five to twenty. But they’re saying the appearance of the SWAT team could mitigate the sentence with aggravating circumstances.”

He sighed. “I just . . . I can’t . . .”

Her hand landed on his shoulder. “Okay. I get it. I just wanted to warn you, boss.”

He looked up at her. “I haven’t been your boss for a long time. Since you left the Investigative Support Unit and joined me at the SVU.”

“You’ll always be my boss,” she said and winked.

“Don’t.”

She laughed. Pointed at him, then headed toward the door. Turned. “Oh, by the way, Axel said that Deke Starr from the Copper Mountain sheriff’s office called him looking for you. Said he’d left a couple messages on your phone.”

He sank his head into his hands, bracing his elbows on the island.

Caspian came up, tail wagging. Put his head on his knee.

Everybody just needed to . . . Calm down. He was *fine*.

“Wait—is he trying to recruit you?” She pulled out a stool. “Seriously?”

He sighed. “No. Maybe. I don’t know.” He turned to her. “I don’t know if I’ll be back in action down here—”

“People get knee replacements all the time—”

“My knee was completely blown out. It’s a little more than a knee replacement for a fifty-year-old.”

She held up her hand. “I know. I remember. It scared all of us to death. We were praying you didn’t lose your leg, but . . . you’re seriously going to go from tracking down kidnapers and stalkers and rape victims to giving out parking tickets in Copper Mountain?”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Sorry. It’s just—”

“My mother is moving back to Copper Mountain.”

She stilled, frowned. “Um . . . and . . .”

“And it’s not easy. There are memories, you know.”

She drew in a breath. “Right. Your sister. I forgot she was one of the early victims of the Midnight Sun killer.”

“Yeah. Finally, case closed. And Mom feels like maybe it’s time to come back. But . . .”

“You think the memories will haunt her.”

“Don’t they always?”

She swallowed. Shrugged. “Depends, I guess, if you make peace with them or not.”

He put his hand on Caspian’s head, the soft fur between his fingers. Tried to keep his voice from shaking. “My fifteen-year-old sister was killed by a serial killer. For years, we didn’t know what happened. I came home from summer camp, and she was gone, just like that. My parents fell apart, got divorced, and . . . yeah, we’re a long way from peace.”

She stared at him.

Okay, so he didn’t know where all that heat came from. “Sorry.” He schooled his voice. “I guess . . . hopefully all that is changing, and I’m thinking I should be there for that. I dunno.”

“I’ve learned that when people want redemption, they go home. Maybe this is your mom’s way of trying to make peace.”

Her hand found his, and he glanced at it, frowned. But she didn’t pull away.

He gave her a look.

She smiled at him. “I’m going to miss you.”

“I’m not falling off the planet.” He pulled his hand away. “Your boyfriend’s parents live in Copper Mountain, *coz*. I’m sure you’ll do your own haunting of me.”

“Oh, you betcha.” She patted Caspian. “I’ll let you go on one condition.”

“I didn’t realize we were negotiating.”

“Do you want me to haunt you or not?”

He managed a slight smile.

“You take this guy with you.” She nodded toward the dog. “Because he’s got his eye on you. And if anyone can keep you safe, it’s Caspian.”

“He’s got his eye on my socks. And my dinner.” But he looked at the animal’s brown eyes glancing at him. “But yeah. He’s okay.” He rubbed the dog’s ears. “Aren’t you, bud? Even if you can’t fetch or sit—”

Caspian leaned his head against his leg, moaning at his touch. “And are completely embarrassing.”

Flynn laughed. “Try and eat something other than a Hot Pocket. And I’m not talking to Caspian.”

Dawson shook his head. “Go fight crime or something. I’m fine.”

“See you ’round, boss.” She headed out the door, into the darkness of the setting sun.

And he sat in the shadows, Caspian’s head on his knee, wishing he hadn’t lied to the one person who still believed in him.

HER ICE HAD long-ago melted into her Coke, watering it down. A good match to her chilly french fries and now-soggy burger.

I’m pitiful.

Keely looked at the text she’d drafted a long moment before, aw, why not? She had no one else to confess to except her manager, Goldie. Which perhaps made her even more pitiful.

She sent it.

Blew out a breath and set down her phone. Clearly the country songs twanging through the speakers of the burger joint didn’t emanate from local radio because she’d heard “She Had Me at Heads Carolina” by Cole Swindell twice, along with “Thought You Should Know” by Morgan Wallen.

Probably a mixed album of all the hits from the last few years picked up at a local bin at a Walmart down in Anchorage, and wow, she’d turned cynical. Just because she’d landed here—in a backcountry, snow-covered smudge under the shadows of the icy Alaskan mountain range, in a honky-tonk with a moose head

overlooking an old jukebox and dartboard, a few locals hunkered up to the long bar—didn't mean that she *belonged* here.

She was just passing through Copper Mountain. For a burger. Fries.

To get a good look at her birth mother.

Then, back to reality and all the things that came with that, like Five Seasons room service and maybe a nice, long, heated-rock massage.

A woman came up to the table, her long dark hair pulled back. She wore a long-sleeve T-shirt with Midnight Sun Saloon and Grill across the chest. "You want a refresh on that Coke?"

Her name tag said Shasta, like the soda company.

Keely nodded, smiled, tried to communicate a "Yeah. That would be great." Added a thumbs-up for boost.

"Didn't like the fries? People come from miles around for one of our baskets."

All of ten people? She shook away the snark, found another smile, then motioned the waitress closer so she could whisper. "They're good. Just . . . eyes were bigger than my stomach. It started shouting 'slow down' after the first three. But yeah, they're good."

"I'd say your stomach probably needs to shut up," Shasta whispered back. "I don't think you're in danger of overeating." She winked, then picked up the plate. "We have bottomless baskets. Would you like a refresh?"

Keely leaned back against the booth, put her hands on her stomach. "So full."

"Yeah, those three bites of burger really fill a girl up. We have some great pie. Vic hired this baker out of Anchorage, and she makes fantastic blueberry pie from our preserves. I promise, your stomach will love you."

Keely sighed. Nodded.

"Attagirl. Can't let you freeze to death." She walked away, and Keely had no idea what she meant.

Maybe she referred to her thin white puffer jacket. So she wasn't wearing bearskin and leather—she hadn't intended on putting down roots. Just a quick trip up to Copper Mountain. Maybe a . . . conversation. Then back into the little Cessna puddle jumper she'd ridden up in, and she'd get on with her life.

Whatever that looked like.

Her phone pinged and she looked at the text from her manager, although she'd lately turned into a counselor, apparently.

You're not pitiful. You have questions. And you need answers. Just pretend you're going on stage, take a deep breath, and walk up to her and say hi.

"Here you go." Shasta put a piece of pie in front of her. "I warmed it, so the ice cream is a little melty." She set down a fork. "Don't wait too long to eat it."

Keely turned over her phone and nodded. "Thanks."

Shasta's gaze flicked off the overturned phone, even as she smiled. "Uh-huh."

Keely blew out a breath and picked up her fork. Actually, her stomach had been screaming *Feed me* for the past six hours since leaving Anchorage, but well, her brain had said, *What are you doing?*

Which made her legs all jumpy, and frankly, she'd nearly run out of the joint twice in the last hour. She looked at her watch. Or, rather, ninety minutes.

Whatever.

Shasta came back with her Coke. Set it down. "You look sort of familiar."

Keely lifted a shoulder, pointed at the pie, gave a thumbs-up.

Shasta's mouth opened. "Oh my gosh—you're Bliss!"

Keely sighed, held up her hand. "Please," she whispered.

Shasta cut her voice low. "Sorry. But—what are you doing *here?*"

The *very* last thing Keely needed was for someone to tweet it out, or post her image on Insta, or grab a side photo for TikTok. “I’m visiting a friend.”

Shasta’s eyes widened. “You have a friend in Copper Mountain?”

Aw. She should have known she’d talked to the one person who probably knew everyone in town. “It’s a surprise. Don’t tell anyone.” She swallowed, her voice still at a whisper. “You’ll find out soon enough, probably.”

True, maybe. Who knew what bio mom would do once she found out?

Except—she glanced over at Vic, the way the woman filled beers, filled orders, and occasionally hollered at locals—who knew?

In fact, part of Keely’s ninety-minute dilemma had been sorting out the veracity of her father’s story.

Vic Dalton. Former cop who gave away her daughter and disappeared into the Alaskan frontier. It had taken a private investigator and a couple thousand dollars to track the woman down.

“Is that why you’re whispering?” Shasta asked.

Not even a little, but Keely nodded. Why not? She didn’t need any other rumors to start.

Bliss is losing her voice. Yeah, that would sell tickets.

She even put a finger to her lips.

Shasta grinned. “I got you.” She winked and walked away.

Keely took another bite of pie. She should have started with this. The sugar hit her veins, adding a surge of hopeful what-ifs.

What if she simply got up and walked over to the bar and introduced herself to the big, tough-looking female barkeep with the blond hair and the take-no-prisoners demeanor? *Hello. My name is Keely Williams, and I believe you’re my mother.*

She took a sip of her Coke, watching as the woman now talked with one of the locals, a good-looking man, late thirties, who stood next to a smaller woman in braids. She handed them a take-out bag, and they left.

And then, just like that, Vic's gaze landed on Keely.

Not just *landed*. *Held*. And the force of it caught her up, stole her breath, pinned her into place. Vic had blue eyes, not hazel-blue like hers—but for the first time, maybe, she saw her nose on someone else's face. So *that's* where she got that little bump.

Keely looked away, her heart filling her throat, slamming against her chest.

Oh boy.

Nope. Not a chance she could do this. Because really, why again had she traveled a few thousand miles to meet a stranger?

She pushed the half-eaten pie away and reached for her phone. It buzzed in her hands, and she thumbed open the text.

I got another call from Bryce today. He needs an answer.

Yeah, well, get in line. Life was full of questions, of people needing answers.

Today was not that day.

She put her phone into her satchel propped on the booth seat beside her, pulled out a twenty, and dropped it on the table.

She got up. Turned and ran straight into—oh no, no—Vic.

“Hey,” the woman said.

She had a deeper voice than Keely imagined and spoke with gravel in her tone, as if she might be a smoker. Broad shouldered, thin hipped, with arms that looked like they could break a person, her blond hair pulled back into a tiny ponytail.

And still, she seemed almost concerned, a frown creasing her brows. “I came over to make sure everything was okay. Were you waiting for someone?”

Yes. *You*.

Keely swallowed. Shook her head. *Aw—*

“Okay. Well, if you need—”

A shout from near the dartboard, and a flannel-shirted man

pushed another man and suddenly tables flipped over and shouts rose—

“Toph—let him go!” Vic headed into the fray, and Keely made a beeline for the door.

Run. It wouldn’t be the first time.

She pushed out into the brisk night, the stars bright in the black sky. Somewhere to the north, the glaciers and mountains rose, routing a frigid wind along the main street. She tucked up the collar of her jacket and pulled out a hat.

Last thing she needed was a bout of pneumonia.

Hiking her satchel over her shoulder, she headed down the street, past a bakery and the twinkle lights of a pizza joint, a grocery store that looked like a house, and then down a side street to the Gold Nugget Inn. The two-story home had once been owned by some great-grandfather of the owners, Hal and Nora Jensen, who had turned it into a café on the main level but kept a few rooms for rent upstairs. She took the one with the private bathroom.

It was also the only B and B open for lodging in March.

They’d seemed like a nice couple when she checked in during the daylight, and now the smell of baking bread and the quiet crackle of a fireplace in the front room met her as she entered and headed up the stairs.

It calmed her, a little. Okay, so maybe . . . maybe . . .

Aw. What was she thinking. Stupid idea, thinking her birth mother might have some insight into the biggest decision of her life. Given the looks of the woman, she had as much mothering in her baby finger as Keely did.

“Are you in for the night?”

Keely turned on the stairs and spotted Nora Jensen standing at the bottom. Mid-sixties, wearing an apron, the woman gave off a Marie Barone from *Everybody Loves Raymond* vibe. A hint of meddling, maybe some overcaring in her smile.

But it wasn’t a bad look for an innkeeper.

“Yes. I—”

“I know it’s dark out, but it’s only six p.m. Would you care for a hot cocoa, or we have a puzzle by the fire that needs attention.”

“Oh. Um.” Keely sighed. “I think I’m heading to bed.”

Nora nodded. “Breakfast is at eight. Have a good night.”

Something about the woman stirred a warmth into Keely’s bones. It reminded her of her grandma, maybe, once upon a time.

She headed upstairs and set her satchel onto the rose-flowered bedspread. Eyelet curtains hung at the windows, a hurricane lamp pooled light over one dark walnut bedside table, and of course, a Bible sat on the other. A green Queen Anne chair held a doily at the nape, and with the old Panasonic television, she felt like she might be stepping into her father’s den. The place held a sense of time captured, revered.

A place to rest.

To stop *thinking*.

She sat on the bed, toed off her boots, and hung her jacket on the tall bedpost. Then she pulled out her phone and opened her photos app. Scrolled to the right one.

A four-year-old girl with blond hair wisping around her cherub face and sky-blue eyes the color of a perfect day laughed into the picture. She held a dripping ice cream cone, chocolate around her mouth, and a grin that could light up the coldest night.

Zoey. She loved that name—had suggested it, actually—and they’d used it. Zoey Anne Harper. They’d even given her the middle name of Keely’s adopted mother, Anne. She ran her thumb over the chocolate mouth, stared into her eyes.

Gasped.

They looked like Vic’s. Piercing and solid and seeing into her soul.

Keely closed the phone. Stared at the ceiling. Listened to the wind moan and knew in her soul that, indeed, she was a coward.

Like mother, like daughter.