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DANA MENTINK

FIRE

MOUNTAIN



ELEMENTS OF DANGER #1

# FIRE MOUNTAIN



**DANA MENTINK**

  
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Dana Mentink, Fire Mountain  
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On May 18, 1980, Mount St. Helens in Skamania County, Washington, erupted. It is considered the most disastrous volcanic eruption in US history. While fifty-seven people lost their lives, many more were saved, thanks to the efforts of emergency management personnel and the citizen scientists who helped create a clear picture of the disaster in real time. This book is dedicated to the heroes, both officials and laypeople, who risked their own lives to protect their neighbors.

## □ ONE □

**COLD AND ICE-PICK PAIN** bored into Kit Garrido's temples.

Her limbs were leaden, her body a deadweight in the driver's seat of her big rig. Grit coated her tongue and teeth. She tasted blood. Try as she might, she couldn't reach out to unbuckle her seat belt. Panic bubbled up inside her.

She felt movement. Someone yanked hard on the passenger door, unleashing pulses of pain.

"Ma'am?" A low baritone, rough.

A big hand skimmed her temple, calloused fingers hard like talons. Through her slitted eyelids, a male torso materialized, a large man in a heavy jacket. Warm ash drifted from his baseball cap and settled on her cheek, featherlight.

"What . . . happened?" Her voice was a croak.

"You crashed." His voice held the trace of a Southern accent. "Volcano's unsettled everything. Not safe to stay here."

Not safe? Crashed? Why wouldn't her mouth work fast enough to spit out the questions? Fear lapped at her insides as he fumbled for her seat belt.

“You’ve got to wake up. Now.”

She forced her eyes farther open, grabbed the wheel. Cold wind raked her cheek. Wind? She lurched into full consciousness so fast her brain rocked in her skull. Green. Everywhere green mixed with brown, the trees of northern Washington all around, the rattling pine needles oddly muted by their coating of volcanic ash. A pine cone dropped on her lap through the gaping hole in the windshield. It left a sooty stain on her knee before it bounced off. She stared at it.

*How . . .*

He was talking, but she couldn’t follow.

She touched her brown ski cap, then the flannel of her favorite long-haul driving jacket, the feel of the fabrics proving to herself she was alive. Somehow. A hiss of escaping steam commanded her to acknowledge what she desperately didn’t want to see.

Her beautiful Freightliner truck was wedged cab first, jammed in a crevice between two crooked trees. In the side-view mirror she observed an enormous trench of gouged earth that marked her journey from the road above to the place of impact. The shiny yellow cab with its cozy sleeping unit, her home for three-hundred-plus days a year, was squashed like the face of a Pekinese. The pristine white trailer she’d washed that morning was no doubt damaged as well. She closed her eyes and pictured the bold font she’d painstakingly chosen for the Garrido Trucking logo. How absurdly proud she’d felt the day the lettering was applied. Her truck. Her business. Her life. Finally.

Muscles in her throat tightened, and tears started down her face.

Crashed. She'd crashed. Everything she'd worked for, gone. The pain in her head intensified. She stared around wildly. "But what happened? How did I wreck?"

The man shrugged. "Dunno. I'm not sure why you'd even be on Pine Hollow Road in the first place. Pretty ridiculous, considering."

Ridiculous? She bridled as the location sank in. Pine Hollow? Why there? Deep breaths. One, two, three, then she unbuckled and levered herself from the driver's seat. Pain lanced her left wrist. Broken or sprained? Her shirt was splattered with blood, though she couldn't feel any cuts.

"Easy," the man said, arms outstretched as if to catch her.

Why couldn't she remember what happened? She must have rolled out of her small office solo that morning, like she always did before picking up her load, the last load she dared haul out of a region under an evacuation advisory. She wouldn't have chosen Pine Hollow, a twisty route that would take her nearer the volatile Mount Ember. Everything she'd learned, the geologic facts she'd devoured, left her itching to escape. Had she lost control? Maybe she'd been knocked out by a falling boulder. Had the noxious gasses venting from the volcano's bulging side overwhelmed her? But why here?

The cold infiltrated her torn jacket, numbing her arms. Faraway, she heard the distant rumble of thunder or maybe another earthquake from the mountain preparing to blow. No sounds of vehicles, sirens, people. Eerie. Terrifying.

Her thoughts were muddy, slow. *Get help.* She patted her pockets in a futile search for her cell. Gone somewhere.

The satellite radio was her next choice until she realized it had been pierced by the branch that neatly skewered the windshield. Her throat went dry. A few inches to the left and it would have impaled her too. Ruined also was the precious old-school CB she'd rebuilt, which would have instantly connected her with a fellow trucker.

The man was still staring at her. He straightened and leaned closer. "Are you hurt badly? I can carry you."

She couldn't make herself answer, so he went on.

"Your radio's crushed, I see. My cell phone has no bars down here. Where's your phone?"

She jammed her knit cap on tighter. Hurt or not, she wouldn't let any stranger control the conversation, especially not in her rig. "I'll find it."

He shook his head. "You rest a minute. I'm gonna hop out and make sure your truck's not on fire or anything." He muscled his way back out the passenger door, the metal protesting with a bloodcurdling shriek.

She didn't see any sign of his vehicle through the filthy glass. Where had he come from? There were no helpful locals out and about under the present circumstances. Nerves tightened in her stomach. A trucker alone with cargo was vulnerable, a female trucker even more so.

*Protect yourself.* She fumbled for the crowbar, but the seat was collapsed on top of it. Instead she yanked the fire extinguisher loose, which made her head feel like it was going to detonate. Best she could do. She eased closer to the fractured passenger window.

The ground was a moonscape of ash and debris. The man eased along, a palm on the cab for support, and she got another chance to examine him. Long legs, cowboy

boots, flannel shirt, Yankees baseball cap, and a scar—she hadn't noticed that before. It bisected his left eyebrow. He disappeared around the other side of the rig before returning a few moments later. The closer he got, the taller he was, probably six four and muscled. More than a match for her five-foot-five, hundred-ten-pound frame. The fear resurged. *Protect yourself.*

The extinguisher cut into her clenched palm. He drew close enough to the open passenger door for her to catch the light brown of his eyes, almost translucent like smoke. When he tried to climb aboard, she raised the extinguisher. "Where did you come from?"

His lips quirked. "Originally? South Carolina."

That explained the drawl. "I meant . . ."

"I know what you meant." He shot a look at the ravaged landscape before he turned back. "Top of the ridge. My cabin's up there. I was on my roof and I saw you go over the shoulder. I was surprised six ways to Sunday. Didn't even hear you coming because the wind was howling, and I sure didn't expect any rigs to be in this area. Anyway, I hightailed it here in my truck. It's parked up a ways."

"I don't know you." A silly remark.

"Don't know you either. You from around here?"

She wouldn't tell him where she lived. "Close."

He pointed to the fire extinguisher and heaved out a breath. "Are you going to clobber me with that or not? I promise it's not necessary." He held up his palms. *How does anyone have fingers that long?* "You need first aid before we get out of here, and I'm the only one here to give it to you whether you like it or not." He plucked the

kit from the pocket in the door and wiggled it at her. “You’re bleeding.”

“I don’t need first aid.”

He said something in reply, but his words seemed to come from far away, a rushing sound drowning them out as dizziness overcame her.

The extinguisher dropped to the floor, and she sank onto the driver’s seat while he climbed in and slammed the passenger door. A wave of nausea enveloped her. Hastily he dumped out the first aid kit and shoved the container under her chin as she wretched. He handed her a clean handkerchief from his pocket with a neat C embroidered on it.

She stared at the precisely folded, pristine cloth.

His cheeks pinked. “I know. No one carries these things anymore. Mama insists, and she sends me a box of ’em every Christmas.” He looked intently at her. “I’m fairly certain you have yourself a concussion.”

He seemed like the kind of man who was certain about everything, the kind she avoided. Again he glanced out the window, and she saw the trickle of ground sloughing down the steep slope. The sky was already a sickly gray, rapidly darkening, thick with flecks of rock, minerals, and volcanic glass.

Powerless to the pain lancing her temples, she did not resist as he checked her pupils and pulse and smoothed a bandage across her brow.

“Cut up here near the hairline. Just a little one. Not deep. Probably won’t scar.”

“Who are you?”

He offered her a bottle of water from his back pocket. “Drink some.”

“Stop helping me,” she snapped. “Answer my question. Please.”

“You’re bossy.” His voice was teasing, but there was tension in his mouth, his muscled shoulders. Other thoughts were distracting him. Her too.

“Who? Are? You?” She clapped her hand on her skull as if a knife were cleaving her temples.

“Be still. No sense adding to your pain. Name’s Cullen.” He looked toward the direction of the road. Another rumble blasted through the haze.

“Cullen who?”

He scrubbed a palm through his crew-cut hair the hue of a tarnished penny. “Cullen Landry. Should I call you Kit?”

She blinked, stomach tight. “How do you know my name?”

He pointed to the stuffed bear nestled next to the ruined radio, the name Kit embroidered on a heart held in its paw. “Not rocket science. Figured that’s you, right? Short for anything?”

Her face went hot at his mention of her teddy bear. “I . . .”

A gust of wind blew a wisp of ash through her ruptured windshield.

“Last name Garrido like on the side of the truck?” he said.

She allowed a small nod.

“All right then, Ms. Kit, we can get to know each other better later, but the sun’s setting, and right now we got other problems.”

“The volcano,” she said absently.

“That’s way up there on the list. This road’s been red-zoned.”

“Red? When I left, emergency services said yellow everywhere except the northern side of the mountain.” *When I left . . . which was when, exactly?*

“There’s been a lateral eruption on the flank. Earthquake swarms, the mountain’s continuing to bulge out, it all adds up to a mega eruption.”

She studied him, swallowing another wave of nausea. His chin was stubbled, face tanned.

He shifted. “To save time, can you tell me if anyone knows you’re here?”

“I probably talked to my office guy before I left.” *For where?*

“Probably?”

Her brain felt dazed, like a bird that hit the window glass midflight. “I don’t remember exactly.” It pained her to say so.

The crow’s feet deepened, bracketing his eyes, puckering the eyebrow scar. “Okay. Let’s backtrack. What do you remember? Your age? Address? Anything?”

Her chin went up. “Of course I know that. Kit Garrido, age thirty. I live in a trailer in Tulley Valley, where my trucking office is.” Instantly she regretted rattling off the information to a complete stranger. So much for playing it close to the vest. She really must have a concussion.

“What were you driving?”

“This.” She flapped a hand at her ruined vehicle, her life savings crumpled and wrecked. Tears blurred her vision. “A Freightliner Cascadia.” Her rig. Her everything.

The muscle in his jaw jumped. “I meant what cargo? For

whom? Do you remember that part? Maybe they'll alert someone when you don't show up with the delivery." Sweat trickled down his temple. Odd since she was so cold her toes had gone numb.

What was her cargo? And her destination? "I can't recall at this moment." And she wasn't sure she should tell him anyway.

He peered around as if he could find someone else to answer his questions. "You're sure you don't have your phone on you? In a pocket or something?"

She gritted her teeth. "It was in the charger next to my seat." At least, she figured it was since that was where she always kept it.

He was still scanning the horizon, lost in thought. His gaze wandered back over the contents of her cab, the wrecked steering wheel, the imploded glass. Eyes narrowing, he suddenly went still for a long moment before he let out a low whistle. "We've got more problems than a math textbook."

She felt like laughing. "Besides the fact that I was in a crash and now we're stranded somewhere in an evacuation area near a volcano that's about to erupt?"

He scrubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "Yeah, besides that."

She tried for a calming breath, but it hurt coming in and going out. "Like what?"

He pointed. "Take a look for yourself."

At first she could not understand the significance of the little round hole punched in the driver's side window or the second one two inches below it. "Are those . . ."

"Bullet holes. Yes, ma'am."

She gaped. “Someone . . . shot at me?”

“Appears that way. Could explain why you crashed.”

“Who would do that?”

“Great question. Carrying precious cargo?”

“I don’t—”

He cut her off with a sigh. “Remember. Right.”

A shooter had tried to kill her? Steal her cargo? And was possibly still out there? Cullen stood motionless, watching her. He was a stranger . . . with no vehicle visible that she could see.

He indicated something else with a jut of his chin. She looked. A splotch of red caught her attention, and she gasped. The small print on the passenger window was a bloody, partial outline of a hand. Cold inched along her nerves.

His brows drew together, lines bracketing his forehead. “Not your blood. You were still strapped in when I arrived.”

“And not yours?”

He held up his calloused palms as if she were attempting to rob him. “No blood, and that’s a tiny print. I got big hands.”

Someone had pushed their way *out* of her truck. Someone bleeding. “I was alone. I never travel with anyone else.”

“Until today maybe.”

“No. I was alone.”

“Ms. Kit, we can talk about that after we’re clear of this location. Gotta get out. Take us ’bout a half hour to reach my truck. Let’s stick to the trees in case whoever it is hasn’t left.”

Before she could reply, he'd climbed down again and started to scour the ground. Without a moment of warning, the slope let loose with a noise like thunder. Cullen barely managed to scramble back inside and slam the door. They flung themselves in the seats and held on. Soil rolled and pummeled her rig, shaking and rattling. A brown avalanche rushed by the wreck.

Debris shot around them, rocking the trailer.

Unbelievable. They would die here in her truck, the machine she loved that had given her an independent life.

A boulder slammed into the roof, the percussion swallowing her scream. Would the roof give? Cullen leapt up, pushed her behind the driver's seat, and crouched beside her. Her heart thundered so hard she was sure he could feel it, his wide chest pressed against her shoulder. The percussion of the earth piling all around them was like the onslaught of a hurricane.

Time stood still. Five seconds? Ten? Fifteen? And then it stopped.

Her breath came in harsh gasps.

He crept to the window. "Well, you're not driving this rig anytime soon, but it appears we won't be buried alive just now."

She forced her lungs to do their job. "We can dig out. I've got a small shovel."

He opened his mouth to answer when a strange noise emanated from the sleeping area. They both jerked as if they'd been touched by hot lava.

That sound . . .

It couldn't be what she thought it was. Her brain was misfiring. It had to be the concussion. But the noise con-

tinued, and Cullen looked as if he'd heard it too. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled. "What . . . what is that?"

His intense stare added to her unease. "You said you never carry any passengers."

*Passengers?* "I don't." She gaped.

He shoved aside the curtain to the sleeping area and crawled inside. She was immobile as he returned a moment later, eyes wide with shock, holding a car seat. The seat held a baby in pink pajamas who wriggled, let out a cry, and strained against the straps of her carrier. The toothless mouth opened wide like that of a newly hatched bird.

Kit could not summon a single word.

"Her seat was belted to the chair in your sleeping area." He looked from the baby to Kit, his expression hardening with suspicion. "Well?"

She blinked, nerves screaming. "I . . ."

He cocked his head. "How exactly did this baby get into your truck, Kit Garrido?"