

Zion National Park
May 15, 1948

HENRY WELCOMED EVERY new sunrise at Zion National Park as each one thrust his past another day behind him. Dawn crept along the steep canyon walls of Navajo sandstone, bringing its oranges and reds to life as he guided his horse along the trail leading to the Virgin River. How many more Utah sunrises would the pair of them see together?

As they passed the sleepy lodge, he attempted to banish any thoughts of the future—or the past, for that matter—and instead let the juniper-scented air root him in this quiet moment. He longed to think of nothing but the clatter of Duck’s hooves and the chirping songs of the morning birdlife. The “sweet-sweet-sweeter-than-sweet” notes of the yellow warbler set the tone for the day far better than a bacon-and-egg breakfast.

Still, reality pressed in. He couldn’t delay a decision about the new posting much longer. Alma would likely appreciate the cooler climes of the Grand Tetons, but wrenching his wife from this spot would take more than a written order from his superiors. It would take a word from God Himself. Since the Lord hadn’t responded to a single one of Henry’s pleas since his son’s disappearance, he wasn’t sure how to present this particular request to the Almighty.

The memories rushed in like the flash flood that had stolen his joy—his heart. Henry closed his eyes against the familiar ache. His fellow

rangers still didn't know how to act around him, their laughter dying away when he entered the room. As much as he loved Zion, he needed a new beginning. Every path held a reminder of what he'd lost.

Alma would demand to stay put for the same reason. The river now flowed in her veins, the icy cold grief carving an impassable chasm through their marriage. Some part of her must be clinging to an irrational hope that one day he'd walk in with their infant son safe in his arms. She wouldn't leave Zion until they could put him to rest.

But the Virgin River refused to give up its dead.

Nine months gone. The thought tightened around his throat like a noose. He couldn't ask her to forego hope, not when he hadn't figured out how to surrender his own guilt.

After the horrors of fighting in the Philippines, moving to this place had been like coming up for air for the first time in years. The cliffs of Zion Canyon had wrapped around him and his little family, shielding them from a world spun out of control. The isolation had given him a place to heal. Until the rain fell and the water rose.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away . . ." Henry's throat closed, choking off the verse's final phrase: "*Blessed be the name of the Lord.*" Perhaps someday—in a new place—he'd be able to give voice to Job's words.

The truth settled over Henry. Leaving would be a mistake, at least until God gave them certainty on the matter. As much as it hurt, he needed to decline the transfer request.

The dun horse swiveled his ears toward the stream, shying a couple of steps to the side and dragging Henry back to the present. Tightening his grip on the reins, Henry stood in the stirrups to scan the riverbank. A mewling cry lifted the hairs on his arms. Likely a wounded critter of some sort. Best to let nature take its course.

The bleat sounded again, the final long quaver tugging at his heart. He nudged the horse forward, Duck's hooves clattering against the rocks. Stopping just short of the footbridge, he scrutinized the

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bank until an almost imperceptible shiver in the reeds caught his attention.

The breeze tickled the grasses all along the waterline, but something seemed different in that sheltered spot below the span. Whatever was there couldn't be large. Perhaps a weasel had captured itself some breakfast, and the sounds were nothing but the dying gasps of a desert cottontail.

Henry leaned forward, squinting against the glare. The noise lifted again, barely audible over the sound of the river. His father had chided him more than once for being too soft, and the long-distant scolding still triggered a wave of shame. Even so, he couldn't resist answering a call for help, no matter how softhearted it made him appear.

He slid from Duck's back, his boots landing with a muted thud on the trail. He dropped the reins and picked his way to the river's edge, the bridge throwing cool shadows over the surface of the water. A few more steps brought him to the low bank, and he used his toe to pull back the veil of rabbitbrush rather than risk a hand to an injured animal.

A leather hatbox sat in the dirt. Its lid lay flopped behind it and skewed to one side. A section of a wool blanket spilled out, its wide stripes matching the Utah Parks Company's distinctive pattern for the Zion Lodge. The remnants of a picnic lunch? He nudged the box with his foot, considering the likelihood of uncovering a skunk or an angry ringtail cat. The squeaking cry brought Henry to his knees in an instant. He pulled the edge of the coverlet aside, and the mewling doubled in speed and volume—almost as if he'd somehow freed the plaintive sounds to rise to the heavens and summon the help of the angels. The reddened face of an angry newborn glared at him, an almost accusatory look in its eyes.

The moment stretched endlessly as Henry struggled to make sense of what he was seeing. *A baby. Alone.* Images of his own son crashed through his brain, his heart thumping so hard he could feel it against his ribs.

Don't be ridiculous. Henry sat back to gather his senses. He studied the water both upstream and down, hoping for something—anything—to explain how this child came to be in this unlikely spot. Reaching down, he brushed a finger against the infant's cheek, its skin clammy. The baby wailed, extended an arm from the coverings, and shook its balled-up fist.

"A fighter, eh? What happened to you, then?" Henry tucked the blanket back into position. "Where's your mama?"

Duck nickered from the trail, rousing Henry from his reverie. Sliding his hands under the box, he lifted it from its hiding spot. "A child lost. A child found. Lord, what are You doing?" Bracing the container against his chest, Henry climbed the bank with careful steps. No matter how the child came to be here, getting him someplace safe and warm had to take priority.

Someplace far from the river's greedy grasp.



Alma swished her fingers through the fragrant soap suds. The water had long gone cold, the breakfast dishes cleaned and stacked on the drainboard. But still she remained at the sink, a single verse echoing in her heart: *"My soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is."*

She lifted her gaze to the dusty windowpane and the canyon walls beyond—layers of sandstone, deposited and hardened over time, much like her own spirit. Cast aside by the floodwaters, she'd become another rock in the landscape.

With a sigh, Alma dried her hands on a flour-sack towel and turned to survey the kitchen. Park housing left much to be desired, but she'd finally taken her paintbrush to the small dinette. The dainty Swedish flowers and leaves she'd painted along the trim did little beyond giving her something to do. Most of the rangers' wives entertained themselves

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with tittle-tattle, park activities, or minding their children. Alma had no desire to help arrange picnics or plan out the new information center. And her child?

She pressed fingers to the bridge of her nose. *Lord, forgive me.*

Retrieving her paint set from the table, she eyed the tall cupboard beside the sink for her next project. The traditional Swedish *kurbits* designs—fanciful plants heavy with colorful flowers and gourds—were said to bring luck to a household. The motif had been inspired by the plant God had provided to protect Jonah from the desert sun. Maybe it would shield her as well.

The familiar tap on the door tightened the muscles along Alma's back and neck. Before responding, she took a moment to gather the strength necessary to face the chatty young woman waiting on the porch. With a deep breath, Alma swung the door open. "Mattie, what a surprise."

The younger woman's laugh was like a songbird's trill. "I only have a minute, Mrs. Eriksson. I'm heading into Springdale for some supplies. Do you need anything?" Mattie swept inside, her aqua-blue crepe dress a colorful change from the housekeeping uniform she often wore. "A friend of mine is feeling poorly, so I thought I'd pick up some ginger ale and such."

"I hope it's nothing serious." Alma reached for the pad of paper she kept on the corner table. How many items could she ask Mattie to purchase before it became an inconvenience?

"She'll be fine, I'm sure." Mattie tucked her small pocketbook against her hip. "Did you hear about the baby that was discovered this morning?"

Alma's pencil bounced off her toe and rolled across the floorboards. "Wh-what baby?"

"Your husband found an infant near the river, not far from the lodge." The woman's gaze didn't waver. "It was in a basket—or something—hidden under the footbridge. Who would abandon a newborn out in the cold where some coyote could come snatch it? Shameful."

"Was he alive?" Her heart fluttered in her chest as if newly awakened.

“Oh—I’m sorry.” Mattie’s brows pulled together. “I-I didn’t think. It was just such a humdinger piece of gossip.” She touched Alma’s wrist, slowly shaking her head. “Dear Mrs. Eriksson, forget I said anything.”

Alma yanked off her stained apron before tossing it and the notepad onto the table. *Not likely.* “I’m going to the ranger station.”

“You really don’t want to—”

“I need to see the baby for myself.” Alma retrieved her straw hat from the coat-tree.

“I don’t know what good that’ll do.” Mattie chewed her lower lip. “Henry’s going to get steamed over this. I’m supposed to be helping, not upsetting you.”

How long had Mattie been calling Alma’s husband by his given name? Alma studied the woman as a sudden chill descended into the recesses of her stomach. The girl was as young as Alma had been when she and Henry had first met. “I don’t need your help. And I don’t want anything from the market.” A sour tone had crept into her voice, but she didn’t attempt to soften it. “You can go now.”

Mattie backed a few steps before turning and darting out the door. Would she report back to Henry or try to lie low in town until the fire-works were over? Either way, it wasn’t any of Alma’s concern.

That child was.



Light spilled in the window of the ranger office as Henry clunked the telephone receiver back in its cradle and turned to Fred. “The sheriff won’t be here for a few hours. He’s busy with an emergency call over in Hurricane.”

Fred’s brow wrinkled as he stared down at the hatbox and its sleeping occupant sitting in the middle of his desk. “So the babe just stays here? Should I get one of ladies from the lodge to keep an eye on it? Or maybe we could drive it to the hospital in St. George.”

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Standing up, Henry sighed and stretched his back. He'd hoped the sheriff would take possession and get this pint-size distraction out of the office before too many people became aware of its existence. "Give Ernie's wife a call. They have two little ones. Maybe Maureen can help. But not a word to anyone else." His whole day had dissolved into chaos. He'd asked the other rangers to keep the news under their hats for the sake of the investigation—but in reality, he didn't want all the rangers' wives crowding into his space to coo over the foundling. Maureen could be discreet.

Alma especially couldn't hear about this. She'd been through enough. They both had.

Henry rubbed a hand over his eyes. He needed to get back to the site. There could be evidence out there showing who had stashed this innocent baby under the bridge. And why.

"I'll find Maureen." Fred grabbed his hat from the hook by the door. "Will you be all right here alone?" He tipped his head toward the box. "What if it starts squawking?"

"I think I can handle it. I am a father. Or . . ." A lump settled in his throat, and he reached to loosen his tie. "Or rather, I was."

The other ranger withdrew from the room, his footsteps echoing down the hall.

Right on cue, the infant stirred, a tiny, grunting cry breaking the silence.

Henry held his breath. One thing he remembered from his days with a newborn—don't rush in too soon or it was all over.

The rumpled blanket shifted, the whimper intensifying into a full-blown squall at a rather impressive pace.

Henry walked over and took hold of the box, jiggling it lightly. "Sh, no crying, Mister."

The baby's round eyes locked onto him as the forehead crinkled. In the next heartbeat, the lips parted and the cherub emitted a long warbling wail complete with pitiful chin quivering. It was followed by a gasping intake of breath and a secondary vocal assault.

“Now, don’t do that.” The cries punctured Henry’s soul. With shaking fingers, he patted the blanket roughly in the area of the babe’s stomach.

A bare foot kicked through the wraps, the toes flexing as the child continued to fuss.

Henry tucked the covers back around the squirming form, only to have them upended again. Jaw tight, he squared his shoulders and slid both hands under the infant, lifting him free from the leather case. As Henry cradled the bundle to his chest, the familiar sweet smell demolished what was left of his defenses. He groaned and patted the soft back. “I can’t tote you around all day, small fry, but I’ve got a nice lady coming to care for you. You’ll like her.”

When the fuzzy head bumped against his jaw, Henry’s eyes blurred. He jerked his gaze back to the window, blinking hard. He needed to clamp the lid on his emotions or he’d be of no use to anyone, least of all this tiny fellow. He bounced gently on his toes, the swaying motion coming back to him a bit too easily. “There, now.”

“Henry?”

Henry turned at the sound of Alma’s voice. The tender expression on her face tore further at the hole in his chest. How many times would he fail to protect her from heartache? “Alma, honey, don’t come any closer. You don’t need to see this.” He held up a hand as if the baby were some gruesome accident scene rather than a perfectly formed miniature person.

She ignored his warning and crossed the room to stand beside him. The flush on her cheeks drew him back to when he’d first laid eyes on her, a girl not quite eighteen in the front row of their small Scandinavian church.

Her lips parted as she stared at him holding the child. “You look . . .” Tears pooled along the lower lids of her pale blue eyes. Alma shook her head as if scattering the thought. “Wh-whose?” She laid trembling fingers on Henry’s sleeve and her other hand against the infant’s back.

“Wish I knew.” Henry studied his wife. After months of barely

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speaking to him, she didn't seem capable of more than one or two words at a time right now. Then again, he was struggling to find something to say himself. "Why are you here?"

"Mattie stopped by."

He should have known better than to let that young woman walk out of his office after learning of the morning's events. The biggest gossip in the park had gone straight to Alma. "I didn't mean for you to hear it that way." He lifted his voice over the half-hearted fussing.

Alma slid her palm under the swaddled form. "Let me."

If only Fred were still at his desk. With another ranger at the ready, Henry could have held on to the vestiges of common sense and steered his wife away from this danger threatening them both. "I don't think it's wise." But he could never resist her any more than he could keep water from flowing downriver. After a moment's hesitation, he released the weight into her grip. "Maureen Harper is coming to take care of it until the sheriff arrives."

"It?"

"Him."

She cupped her arms around the boy and angled away from Henry as if she and her husband were performing a well-rehearsed dance step—one perfected during the many long nights with their own colicky infant.

"The mother might show up to claim the child. If not, he'll go into state custody. He's not ours—not our responsibility, I mean." Words were starting to flow at last. "We can't keep him here."

"Mm-hmm." She bounced the foundling gently in her arms, her attention fixed.

The little one latched his eyes onto her, his mouth opening round and wide into a massive yawn.

"Alma, don't get . . ." The gentle sound of his wife's humming hushed the words on his lips. The Swedish lullaby "Byssan lull" filtered through the quiet office. This wasn't going to end well.

Voices echoed from down the hall, and Henry willed them closer. “Maureen is here, Alma. She’ll take him now.”

“Maureen already has two children to look after.” Her expression hardened, as if daring him to take the babe from her arms. “If the mother turns up, you know where to find me. It would make more sense to search for her rather than settle for temporary caregivers.”

As Fred and Maureen appeared in the doorway, Alma straightened her shoulders. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a can of evaporated milk waiting at home. I am sure this little boy is hungry.”

Maureen lifted her brows as Alma disappeared down the hall. “You’d best find that mother fast, Ranger Eriksson, or your wife will be knitting booties.”

Palo Alto, California
Present Day

THE MOUNTAIN LAKE shimmered in the early morning light, the sky above the glaciated peaks stained with the colors of dawn. Talia Eriksson sat back in her ergonomic desk chair and studied the scene on her phone. The epic panorama called to her soul. “Seriously, Jasmine. You have the best job.”

Her friend’s giggle sounded from just off-screen. “That’s what I’m telling you, Tal. You should try it. Drew and I drove up here at three a.m. and snatched an hour of sleep in the parking lot before hitting the trail.” Her face came into view, cheeks pink from the cold and shoulders clad in a puffy, insulated parka. “We’re about ready to start, and I knew you’d get a charge out of seeing the behind-the-scenes setup.”

“You’re so right. I’m adding that spot to my bucket list.” Talia leaned an elbow on the desk. “I’m surprised you have a signal out there.”

“Me too. I’m going to pop my cell on the tripod so you can watch. Drew’s going to take the photos with his SLR.” Her head turned. “You ready, babe?”

Talia couldn’t hear his response, but it must have been an affirmative because Jasmine set the camera so it faced the action before stepping away and walking to the viewpoint. She gave Talia a cheery wave, then struck a cheesy pose with her hands in the shape of a heart.

Her husband stepped closer, the side of his technical pants coming into view and causing the camera to briefly refocus.

Talia propped the phone against her pot of faux succulents and squinted at the familiar silver lettering on Drew's rear pocket—the logo of one of Zeta's biggest competitors. Jasmine and Drew had done a brand deal for them just last month. How much of the couple's gear consisted of freebies sent to them by marketing companies? He strode forward to shift a fallen branch out of the way of his shot.

Jasmine stripped off her coat, grabbed the waistband of her fleece hoodie, and pulled it over her head to reveal the newest ZetaWear sports bra in Moon Mist. The color stood out nicely against her bronze skin. She tossed the outerwear to the side before slipping her baggy sweatpants off the matching bike shorts. “Whoa, brisk.”

Rubbing her arms, Talia shivered in sympathy. Her friend was going to freeze her booty off.

Jasmine jogged in place, clapping palms across her toned arms. “Let's do this.” She laced her fingers through her long dark hair, pulling it loose from the messy bun and letting it cascade over her shoulders.

Talia lifted her voice to be heard better on the speakerphone. “How cold is it?”

“Not too bad.” Drew answered from somewhere nearby. “Around forty. It might get to sixty later, but we like to shoot when the sun angle is still low.”

Jasmine made a face. “I don't mind suffering for my art. But I'd like to get done before the wind picks up. Where do you want me?”

Thank goodness for image-editing software that could touch up flushed skin and airbrush away goose bumps. Talia had studied Drew and Jasmine's portfolio. They were talented at highlighting products and making scenes look inviting no matter the weather. That's why she'd brought them on as brand ambassadors.

“Not too close to the edge.” Talia bounced her knee in a burst of

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nervous energy. She'd heard too many stories of influencers taking risks for the "perfect shot."

Jasmine took a few steps closer to the cliff before finding a good rock to sit on. "Don't worry. Drew's really talented with lens compression. The view will look closer than it really is." She wrapped an arm around one knee and let the other leg dangle while she stared contemplatively off into the distance. "How's this?"

The rapid-fire sound of the camera shutter supplied the answer.

A similar rapping on Talia's doorframe drew her attention away.

ZetaWear's designer, Sydney, stood just inside the office. "Got a minute, doll?"

"Come on in." She waved the woman closer, eyeing the stack of fabrics she had draped over one arm. "I'm watching the shoot."

Sydney dropped the samples on the desk and crouched to see. "Nice. What a view." Her brows furrowed. "Can she pull her hair over her shoulder? You can't see the asymmetrical straps. That's the best part of this design."

Jasmine tugged her hair forward and swiveled away from the lens so her shoulders were exposed. "How's that?"

"You know what would be really fun?" Sydney's tone pitched upward as it often did when she was overly excited. "What if you did some yoga positions? Like a warrior pose? Or a handstand scorpion? Can you do that?"

Talia ducked her head to avoid rolling her eyes. "Syd, that's not the vibe we're going for. We want people to think, 'Hey, I want to sit there and enjoy the sunrise like her.' If she does a bunch of difficult moves, people won't imagine themselves in the image. Besides, who's going to hike up to a mountain lake to do yoga?"

The designer frowned. "Me. I totally would."

Yeah, she probably would. Talia took a sip of her chai latte. "Remember, we're trying to evolve our brand positioning away from the image that ZetaWear is only for yoga or the gym. That's the whole point of

this promotion.” She and Sydney had been battling over this for months now.

Sydney straightened and picked up one of the textile samples. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. We’re tweaking the blend for the upcoming national park line.”

“Hold on a second.” Talia lifted the cell. “Hey guys, I’ve got to run. I can’t wait to see your images. Please text me your best ones before you post anything. And stay safe out there.” She waved to her friend before ending the call and turning to the designer. “All right. What’s up?”

“We’re going with this updated polyblend. It will save a fortune and give us the capital needed to license the *artwork*”—her nose wrinkled—“you’re wanting us to include.”

Talia’s heart jumped. This collection had been her first foray out of marketing and into design work. The bland, oatmeal color of most of ZetaWear’s products had never appealed to her, so she’d suggested a line of athletic wear that sported park-themed graphics—the Grand Canyon’s colorful rock layers, the brilliant hues of Yellowstone’s Grand Prismatic Spring, the misty blues and greens of the Great Smoky Mountains. “You’re going with the artist I recommended?”

“She agreed to let us use the illustrations on spec. We’ll see how they look.”

“You won’t be sorry. Hikers will snap them up.”

Sydney pursed her lips. “So you say, and Josiah wants to test the market. This fabric isn’t as soft as our yoga line’s, but it should hold the ink better. And it’s significantly less expensive. If we’re going this direction, I don’t want to sink a fortune into it.”

The dismissive tone set Talia’s nerves on edge. “Not everyone cares to twist their body into pretzels in the name of fitness, and we all know getting out into nature is good for one’s mental health.”

“Whatever.” Sydney handed the samples to Talia and turned to leave. “We should have some photo-ready prototypes tomorrow. I’m sure your little hiker buddy won’t mind redoing the shoot.”

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Talia didn't bother to reply, just picked up the swatch and ran it between her fingers, listening as the designer retreated down the hall. The polyester felt slick, almost more like a nylon swimsuit than the feather-soft yoga wear the company had built their reputation on. Maybe once it was washed and sewn into a garment, it would be more appealing. And the nature designs would draw in the exact customer group she'd been drooling over for years.

Her phone vibrated. Lifting it, she skimmed the text from Jasmine.

Heading back. Here's a preview,
but we'll do some post-
processing to punch up the
light and color. Next time you're
coming with me. Start living your
bucket list, girl!

Two photos popped into the feed. In the first one, Jasmine sat with her back to the camera, her legs crisscrossed in front of her. The line of sight drew the viewer's eyes first to the fashionable ZetaWear asymmetrical straps on Jasmine's slim shoulders and then to the sunlit mountain lake beyond. The second shot was nearly identical, except Jazz had swiveled to grin at the lens and flash her signature peace sign to her followers.

Talia's throat tightened as she dragged her gaze back to the colorless office. It wasn't often she got so sucked into a marketing image that she experienced the same discontent she sought to provoke in customers—though in her case, it wasn't about wanting cute athletic wear.

She missed being on the trail. Before his retirement, her grandpa had been the chief ranger at Zion National Park, and his passion for nature was woven into her DNA. National park road trips had consumed every summer vacation until her mother's breast cancer shredded the fabric of her family. With Mom's death, everything Talia knew unraveled.

Her dad had married a woman from church a year later. As happy

as she was for him, Talia couldn't help feeling like her tight-knit family had all gone their separate ways, reduced to little more than memories and unfinished scrapbooks. How did one make memories alone?

The only things holding her together now were her many to-do lists.

Lately her baby brother had blown up Talia's inbox with photos of his little family's adventures in their self-converted Sprinter van. But she had no time for such luxuries. The only traveling she'd done in the past two years included business retreats at spas and airport conference centers. When had she last felt dirt under her feet?

As her mind wandered, Talia's hands found their way back to the swatch, running the stretchy polyester through her fingers. Every company had its own proprietary blend, each claiming to be an improvement on the competition's—softer, stretchier, more supportive, moisture-wicking, and antimicrobial. That last word still crept her out. She preferred not to think about microbes or what technology might be used to prevent them from taking up residence so close to her skin. She opened the bottom drawer of her desk and dropped the textiles inside with countless others Sydney had dumped on her over the past two years.

Checking her watch, Talia groaned. She needed to prepare for this morning's online presentation. She was scheduled to talk with a collection of fitness magazines about ZetaWear's current collection. She should make Sydney do it, but the designer was still pouting.

Opening her planner, she scribbled the name of Jasmine's mountain lake onto her ever-expanding wish list and tucked the folded sheet inside the cover flap. Flipping past multiple bulleted to-do notes, she found an empty page and jotted down an agenda for the meeting. She was accustomed to writing press releases, not conducting live interviews where she was expected to answer questions on the fly. She'd hate to get the facts wrong or—worse—completely blank on the product line's colors. *Opal Blush, Moon Mist, Seaglass Veil, Fawn Whisper*. More washed-out pastels and neutrals.

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That would change soon. A shiver traced its way up her arms.

An hour later, Talia checked her lipstick in her phone's front-facing camera before she clicked into the online meeting and greeted the small collection of journalists. After reading her prepared spiel and then answering a few questions, she thanked them for coming. There should have been more excitement, but what else could she say? Nothing about this line was particularly a departure for Zeta, and she didn't dare hint at the upcoming national park styles. Not yet.

Each of the reporters signed off until only one remained.

The woman cleared her throat. "Hey, Talia—can I ask an additional question now that it's just you and me?"

Talia's finger hesitated over the X that would terminate the online call. She drew her hand back. "Of course." She glanced at the woman's nameplate. Lissa James looked vaguely familiar.

The reporter offered a well-controlled smile, not flashing a hint of teeth. "Many athleisure companies have tightened their belts in response to the declining economy and rising prices, often cutting corners with fabrics and their environmental impact. Can you speak to Zeta's commitment to providing a greener product—especially since you're entering the crowded outdoor-recreation market and pitching garments to customers who might care a little more about the future of the planet?"

Talia's stomach tensed. "I'm so glad you asked, Lissa." Her favorite stalling technique gave her a moment to recall the well-rehearsed company position on such topics. "Here at ZetaWear, the earth is a top priority. That's why a portion of our profits from this line will be set aside to support nonprofits dedicated to protecting our public lands and promoting environmental stewardship. We fully intend to put our money where our mouth is."

Lissa leaned closer to her camera. "But what of the production itself? Are we talking about any natural fibers? Renewable resources? Zeta's patented polyblend is a closely guarded secret. How can customers be

sure you're not contributing to the problems of textile waste and microplastics in our waterways? Not to mention the air pollution caused by production."

They had faced these accusations before, and Talia had written out heavily nuanced answers she insisted every employee memorize, even though the process left her uneasy. "ZetaWear is committed to reducing waste at *every* step of production. We ensure our suppliers share our commitment and goals. In fact, we're one of the few fitness wear companies with a direct recycling program. On our website you can find—"

"Quite admirable. But our testing shows some disturbing facts about your products." The reporter's expression grew steely, her carefully sculpted eyebrows drawing low over her eyes. "I'd like to get your take on it before we go public with our—"

"Why don't you send me what you've gathered." Talia knew better than to get pushed into a corner, the prickling on the back of her neck reminding her to guard her reaction. "Then we can look it over and give you a response."

"—contains forty times the safe limit based on California standards." The woman hadn't even stopped for a breath. "Significantly higher than most of your competitors. Did you know how quickly bisphenol A can be absorbed through the skin? In minutes. And how many of your customers wear sports bras for hours on end—not just during a workout, but all day? The underpaid seamstresses in the sweatshops are at risk, and so are those who buy and wear your product. I'm sure you're aware that bisphenol A has been implicated in various cancers, fertility issues, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular problems."

The oxygen in the room dissipated the moment the reporter mentioned cancer. Talia thrust away the memories and sat forward, pinning Lissa with a glare. "You know we'll need to review this data before I can make a comment. Forward it directly to me, and I'll take it to my staff for consideration."

"I'll do better than that." She folded her hands on the desktop. "I'll

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forward it to the Department of Public Health. You don't need to give me a comment on the study right now. That's not exactly what I'm asking."

"It's not?" Talia reached for a pen. This was not going well. Likely this Lissa James had nothing new, but Talia still needed to prepare a company response in case the news was inflammatory enough to catch the public's attention.

"No. What I want to know is this." She smiled as a dark gleam appeared in her blue eyes. "Are you wearing the product right now?"

A totally inappropriate question, but the chill swept over Talia even before she jabbed the button to end the call.

Of course she was wearing it.

She'd worn Zeta's activewear nearly every day since she'd accepted the job. Everyone here did.



Zion National Park

The merciless afternoon sun beat down as Blake Mitchell propped a foot on a rock and braced the citation book against his knee. He lifted his gaze to peruse the canyon laid out below them, the spectacular walls of the Great White Throne rising on the far side. The teen standing in front of him deserved to sweat, and there was no place more beautiful to do so.

The kid shuffled his feet and refused to meet Blake's eyes. Maybe there was hope for him.

"I'm not sure what you were thinking, carving profanities in the sandstone." Blake kept his voice steady as he filled out the form. "Not everyone wants to see your artwork. This park belongs to all of us." The lecture made him sound like a grumpy old man. But even though the class B misdemeanor could earn someone prison time and hefty fines, Blake knew how the courts looked on these things. Likely as not, the

boy would walk with probation and community service. Hopefully one brush with the legal system would be enough to jar him out of his self-absorbed mindset.

It had taken twice for Blake.

Scowling, the teenager took the slip of paper and jammed it into his pocket. "I wasn't hurting nobody. Just some dumb rocks."

Sure—this time. It was next time that Blake worried about. He returned the kid's license and watched him slouch back to his friends.

In Afghanistan, he'd witnessed juveniles plant IEDs and strap on suicide-bomb vests. Getting hassled about a little graffiti wasn't the worst thing that could happen to a kid.

As Blake descended Kayenta Trail toward the Grotto, he studied the mighty red rock cliffs that towered above the Virgin River. After the convoluted grace journey that brought him to this place, he never wanted to take a minute for granted. As long strings of hikers passed, climbing the trail toward the Emerald Pools, he made sure to give each person a welcoming smile.

In the parking area, Interpretive Ranger Alder Clark leaned against Blake's white Tahoe, relaxed as ever. "There you are. I heard the complaint back at the visitor center. You located the boys, I take it?"

"Pocketknife in hand. Kid bought it at the gift shop, can you believe that? I don't think he meant any harm, just a sixteen-year-old trying to impress his buddies and not considering the long-term consequences."

"Who does at that age?"

It felt good to have made a friend in this new place, and having dinner last night with Alder and his family had cemented it. "Your oldest is about that age, isn't he?" Blake asked.

Alder ran a hand over his hair before replacing the iconic flat-brimmed straw hat worn by most of the rangers. "No, he's just tall for his age. Chase is in middle school. He hasn't hit that 'my friends know better than my folks' stage yet. But I'm sure it's not far off."

"Maybe you'll get lucky. He seems like a good kid." A great kid,

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actually. Blake had watched Alder and Katie interact with their three children last night, and they'd struck him as the perfect family. But what did he know? He came from a long line of failures. Pursuing a family of his own never seemed worth the risk—though if all children were as fun as Alder's, he might have considered it.

His policy had been to bail on relationships before reaching the “deep conversations about the future” stage. Or conversations about the past, for that matter. It was safer for everyone that way. Blake had made it to almost thirty without getting seriously entangled. That wasn't likely to change anytime soon.

“Kids have to find their own paths.” Alder shrugged. “My dad says parenting is a long series of goodbyes. At first, they're a hundred percent dependent on you. But once they take those first steps, they're walking farther and farther away. By the teen years, they're learning to be independent. Good parents need to stand back and let them.”

Blake unlocked the Tahoe and opened the driver's side door. “Sounds like you had a great dad.”

“The best.” His friend leaned his lanky frame against the government vehicle. “What about you?”

“Polar opposite, I'm afraid. Lived fast. Died young.” He choked back the bitter taste climbing his throat. This discussion was getting into dangerous territory.

Alder's brow furrowed. “That's rough, man. I'm sorry.”

Blake started the engine to get the SUV cooling. “No worries. I'm glad you and Katie have it figured out. Maybe I'll learn something from you.”

“We're far from perfect.” Alder chuckled. “I lost it with Chase the other day over a stupid homework assignment he'd lied to me about finishing.”

Blake studied the ranger's good-natured face. He suspected Alder's version of losing it was radically different from what he'd grown up with.

“That’s not what I wanted to talk to you about, though.” Alder dug a pair of sunglasses out of his shirt pocket. “Last week you said you’re looking for a new place to live.”

Blake retrieved his water bottle from his pack. It was only May and the temperatures were already climbing. What would it be like in July? “Yeah. They put me in temporary housing when I arrived, but someone else is scheduled to be in there next month. I’ve been looking, but the prices are ridiculous.”

“Hurricane is a bit of a drive, but Katie and I have a little mother-in-law cottage out back. We’d originally planned to use it as a vacation rental to help with the mortgage, but it’s been too much of a headache. We can’t take those kinds of chances with the kids around. It’s tiny—just a studio. That’s why Katie had me invite you over. She wanted to scope you out.”

Blake’s heart jumped. “Are you kidding me? I’ll take it.”

The corner of Alder’s mouth lifted. “I haven’t even mentioned the rent.”

“I’m sure we can come to an agreement.”

After a quick back-and-forth, they settled on rent and a move-in date. In Blake’s mind, he was already throwing his belongings into the back of his beat-up Subaru. The dormitory housing, complete with rodent infestations, had left a lot to be desired. Having his own space—no matter the size—sounded like heaven.

“Hey, you’ve got Mondays off, right?” Alder asked. “Chase and I were thinking of going to Kolob Canyons to do some hiking. I know he’d love to have someone who’s not his old man along. He couldn’t stop talking about you last night.”

Blake scratched his jaw. “Me? Seriously?”

“Former soldier and law enforcement? You’re basically his hero. But the poor kid’s stuck with geology-geek Dad. I’ll have to remember not to bore him with science facts while we’re hiking, otherwise he might try to trick you into adopting him.”

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Blake had never had anyone look up to him before. That would take some getting used to. “I hope I don’t let him down.”

“Not much risk of that. Not unless you start telling dad jokes and listing off the different kinds of sedimentary rocks.”

“I don’t think I even know any dad jokes.”

“Well, you’re good, then.” He headed for his car but stopped halfway across the lot. “Oh—and watch out for Katie. She’s already putting together a list of single women for you. I know all of Katie’s friends.” He grimaced. “If you’re smart, you’ll find yourself a girlfriend before she gets a hold of you.”

A girlfriend? Blake slid into the driver’s seat and cranked the AC. Maybe the rodents hadn’t been so bad.



Palo Alto, California

Talia folded her legs under her on the small green sofa in her apartment. The sudden movement sent the damp towel wrapped around her head slumping to one side. Adjusting the computer on her lap, she slid the towel free and ran fingers through her hair before clicking onto yet another website. After her meeting, she’d approached Josiah, the company’s chief operating officer, about the reporter’s claims. He’d laughed them off as clueless fearmongering.

For some reason, that felt less than reassuring.

The moment Talia got home, she’d jumped in a hot shower, soaping and rinsing every inch of her skin. Twice.

Afterward, she’d gotten busy researching the presence of BPA in workout clothing and taking detailed notes. It would be her job to battle this negative publicity and find some way to spin it to ZetaWear’s benefit. Evidently it wasn’t just microplastics. Studies indicated that many of these garments also contained unhealthy amounts of toxic chemicals.

She tightened the belt of her terry cloth robe and considered the company's next move. Rather than giving the accusations any credence, she needed to design a campaign to deflect attention and keep customers focused on the positive aspects of their products. *Keep 'em buying*. A hard lump settled in her throat.

What she needed was a list. Uncapping a purple felt tip, Talia brainstormed words she could use. *Movement, fitness, health*. She scratched a line through the last word. Might be problematic. She added several more: *flexibility, strength, stylish, independent, unique*.

Unique? Just last week they'd filmed a video with a group of models striking yoga poses on a sandy beach. The images had been beautiful in their simplicity and elegance, but unique? Hardly. Every woman in the shoot had the same long, lean body type. She'd insisted they include two minority women and a wheelchair athlete, but Sydney refused any talk of plus-size models. Even the sand had been raked until it was uniformly clean and inoffensive. Sanitized nature, ideals of how women should look and behave, and Zeta's subdued colors—it all promoted a myth of perfection the world would never achieve.

Selling a fantasy was the keystone of good marketing.

Talia switched to a green pen, adding color to the bullet points. Everyone knew that buying a simple sports bra and spandex shorts wouldn't provide all the answers, especially not for those who lounged around in their stretchy garments while bingeing on pizza and Netflix. The comfortable illusion was a great deal easier than true change.

But what if their fantasy worlds put them at risk for cancer? She'd struggle to live with herself if her actions led anyone down the torturous path her mother had walked. The oncologist had been unable to explain the cause of Mom's illness, telling Talia there were all sorts of potential triggers.

The world was never again the safe place she'd imagined.

Talia's phone buzzed, jarring her from the dark spiral. She retrieved the device from the coffee table. An unfamiliar number rolled across

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the screen. Just in case it was work-related, she clicked open the new text message.

This is Lissa James. Sorry I came on so strong earlier. I wanted to get your attention. Are you open to talking privately? If not, I'll leave you alone.

A half-choked laugh burst from Talia's throat. The audacity of that woman. How had she even gotten this number? Talia tossed the cell on the sofa and glanced at her dinner sitting forgotten on the coffee table. The square of lasagna had dried and cracked around the edges. She scooped up the small disposable tray and walked it to the microwave—after all, doomscrolling wasn't getting her anywhere. It shouldn't be too hard to find a way to spin this development in ZetaWear's favor. Chances were, they'd sell more clothes than ever before.

More people wearing their poison-laced fabric.

The thought sunk its claws into Talia's already strained nerves. Setting the container on the counter, she grabbed a cup and held it under the tap. Cold water spilled over the rim of the plastic cup she'd treasured since she was five. She locked eyes with the Hello Kitty emblazoned on the side. When had BPA-free cups become standard?

This is ridiculous. She couldn't start second-guessing everything around her because of one reporter's allegations. Even so, she dropped the lasagna in the trash and reached into the cupboard for a glass.

The cool water soothed both her throat and her emotions. Hurrying back to the living room, she grabbed her phone and tapped out a quick reply.

This is unprofessional. Please contact me at the office only.

She refrained from adding an angry emoji before pushing Send, then blocked the number. The cell vibrated in her hand, and she nearly dropped it. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

When her grandfather’s name lit up the screen, she laughed. Talia pressed the phone to her ear. “Pops! How are you?”

“Hiya, kid. I wanted to be the first to wish you a happy birthday tomorrow. How’s my best girl? Should I sing you ‘Ja, må hon leva’ like your *gammelfarmor* used to?”

The image of her silver-haired great-grandmother singing the Swedish birthday song brought a flurry of memories as sweet as pink-frosted cupcakes. “Thanks, Pops, but then I’d have to sing right back at you, and nobody needs to hear that.” Their shared birthday had always been a source of joy for Talia, making her feel special among the crowd of grandchildren. She clicked on the speakerphone before setting the device on the kitchen counter and opening the freezer for the pint of pistachio ice cream she’d stashed there yesterday—another birthday tradition. He’d be eating vanilla. “I’m glad to hear your voice.”

“Right back at you.” He went silent for a moment. “You sound tired. Are you working too hard?”

Pops never missed anything. Talia pried the lid off the container and dug the tip of her spoon into the icy green goodness, but it was too firm to give way—kind of like her mood. “It was a rough day.” A rough week, really. She sighed. How long had it been since she’d taken some time off? “I think I need a vacation.”

“My door is always open. You know that.” His smile was evident in the lilt of his voice. “I’m just rattling around this big house alone. It’s a shame.”

“I wish I could come.” Zion Canyon would be the ultimate escape from the stress of this job. She could almost picture herself hiking the Scout Lookout trail, the spring sunshine warming her shoulders. Just the thought of it melted some of the tension from her muscles.

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“But I have a big product launch coming up and there’s been a bit of drama—you know, like always.”

“Life is full of drama. Don’t let it get the best of you.” He chuckled. “Though that’s easy for the old retired guy to say.”

“You’re not old. You’re the youngest seventy-something-year-old I know.”

“And you’re the oldest almost-twenty-six-year-old I know.”

Talia’s heart lifted at their long-standing exchange. They’d been teasing each other as long as she could remember, and she missed their easy banter.

“Well, don’t let it get you down,” he added. “You’re too young for gray hair. Leave that to us senior citizens.”

She sank onto the barstool. “I’m not sure why I’m doing this job anymore. I’m tired of trying to convince people to buy stuff they don’t need or want.” She paused, pondering how much she should share. “Today I learned that the clothing our company makes might actually be harmful. Chemicals and microplastics and all that nonsense.” She used the spoon to scrape off a sliver of the ice cream and pressed it to her tongue.

“Have you brought it to their attention?”

“They don’t seem concerned. Now I’m trying to figure out how serious it is.” She set down her spoon, determined to wait for the thaw.

“You have a big heart, Talia. I know you’ll do the right thing.”

After ten minutes of chatting with her favorite birthday twin, she wished Pops a happy birthday and good night before hanging up.

Talia stared at the phone screen for a long moment, her spirits finally settling onto a steady path. She needed more information than the internet was willing to provide. Maybe going to the source wouldn’t be the worst idea.

She unblocked the number from earlier, then hovered her thumb over the screen for a long moment before touching Call. It connected almost instantly, providing no time for her to change her mind.

“Talia?” Lissa’s voice pitched high, her surprise evident.

Talia ran a hand over her forehead. “I-I shouldn’t be talking to you.”

“I’m glad you called. I didn’t mean to harass you at home, I just thought it might be easier for you to talk away from listening ears.”

“Just to be up-front, I am loyal to my employer, but I would like to know more about what’s going on. What can you tell me?”

For the next hour Talia scribbled down notes faster than she ever had back in business school. The more Lissa detailed the research, the darker the picture became. There seemed little question that the executives at ZetaWear knew exactly what they were doing. Industry professionals had done a shrewd job of covering up the information and pointing the blame elsewhere. Now a small group of people—including Lissa—was determined to shine a light on the situation.

“You could join us, Talia,” Lissa entreated. “Give us an insider’s view on the athleisure industry, and together we’ll blow this story wide open.”

Talia dug her fingers against the knotted muscles in her neck. “I have to confess, I’m concerned. But I’d be out of a job—maybe even my whole career—if I shared corporate secrets.” ZetaWear had hired her right out of grad school, taking a huge chance on an untested beginner. Could she turn her back on them now?

“There are employment laws protecting whistleblowers. Zeta wouldn’t be able to retaliate.”

Talia swirled the spoon deep into the carton of ice cream, now the consistency of soft serve. One person’s whistleblower was another’s traitor. She didn’t want to be either. How had this day become such a tangled mess? “Let me sleep on it. If I’m going to blow up my career, I need to be certain.”

Lissa’s sigh carried through the phone speaker. “Of course. I understand.” She paused. “I’m sure you’ll do the right thing.”

The echo of Pops’s earlier statement reverberated in Talia’s soul. What was the “right thing” in a case like this? She finished the call, returned the carton to the freezer, and headed for bed. It was going to be a long night.