



CHAPTER ONE

IT WAS TIME TO CONQUER this fear that held her hostage.

Julia Stevens tightened her boots, then clicked each foot into the skis. Inhaling a fortifying breath of freezing air, she stuck her poles into the snow. The skis sliced through the powder.

White-topped mountainsides sprouted deep-green pine trees, and a piercing blue sky hovered over the small dots of the town below. Was it the smartest decision to pull over at the empty field to ski? Probably not. Could she endure her assignment if she didn't get the jitters out of her system first? Absolutely not.

A thrill of excitement rushed through her at this last opportunity to document American culture—the ultimate experience for outdoor enthusiasts during winter, formerly her favorite time of year. She paused to snap photos for her social media accounts. Her phone's camera would suffice until she could perfect her landscapes with the Nikon.

Bittersweet emotions ricocheted through her soul as she snapped the images. Sweet, because she loved her job and the adventures in each location. Bitter, because at the end of this month, she'd have to fulfill her promise to herself to go home and face her past, where her world had shifted in one agonizing incident.

Not to mention create a new career to sustain the rest of her life. If she could end this last assignment well, she'd have a shot at the substantial journalism she'd always dreamed of doing . . . at least since the accident.

Two years had seemed like a lifetime when she'd taken this job—a distraction, an opportunity to write a new future. Now the final days stretched in front of her, leaving her to wonder how she hadn't made significant progress in that time, at least not inside. But if she could finish this assignment, her boss had promised he'd open doors for her new dream.

Silverberg, Colorado. The last stop on her paid stint traveling America. She just needed to conquer this one challenge so she could move full force into the month ahead.

She slid her legs forward.

The snow deepened around her skis.

She couldn't move.

She glanced around.

A mass of gray clouds straddled the distant peaks.

Not another soul in her immediate vicinity.

Her heart beat erratically as her mind filled with images of her sister's death. Conjured sounds of her sister's screaming.

Just push forward.

Her skis wouldn't move.

Bile circulated in her stomach. She knew better. She should have analyzed the conditions and at least told someone where she'd be. But no, her decision to get hold of her fear had accomplished one outcome—stuck in a snow field, in the middle of the mountains, above some town where she did not know a soul.

Unclipping the boots from the skis, she lifted one leg, then the other.

She sank deeper into the powder. That wouldn't work.

If she were still a praying woman, she'd ask God for a solution. But she'd abandoned that faith element the day Nikki had died.

An engine rumbled in the distance. Jerking her head up, Julia spotted a pickup winding its way around the road. She waved her arms in the air and yelled.

The truck stopped about fifty feet from where she stood. The door swung open, and a man leaned out. "Everything okay?"

"I'm stuck—the snow's deeper than I thought!"

"Hang tight." He hopped onto the bed of his F-150, then yanked a

beanie over his head, followed by a heavy parka and snow pants. He jumped down and strapped snowshoes onto his feet. "Let me pack it down, and I'll get to you." His voice floated to her, offering warmth and hope.

Julia's legs trembled, relief calming her heart. She'd get out of this predicament, go back to avoiding her skis, and somehow figure out another way to write about this town.

"Where's your partner?" The man moved closer.

Julia met his gaze, then noticed the tight clench of his jaw.

She flushed. In any other circumstances, she'd be intimidated by how attractive the man was. He resembled every stereotype of an outdoor model—tall, broad shoulders, sandy-blond hair peeking out of a brown Carhartt beanie. But today the flush was embarrassment. She'd known better than to do this on her own, and now she had to explain her actions.

"I'm alone. Just went for a quick ski and got stuck."

His brows rose. "What in the world gave you the impression you should be out in the wilderness alone?"

He could at least be compassionate. It wasn't like she was happy about the result. Tilting her chin, she met his gaze. "I assume you've never misjudged the depth of the snow?"

"Not like this." He stomped the ground, packing the snow around her in a trail to her car. "What was your plan if I hadn't driven by? Wait all night? Die of hypothermia?"

Wow, he really laid the guilt on thick. "I have a cell phone. I would've called for help. Would've crawled in if I had to. Worst case, my boss can track my location for safety purposes. He would have called reinforcements."

A gush of wind ruffled the snow, puffing small clouds into the air.

"Here's what you're going to do. The snow is packed now. You'll reattach the skis and follow the path I made back to your car. Then you'll leave this area and not venture into the outdoors again alone. Got it?"

"Got it." She ground the words out, sliding her way onto the path he'd made.

They trudged along the packed ground in silence. Bracing against her Honda, she clicked her boots out of the bindings. “Thanks for helping.”

The man shoved his snowshoes back into the truck and yanked off the hat. A five o’clock shadow dusted his chin, somehow making his eyes pop even more. He scrubbed his face with a hand. “I’ll make sure your car starts and you get on your way.”

Grumpy, but a gentleman.

“Stay safe, ma’am, and hopefully I won’t see you out here alone again.” He met her gaze, and a flash of awareness sparked between them.

Under different circumstances, she might explore the friction, but between his attitude and the demands of this assignment, she didn’t have the time. Odd, though, how he could be simultaneously willing to help her yet so gruff about it.

Julia nodded, shutting her door. The car started without hesitation, soon enveloping her in the warmth of its heat, melting away the frustration at her rescuer. Following the GPS directions to the house she’d rented for the next several weeks, she considered the rest of her day. She’d unpack, settle in, then meet with Bruce Haskins, the man her boss had arranged as a contact.

Shops and cafés, restaurants and trinket stores lined the main street of Silverberg, all covered in layers of snow. Advertisements for outdoor summer activities and store specials filled the darkened windows, a silent confirmation she’d landed in a sleepy winter town. A mere handful of people walked the streets, wrapped in heavy winter gear. Woodsmoke curled into the sky, its scent permeating the inside of her vehicle.

Julia parked at the isolated house a block off the main street—not the quaint neighborhood she’d expected. She pulled her jacket and scarf tighter around her body and climbed out of her car, camera in hand. Packed snow disguised what she assumed was the front lawn, with a narrow route leading to the entrance of the shambled home.

The dark building hardly gave off a welcoming ambience. That was the gamble she’d taken by securing her own accommodations,

but it was better than staying at a hotel or bed-and-breakfast. She could settle in here and live like a true local, not a temporary guest on vacation.

She snapped photos of the home, already imagining her captions and the responses her followers would make.

Filling her lungs with a large gulp of freezing air, she clenched her fists. She'd make this the best stop yet. *Quit* wasn't a word in her vocabulary—despite the ugly accommodations and frigid temperature and one unwelcoming man.

She slid the key into the lock and turned it. The door gave with a light squeak.

A powerful, rancid smell wafted out. Urine-scented air.

Her stomach clenched.

Disgust and curiosity played a tug-of-war in her mind, until the need for answers won. She took a step forward and entered, ignoring the creaking door and dark shadows. Shaggy couches adorned the front sitting room, and trash lined the kitchen counters. She approached the mess, wrinkling her nose.

She covered her mouth and muffled a scream. Her heart beat faster than a mountain lion chasing its prey.

A man writhed on the kitchen floor, gasping. "Help . . . me."

Julia called 911.

The man's body stilled, and his features slackened.



Cade Haskins thrived in action-oriented scenarios. Busting drug rings. Arresting criminals. Keeping American citizens safe. Not staring at a computer screen and fidgeting behind the front desk in the historic Silverberg Hotel lobby. He stared at the day's tasks, but his mind yanked him back to his dad's condition.

It was more than he had anticipated.

The dark wood desk encircled him, and the ornate chandeliers and ambient light cast a haunting shadow.

Guilt gnawed at his stomach. He'd just left his parents' when his

mom called to talk about end-of-life options for his dad. Then he'd seen the woman stranded in the middle of a field. He had no choice but to help, but he'd taken his frustration out on the lady. Even if she'd made a stupid decision, she hadn't deserved the brunt of his anger.

"Cade." His dad shuffled toward him, each step producing labored breathing. "Can you join the chamber meeting for a few minutes?"

Cade's eyes strayed to his computer and the browser tabs open. *Lung cancer*. "Dad, you're supposed to be home resting." Concern tugged at Cade, landing in his stomach like a ball of dread. His father resembled a shell of his former self.

"I have good news." His dad's eyes lit, despite his laborious movements. "Come to the conference room."

Cade followed him to the room full of local business owners. A box of donuts sat at the center of a table lined with half-filled coffee cups. A round of waves greeted him.

"Cade, welcome home. It's been too long. How are you, man?"

Cade turned, tilting up his mouth. "Russell." He leaned forward, shaking the man's hand. "Doing well. The better question is, How are *you* doing?" Russell had lost his wife a couple of years ago.

"Hanging in there. One day at a time." The man sipped from a take-out cup from the Homesteader, evidence of a morning at his café. "I'll never stop missing her, but the restaurant keeps me busy. No rest for the weary."

"I can't imagine what it's been like." Cade set his face into a somber expression to radiate empathy toward the other man. He cleared his throat and looked to his dad. "So what's up?"

Bruce Haskins balanced himself with a hand on the back of his chair. "We have an appointment this afternoon I need you to cover. *Adventures Through America* magazine decided to send a writer to Silverberg. Can you meet with her? Russell is swamped at the restaurant, Kathy's grandkids are staying with her, and Susan will be out of town for the holidays."

"Sorry, Cade." Susan, who owned a hair salon, stood to hug him. "Can't miss a chance for a tropical vacation to escape the snow."

“And I promised my grandbabies holiday memories this year.” Kathy, the town florist, rounded the table for her hug.

Home. Cade knew everyone, had history with most of the town.

Tension emanated around him. He rubbed his eyes and pulled a hand through his hair. “Happy to meet with the writer. Name the time.”

His dad sighed. “Three o’clock. You’ll answer her questions about Silverberg, maybe show her around a bit, and take her on some winter activities.”

Cade gulped his black coffee and prayed the caffeine would jolt his system awake. “Why Silverberg?”

“It’s off the beaten path, not the typical ritzy Colorado ski town. Apparently they think she can showcase both our extreme winter sports and the quiet lifestyle here. At our chamber meeting, we agreed to have someone local show her around town. This is a big opportunity for Silverberg, Cade. And the hotel. It’ll show that Silverberg tourism isn’t limited to summer. We have something for everyone. Extreme outdoor enthusiasts can explore our untamed wilderness. People who want a more tame experience can ice skate or sled or enjoy a relaxing hotel getaway.”

“Right.” His dad sure loved this town. “How long are we talking?”

“She’ll be here for about a month.”

Cade coughed on his coffee. *A month?* “She’s staying here, right?”

“Nope. I offered, but she found somewhere else. Too bad. It would’ve been fantastic marketing.” Dad never had been able to disassociate from work. Even now he was drawn to the hotel like an ice skater to a frozen pond.

Cade ground his teeth. “I’ll take care of it. Get yourself home to rest.”

“Thanks, son. I owe you one.”

Cade’s throat clogged. “That’s why I’m here.” His stalwart dad had supported the entire family for years. Time to return the favor. Cade might not have landed back home under the best of circumstances, but seeing his father in this condition had changed his perspective.

Cade needed to be here. *Wanted* to help.

The plea from his dad rang through his mind as he returned to the front desk, footsteps echoing through the lobby. He couldn't tell his dad no, especially now. Loyalty flowed like a river in the Haskins family.

Besides, anything was doable for a month. He'd survived training at Quantico, for crying out loud.

A random travel writer assigned to Silverberg in the dead of winter made no sense. If the author was someone like Bear Grylls, sure, it would be logical. But Silverberg's mountains were too dangerous for the average person during this season. Case in point—the beautiful but reckless woman who'd gotten stuck in the snow. He imagined touring some frumpy middle-aged lady through Colorado's winter. Bad idea. But the town *could* benefit from more winter tourism, and if he could help his dad—and the chamber—he would.

Cade shuffled through the day's check-ins, searching for any early arrival requests or late checkouts. The ringtone for Special Agent Ace Jenkins, his best friend and former DEA partner, pierced the silent lobby. Cade swiped to answer. "What's up, man?"

"I need a favor."

"Name it."

"Routine traffic stop in Denver exposed a man in possession of several pounds of meth. The man was under the influence but mentioned Silverberg and said the wilderness and snow were supposed to hide him. Leaked an address in your neck of the woods, but kept talking about the backcountry. Then apparently a dead body was found in Silverberg. Can you check the scene out?"

"Anything but that. I'm done."

"You've gotta get back on the horse sometime. Just go by the scene. I'm on the other side of the state. See if it looks like it could be a box lab. We both know Silverberg isn't a likely home for large-scale distribution, but we can't deny that drug trafficking and drug-related gang activity has increased in major cities. Not to mention the DEA has seized double the amount of meth this year compared to last in Colorado."

“Why would Silverberg suddenly be a hot spot? It’s a speck on the map.”

“Probably isn’t. Just need to rule out the possibility.”

Cade glanced at his watch. Almost noon. Ace had been his best friend for years. Cade could—should—help him. It would take no more than half an hour, tops. He could be back before the meeting this afternoon. “Fine. I’ll head over once the afternoon front-desk staff gets in. Give me the address.”

“I owe you one, man.”

“Don’t get any ideas, Ace. I’m done with the DEA.”

“Yeah? Which is why you haven’t moved anything out of your apartment in Denver? I’m still hoping you’ll come back.”

Ace could hope all he wanted, but Cade wasn’t going back. His friend didn’t understand the letdown of a failed mission, the defeat. Besides, Cade had new responsibilities now.

Leaving the front desk in the capable hands of the afternoon staff a while later, Cade exited the hotel, climbed into his F-150, and put the address Ace had sent him into his GPS. He sipped on a watered-down soda he’d left in the cupholder, but the lackluster beverage did little to awaken his senses on the drive across town. Yeah, he loved the DEA. Loved the purpose, the mission. But it brought other complications, and he wasn’t ready to embrace those again.

He pushed the truck door open and gulped the winter air that stung his lungs. Trekking over the packed snow, he worked his way to the door. The sun beat a sliver of light on the side of the cabin. Tall pine trees shaded the remaining area. He hadn’t ever paid attention to this place before today. Its remote location on the far edge of town represented what he loved about his hometown. Lots of space and few occupants.

“‘Just get back on the horse.’ Right.” Cade groaned, despising the phrase.

Sweat trickled down his brow as he faced the door. Caution tape outlined the scene. Not a good start.

He pushed it open.

Glass cookware, stockpiled paint thinner, and masks—the true telltale sign, no doubt used for protection during cooking—screamed at him.

A meth lab.

Cade punched his palm. There was no avoiding the horse he'd just managed to land himself on.

He called Ace.

"This isn't good. It's a lab."

"Dude, it gets worse. The local station determined some civilian woman found the body."

Cade peered through his binoculars to scan the surrounding area. No movement from any of the neighbors, distant as they were. Probably all summer homes whose owners preferred not to rent to strangers when they left for warmer climates during the winter. The perfect place for a murderer to abandon a body. Or a meth lab. "Did they put her in protective custody?" His shoulders bunched, tension pulling at his neck.

"No. They don't think she's in danger."

"So what's next?" Cade paced, dreading the answer.

"Local LEOs will analyze the scene, determine cause of death, and work a joint task force with DEA."

Cade could imagine Ace pacing and tossing his stress ball. "And the civilian?"

"You know how these small-town chiefs are. He told her to be careful and let her go. Didn't think there was a real threat. But you know the risks."

He did indeed, and he hoped—and prayed—these calculated risks made the most sense in this situation. He alternated between looking inside the cabin and scanning the scene outside. No sign of a perp.

His heart hammered until a resignation calmed his pulse. Satisfied with what he'd found, he trudged his way out of the cabin and back to his truck. Frost obscured the windows, and the loud crunch of icy snow left screeching sounds in the wake of his steps.

A few small box labs, set up to cook meth, had been reported in

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this general area in recent months, but none of them had seemed big enough for a DEA presence.

But a body found in a meth lab spelled disaster. This horse he'd landed on was more like a wild bull, crazy and unpredictable.



CHAPTER TWO

CADE RODE THE ELEVATOR TO the conference room on the second floor, wishing he had a way to get out of touring some woman around Silverberg. Between his dad's sickness and the hotel, this was one more to-do item on his growing list. The meth presence complicated matters. He couldn't just ignore the problem. Not after Sanchez.

He pushed open the door to the meeting room. This space housed numerous childhood memories. The simple mountain decor allowed creativity and conversation to flow. The wood panels freshened the room with a lingering sweet fragrance, and soft green walls blended with the Colorado trees in the decorations. Photographs of the local mountains adorned the walls, reminding Cade of his carefree, adventurous childhood.

His gut clenched. He needed to focus on assisting this writer and relieving his dad's stress.

He dropped into the leather chair and popped a mint from the table into his mouth. Did she forget about the appointment?

"I'm so sorry I'm late. You must be Bruce. I'm Julia."

The soft, feminine voice broke his reverie.

"I got caught up doing online research, and before I knew it, I missed the meeting time."

Cade barely stopped himself from rolling his eyes at the excuse before swiveling the chair around to stand and meet his new charge. He froze. Dark strands of hair framed each side of her near-perfect face, and icy-blue eyes widened at him. Not a frumpy blogger.

“You.” Her brows rose.

Man, he was a sucker for the dark-hair and blue-eyes combo. “What?”

“You’re the one who rescued me earlier today.”

He hadn’t recognized her without her hat on, but now the truth hit him full force. The woman from the field. He should apologize, but what could he say? It was still a stupid decision, one that could’ve had dire consequences.

They stared at each other for a long moment. The air around them crackled, and Cade forced himself to take a breath. Did she feel this instant attraction? Or was it friction after their earlier meeting? He blinked, reining his thoughts. He couldn’t afford any distractions. And one drop-dead-gorgeous travel writer might turn out to be just that. A distraction.

“I’m Cade. Bruce’s son. He’s . . . unavailable. I’ll be your contact.”

She plopped a leather tote bag on the floor and pulled a pen from the bun in her hair, offering a view of her slight blush. “Should we get started?”

Maybe she wanted to avoid discussion of their earlier meeting as well. “Sure.”

Julia set a camera on the table, then grabbed her laptop and a leather-bound notebook from the bag by her feet. Clad in dark jeans and a button-down shirt, she crossed her legs, the embodiment of prim and proper.

“Tell me how this job of yours works.” He leaned forward.

“I’m employed by *Adventures Through America* magazine. I work my way through a location—the restaurants, coffee shops, tourist attractions—and get to know the culture of each place I visit, learn local stories. I post to my socials as I go and publish to my online newsletter, *The Traveling Truthteller*, then write a full article for the magazine at the end.”

“So you’re like a travel blogger.”

Her face flushed. “I blog about traveling, yes, but I’m a paid writer for a magazine, not just a blogger. Besides, we don’t really call them blogs anymore.” She straightened, passion flowing out of her eyes.

“We call them posts or articles. Basically, a way to communicate directly with readers. And of course, everything’s linked to my website and socials.”

Okay. Touchy subject. “Tell me more.” He might have some homework in catching up with her works.

“It’s twofold. My publishing platform and social media presence are more like marketing for the travel magazine. I’ve generated a substantial number of followers, which helps sell more magazines.”

Cade crossed his arms. “My dad mentioned that you want to feature some outdoor activities. What else do you plan? And how does it work?”

“I design my own itinerary, but my boss has certain activities he wants me to include. Here, those items include snowmobiling, ice skating, skiing, backcountry skiing, and snowshoeing. I’ll write about Colorado winters and take pictures of what I do. I get to fill in the rest of my time with other local experiences, left to my discretion.”

“And who goes with you?” She’d better have a solid plan.

“Usually I go by myself. Depends on the place.”

Cade shook his head. “That didn’t work out so well for you today. I don’t like this.” Shoot. Did he say that out loud?

“What kind of response is that? Aren’t you in the hospitality business?”

Her tone slapped his heart. “No. My *dad* is with the Silverberg Chamber of Commerce. I’m not. And I meant no, you can’t do this. You can’t be here. Now.” He swirled his finger in a circle, encapsulating the entire plan by the gesture.

“Well, last I checked, you don’t have a choice. I’m here. And I will be writing and exploring. Whether you like it or not.” She crossed her arms and lifted her chin, daring him to challenge her.

Weighty silence stretched between them.

Not the charged chemistry he’d experienced a few moments ago. No, this silence pitted them as adversaries—both clinging to their convictions. This time a pin could drop and it would sound like a boulder rolling down a mountain. Cade narrowed his eyes.

Julia broke the silence with a huff. "This town has had nothing but unwelcome surprises. First you, then a man dying in front of me."

That single statement shook Cade to his core. "What?"

"A man was in the house where I was supposed to stay, then he died in front of me." She rubbed her temples. "It's a tragedy. Something's off in all that."

"Off?"

"Yeah. And I'm going to figure out what."

"Elaborate."

"It smelled putrid, and he was too young to die of a heart attack, I would think."

"So let the police figure the details out. You're a photographer."

She tilted her head. "I am a travel *writer* and photographer. I'm working toward a career in features journalism. What kind of journalist would I be if I just let this go?"

"Still not law enforcement. And this can't fit your job assignment." His heart hammered, but he retained his composure. Occupational training.

"Not yet, but it doesn't sit right to let it go. If you have a room available at the hotel, I'd like to stay here now."

"Give me a second to think." *Lord, why? What should I do?* He rubbed his temples. One conclusion glared at him. The clock ticked in the background. Each click of the second hand matched the marching of his thoughts. *Failure. Death. Sanchez. Beautiful woman on her own.*

He'd have to take matters into his own hands—search for box labs to eliminate any threat to Silverberg and to protect this headstrong woman. These drugs came from his own backyard. Using some of Colorado's most treacherous mountains as a cover might seem bright, but life and death fought for control at this time of year. Add in a dead man, and the facts pointed to a substantial problem. Success at this task would require a unique skill set—DEA training and intimate knowledge of mountain life, and Cade possessed both.

The town was remote, small, and hidden in the Rockies. Thousands of acres of untouched wilderness meant searching for box labs would be like locating a single tree in a Colorado forest. Of course,

it wasn't the town itself that was the problem. The wilderness around it screamed of danger. Especially if the perp Ace had interrogated really did use the wilderness to hide and transport. Or cook.

He rubbed his hands down his thighs, and the plan fell together. "Okay. We have rooms. I'll check you in after our meeting. But here's the thing. You can do a lot on your own. Anything in town is fair game." But sending her into the deep winter on an outdoor sport with a bona fide drug operation out there, after she'd found a dead man? No way.

"Thanks for the approval." She gave a quiet scoff.

She played with sarcasm too. That enhanced the fun. "I'll draw the line though. I'll escort you on any outdoor adventures. Sledding, skiing, snowmobiling." He sat up straight. "If it happens outside the streets of our town, I'll be with you. You can't go alone."

"You're going to babysit me?"

Cade blew out a frustrated breath. "No. I want to keep you safe. Do you even know how many deaths occur in the wild each year because people go out alone?"

Julia tapped her fingers on the table, and uncertainty clouded her features. "Yeah, I think you hinted at that earlier."

Good. Maybe he'd struck a nerve and talked some sense into her. What was her deal? First she made demands and talked a big game, and then she conveyed uncertainty?

"Hmmm." She tapped her pen with a rapid staccato on the desk.

Personality profiling had taught him one conclusion from that action—she was nervous.

"I don't ski."

He almost laughed. Based on their first meeting, he'd already come to that conclusion. "Don't worry. I'll be there to help you. I don't want anyone without outdoor experience to venture into our mountains." He relaxed as the rightness of this plan solidified within him. His DEA career had depended on him making the best decision in a crucial moment. Snap judgments often meant the difference between life or death, and he relied on his faith, training, and instincts to guide him. This was right—complicated, but right.

“What makes you think I’m inexperienced?”

Cade clamped his mouth shut, reeling his mind back to the brunette in front of him. His amused grin formed without his consent. Her crossed legs meant her high-heeled boot landed inches from his ankle. But he had offered enough borderline-offensive comments to her today to take the bait. “Call it a good guess.”

Julia looked at her shoes, then back up at him. “Thanks for your input, but I should be fine on my own.”

He inhaled. He had on his hands a self-proclaimed independent who’d landed herself in his town, along with a mysterious death. In a meth lab. The only thing worse than a person shadowing him was said someone who didn’t think she needed help.

“That may be, ma’am, but I volunteered to show you our town on behalf of the chamber and my dad, and I’m a man of my word.” His commitment to his dad weighed on his mind. Cade’s sense of justice pressed on him. Her safety left no choice. He could help with the adventure component. After all, he’d been doing that most of his life.

“All right.” She held out a hand, which he shook. “I’ll do the in-town stuff on my own and use your help for the off-road events.” She stuffed her laptop and notebook back into her bag and lugged it over her shoulder, then returned the camera strap around her neck. “Don’t worry—I’ll be sure to capture the allure of the mountain air and sunshine in no time.” She waved to the pictures on the wall with a dismissive motion.

“Sunshine?” Cade couldn’t help but clarify. Who wanted to write about sunshine?

“Well, yeah. Doesn’t Colorado have like three hundred days of sunshine, even during winter?”

“Sure. Sunshine.”



Julia threw herself backward onto the bed in the hotel room and sighed. This place had spiraled from bad to worse. Her main contact

was not Bruce. No, as fate—or maybe the Lord—would have it, she was now paired with six feet, three inches of pure mountain man.

She stared at the ornate ceiling, noting each detail of the iconic tile. The intricate design melded into a perfect smattering of muted silver and gold, its elegance representing the nostalgia of yesteryear. Her thoughts swirled as her eyes roamed around the pattern.

The Lord sure did have a sense of humor—not that she gave him too much credit these days. Leave it to God to match her with this mystery man. Cade Haskins—a walking contradiction. One minute he offered to help her, and the next he assumed some bizarre sort of authority. Either way she wouldn't let that spark of awareness grow, even if she was drawn to him.

She cringed at her own audacity earlier in the day. She hadn't actually meant she wanted to be alone in the outdoors. That was just crazy. She knew that. She'd *lived* the personal nightmare with Nikki. Then she'd made her blunder this afternoon, which had accomplished nothing but the reminder that she hated skiing, despite her Olympic past with the sport.

So she had given in to his request to accompany her on her adventures. Any sane person would do the same.

To be authentic, her post would need to include her welcome to town—the dead man. Images of his pale face blended into the pattern, marring the beauty of the antique room. She opened her laptop and leaned forward to stare at the blank page.

Silverberg, Colorado. Population: 700.

Snowy peaks surround this quaint mountain town, a picture of winter perfection. Ahead on these posts, I'll venture around this mountain escape and provide entertainment pieces on small-town winter living.

Seasonal restaurants, outdoor activities, and even snowy adventures will follow.

Not every stop is as unique as this one is proving to be. My adventure started when I showed up at my monthly rental and found a man in the last stages of life. I watched as he gasped

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for air, then died. Even as I type this, my stomach swirls at the memory of observing his death and waiting with him until the authorities arrived. Usually I'm not so morbid, but I agreed to authenticity at the start of my project, and I know you, my readers, look for that. Something rubs me wrong about the situation, so stay tuned, as I'll be candid about my discoveries.

She closed her eyes and shook her head to will away the images of the body. Of course, she hadn't known him, but any loss of life stung. The trials of the day had cast a shadow onto an already tenuous stop, and part of her was begging to turn around and leave. But the suspicious conditions piqued her curiosity, propelling her to research further. Dormant memories of Nikki threatened to surface, imagined images of that fateful day marring the beauty around Julia. Mustering sheer willpower, she forced herself to type.

Onto more positive topics. The hotel I'm now staying in is exquisite. The iconic historic building anchors the corner of its little block, and tourist shops and restaurants line the rest of the street.

She unzipped her camera bag to capture the room's detail. She always included photographs with her writing so her readers had a blend of images and descriptions to visualize her travels. The best would be published in the magazine.

There was a day when nothing would have fazed Julia Stevens. Of course, that was when God had her back, when her Olympics-bound future stretched before her with possibilities and accomplishments and accolades. Her life had been complete—Nikki supporting her and a future with Brad to plan.

Things had changed. Before, every time she'd approached some level of closure, her job had allowed her to pick up and move. Tonight, fear snaked its way through her stomach. The time had come—to face her past . . . and her future.