

## THAT ONE MOMENT

By

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### CHAPTER ONE

Ricki Sheridan didn't expect to die falling off a mountain ledge.

One misstep, a soft spot on the trail, and her leather hiking boot slipped over the edge, sending a shower of gravel over the jagged cliff.

Unbalanced and top-heavy, her scream echoed across the deep ravine like a wounded loon falling from the sky. She jerked the backpack to the right, dragged her left foot up the ridge, and fell against the rocky cliff gasping for air.

A misty fog wet her face and chilled her fingers while tendrils of fear snaked around every nerve. *Breathe, Ricki, you didn't go over. You're okay.*

She shrugged the pack off her shoulder and eased her sore body onto the makeshift cushion. The trembling persisted, uncontrolled, and violent.

*Crap, a little too close for comfort.*

Thankful no one witnessed the near disaster, she gulped the crisp mountain air to restore balance and quiet the pounding in her chest. A mixture of grit and sweat slid over one brow and stung her eye. The only thing available to erase the grime and unbidden tears was the sleeve of her faded denim shirt, which she hastily swiped across her face.

The pup tent on top of the pack slid to one side. She stood to re-center it and mumbled, "This trip might be a bad idea. I should have stayed in Texas."

A devastating betrayal found her on this mountain to help eradicate the pain from her mind. Ricki is a strong woman most times, but the most vulnerable aspect of her personality failed her, again. When it comes to men, she always chooses the wrong one. This time was the last straw, because *this* time it involved her best friend.

Another deep breath diminished the shaking. “Lucky I didn’t tumble down on top of the *second* team.”

“You all right?”

The deep male voice made her jump and spin around. Off balance again, she teetered to the right and kicked another spray of gravel over the edge.

The man reached out to steady her. “Whoa, let me help you.”

He was one of the trail bosses. She saw him at Wolf’s Den Lodge, noticed his ink black eyes and quick smile, but chose to hang back and keep her distance. When the group took to the trail, she decided to bring up the rear. As a result, she fell farther behind the others, but that suited her purpose. Her goal was to be alone. She aimed to keep it that way.

“Thanks, I’m fine, just tripped. Pack is a little off balance. I’ve got it covered.”

Her wanna-be rescuer ran a hand through thick, raven hair, assessed her with a glance, and said softly. “You look like you need a little break.”

Overcome with a sudden awareness of her physical state, her hand went swiftly to her own disheveled mane. She smoothed the windblown tangles as best she could. “I said I could handle it. It’s steep here, that’s all. I was looking up instead of the trail. No harm done.”

“What’s your name?”

She ducked her head. “Ricki Sheridan.”

He stretched out his hand. “We didn’t get to meet formally. I’m Kory Littleton, Trail Boss.”

“I know who you are.” The rude retort wasn’t natural to her, but necessary to keep the distance she coveted.

“I saw your name on the list. Nice to put a face to it. Ever been on a pack trip before? This is a good mountain to start on.”

To her relief, she didn’t have a chance to answer. Another group arrived in single file, impatient, and unable to pass.

A short, scruffy man scanned the sky and looked back at Kory. “You gonna stop on this narrow ledge or what, Chief? It’ll be nightfall soon.”

Shadows darkened the snow tipped peaks, clouds drifted across the late afternoon sky, and a keen breeze cut through Ricki’s thin shirt.

She shivered.

Littleton stepped around in front. “Take your troop on ahead. The lady experienced a small setback. Her ankle’s bleeding. I’m gonna doctor it.” He lowered his voice. “Watch the trail over there, Steve, it’s soft. Don’t want anyone to slip off the mountain.”

Steve Gorman eyed the edge of the trail and turned back to survey Ricki’s injured ankle. He nodded and spit a stream of tobacco juice into the dirt.

She looked down. Blood oozed over the thick, woolen sock onto her low rider boot.

“Next time, try the high-tops. They’re safer,” Steve said. He brushed by, motioning the others to follow. He and the rest of his band followed him around the bend.

“Sit down, the first aid kit is in my pack,” Kory ordered.

Her chin rose in defiance, another chink in her armor—a quick temper. “Thanks, I can bandage it. Take care of the rest of your group.”

He grinned good-naturally and gave her a cheerful salute. “I’m an Eagles Pass Trail Boss, ma’am. We never leave anyone behind. That’s our motto. I’m the head guide, gotta set the example.” The bulky pack slipped easily off his broad back.

“Head guide, huh? What makes you so special?” Embarrassed about her clumsy mishap, she couldn’t resist the urge to goad him.

“Oh, I don’t know, probably because I’ve been around longer—saved a few more lives.” The smile flashed again before his teeth ripped through the adhesive bandage. “Now hold still, I’ve done this a couple of million times, we’ll be through in a flash.”

She flinched at his touch, a small shock of pain raced through the ankle.

“It’s bruised, and it’ll be tender, but should be fine,” he said.

She watched his face as he worked. The image of trail boss conjured up flannel shirts, knee-high boots, a gruff personality, and five o’clock shadow. *This one is different. Clean shaven, strong white teeth, weather-roughened skin, and he’s kind. He’s got the red flannel shirt down, though.*

She shivered again, this time from his strong hand holding her ankle so gently. “Look, Mr. Littleton, I appreciate your help. The backpack got the better of me, I admit...packed too heavy. I’ll fix it and be right along. Please get back to the others. I’m an experienced back-packer, thanks to my father. I know the mountains.”

“The name is Kory. Steve is my back up. We need to stick to the rules. I’ll help you rearrange your load, and we’ll both catch up. We don’t leave anyone behind, remember? ‘Fraid you’re stuck with me. Can you put weight on the ankle?” He slung her pack over one shoulder and heaved his pack over the other arm.

She winced at his reprimand, but eased herself to a stand. “Yes, it’s okay.”

Taking orders wasn’t her strong suit. From the ROTC program in high school and college to a Crime Scene Forensic Investigator in the U.S. Navy, she was used to having the upper hand. But, that was all over now. After her enlistment was up, she turned civilian and applied for a Game Warden position in Dallas. Wildlife suited her more than a stuffy office. She thrived in the outdoors with nothing to confine her but the blue sky.

“Better get a move on then. There’s a wide spot in the trail up ahead. We’ll reorganize there.” He disappeared around the bend.

She followed slowly, testing the ankle with each step.

Sprawled on a rotten log, he systematically unloaded the first few contents of her pack. The boyish grin flashed, again, as he held up a small book. “Ah, reading material. Hope you don’t plan to keep your nose in a book the whole time. This is a retreat, I know, but don’t forget there are nine other people here. Good practice to interact with the other campers.”

She snatched the book from his hand. “Put it down. It’s my journal and none of your business. I said *I’ll* redo my pack.”

Kory drew his hand back—the smile disappeared. “Sorry Ricki, I meant no harm. Chill out, I didn’t peek.”

She flung the remaining contents on the ground one a time. “This trip’s a big mistake. I’m heading back to the lodge.”

His voice changed from jovial to real concern. “Hey, slow down. You’ll never make it back down the mountain before dark. The weather calls for a storm sometime tomorrow. I can’t let you go.” He picked up each item she threw at him and organized them according to weight and size.

She stamped her good foot. “You can’t stop me. I paid my money. It’s on my head. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

To her horror, hot tears trickled down her face. She started to shake.

In one stride, he reached her before she toppled over. “I apologize, Ricki. Sit down. You’re exhausted. Six miles is a lot when it’s uphill luggin’ a pack, especially if you haven’t done it in a while. I’m here for a reason, let me do my job.”

Suddenly, weakness overcame her in a most disconcerting way. She collapsed against him, sobs wracking her body.

His strong arms encircled her. He wiped two large tears from her cheek with his thumb, and whispered softly, “It’s okay, Freckles. We all have our breaking point.”

“Don’t call me Freckles!” She gulped between sobs, the unpredictable temper blazed hot.

“I’m sorry—again. I can’t say anything right, it seems. Too long in the mountains, I guess.” He hesitated. “I meant it as a compliment. They’re very pretty on you.”

“I...I never cry. Never.” The temper subsided into annoyance.

He held her a little too tight and whispered a little too softly in her ear, “Maybe it’s time to let go.”

The sobs stopped abruptly at the intimate encounter. She pulled away and wiped her eyes on one dirty sleeve. "It's over now. It won't happen again."

He turned, grabbed a bedroll, and spread it on the ground. "Sit." His voice left no room for argument.

Never in her memory had she done anything so embarrassing, so out of character. Self-control was one of her strong suits, a source of pride to her. Military training had a hand in that.

He rearranged each item in her pack, buckled it up, re-cinched the straps, and set it against the dead log. "All done. Feelin' any better?" He squatted on both heels in front of her. "You're in no shape to hike down the mountain. Let's see if we can sort this out before we rejoin the others."

Her protest withered on quivering lips. Voices echoed in the faded forest. Someone or *something* was about to round the bend.