Chapter 2

B

**elle’s** eyes opened when cold crept under her makeshift blanket. She jerked awake and sat up. Dawn light hinted at another stormy day.

The men were gone, but one of them had tended the fire. For that, she was grateful.

She wanted to go back to sleep, but the cold and her full bladder wouldn’t let her.

Belle groaned, removed the coat, and wiggled her way to the end of the pallet. She felt dirty and rumpled from head to toe. She still ached from the crash.

Craning her neck to look outside, she saw no one. In a moment, she had her clothes off and her water bottle, a small bar of hotel soap, and a wipe ready. If she heard anyone approach, she would call out a warning.

Belle muffled a scream when the icy water touched her skin, but she scrubbed harder. She dried with one of the garments they’d used for a bottom sheet.

By the time she heard the men, she’d pulled the red sweater over clean undergarments and a clean base layer, had dabbed a drop of perfume behind each ear, and worked to brush the snarls out of her long hair.

Morgan stooped to enter but stopped and stared. His nostrils flared, and his eyes widened.

“Good morning.” Belle smiled and remembered her promise to give this man—her teammate—a chance.

Liam bumped into Morgan. “What’s wrong?”

Without a word, the outfitter ducked inside and made room for the others.

They, too, stopped and stared before sitting.

Adam smiled. “You look ready to start the day, Belle.” He grimaced and looked at the other two. “Probably better than we look at the moment.”

Belle noted the dark stubble on Adam’s and Morgan’s jaws and their rumpled clothes. Liam looked much the same as he had yesterday.

She nodded and worked her way to the entrance. “If you’ll excuse me, I have business to take care of.”

When she returned, they sat cross-legged with what remained of their food from last night.

Belle retrieved hers and waited. As one, she, Adam, and Morgan turned to Liam.

He smiled and again offered a prayer of thanksgiving and a request for mercy.

Belle decided to leave the jerky stick as a last resort. She ate the remainder of her seaweed snacks, her portion of the trail mix, and one chocolate bite. Once they ran out, she didn’t know what they would do.

“We need to take care of the bodies today, Belle.” Adam hesitated. “Do you want to help or do something else?”

Belle shuddered. “Do something else.”

He nodded.

Morgan held a kale chip to the light and spoke without looking at her. “You can go through the suitcases under the overhang to see what we have.”

His comment didn’t set well with Belle. She knew this needed to be done and knew he only stated fact, but something about going through dead people’s things seemed sacrilegious.

“Liam, if I do this, will I be committing a sin or be doing something I shouldn’t?”

Morgan snorted, but Liam seemed to take her question seriously. “Belle, when God called these people to their appointments with him, they left immediately, with no thought to the material things they left behind.

“When David, the shepherd who became king of Israel, and his soldiers ate some bread only the priests were allowed to eat, God did not condemn them. They were hungry and needed food.

“We will not be sinning if we use the things they left behind to survive.”

Adam nodded. “I’ll take pictures of the bodies with whatever jewelry they have on and will put these possessions in the plastic bag you had the kale in. If we get out of here, I’ll return these to their people.”

*If we get out of here, not when* ... Belle’s stomach lurched. “Okay, I’ll go through the bags.”

The men left, and Belle walked around the A-frame to the north and stared at the luggage eight dead people left behind. She didn’t know if they’d found everything, but these pieces were closest to the wreck.

She put her hands on her hips and tried to determine where she would put the sorted objects. If she laid flat rocks in the space between the A-frame and the overhang, she’d have a relatively clean surface to place items. This she did.

Belle reached for the first suitcase and took a deep breath before unzipping the co-pilot’s case. She looked toward the crash and wondered how Adam was dealing with the death of his friend.

By the time the men returned in the afternoon, grim faced and dirty, she had sorted all the items.

“Come. See what we have.” She signaled for them to follow her.

They stared at her neat groupings of clothing, cosmetic products, edibles, and miscellaneous items. She’d left the cases open so she could zip them and store the clothing out of the weather.

“Well done, Belle.” Adam’s tired voice and drawn expression told her how unpleasant their task had been.

“Where did you put them?”

Adam rubbed his forehead. “We laid them side-by-side next to the fuselage and covered them with brush to keep the birds away. I’m glad the weather held.”

Morgan had found his rifle case and some other objects. He laid these on the ground and tilted his head toward Liam. “The Preacher said words over them and sang. He’s good.”

Liam nodded and gave her a tired grin. “I told Mr. Morgan I wasn’t a preacher, only a praise and worship leader.”

Morgan knelt and unlocked the case. “Didn’t matter to them or us, Liam.” The outfitter smiled when he stared at the contents. “Everything is here, and nothing seems to be damaged, but I’ll have to resight.” He lifted a hunting knife and hatchet and examined their surfaces. He unbuckled his belt, attached the knife and hatchet cases, and relooped and buckled.

Belle stared at Morgan’s expression. When he slid the blades into their cases and lifted the rifle, the lines at the side of his eyes eased, and he sighed as if in relief—like he hadn’t been fully dressed until now.

She turned to the pilot. “When do you think the searchers might come? Shouldn’t they find us soon?”

He looked into the threatening sky. Lightning lit up the clouds. “I don’t know. Air traffic control diverted me around the storm, so they know we’re in the general area. The search process will start as soon as our crash has been reported.”

She studied his face. “But? I get the sense you aren’t telling me something.”

He sighed. “Many things can delay a rescue, Belle, weather being one of them. We’re in the middle of September just below timberline. Snow can fall at any time here. Who knows what distance rescuers have to cover to get to us? The terrain may make access impossible except by helicopter.”

Belle eyed the small amount of food she’d salvaged from the cases. “So, we may be here a few more days?”

She caught the look that passed between Adam and Morgan, and her insides trembled. *They think we’ll be here longer than a few days*.

*Breathe!* she commanded her lungs.

Adam reached for their empty plastic water bottles. “At least we have a water source now. We found a clear stream flowing out of rocks not too far from here. I’ll fill these before the rain hits.”

Belle slung on her coat and grabbed a washcloth, a small bar of soap, and a hand towel she’d found in the luggage. “I’ll go with you.”

They walked to the spring without speaking. When they got there, Adam filled the bottles, and Belle washed her face and hands. She rinsed and then held the cold, wet cloth to the bruise on her cheek. She still ached from the crash, and sudden movements reminded her of her recent impact with the ground.

She handed the washcloth and soap to Adam.

The pilot grinned. “Hard to sleep next to a bedmate who stinks, right?” He removed his uniform jacket and dress shirt and handed them to her before splashing the icy water on his muscular chest and under his arms.

Belle watched him lather and rinse. “Tell me the truth. How long can we survive if rescuers don’t find us within the next few days?”

He dried. “I can’t answer that, Belle. I don’t know. Too many variables are in play here. Our odds of staying alive will decrease once snow falls.”

“What about Morgan’s rifle? Can’t he shoot something?”

“I don’t think the game animals will come near the smell of jet fuel and humans.”

She handed him his jacket and shirt.

He slung on the jacket but left off the shirt. “I’d better try to find something else to wear. Even I can smell the ripeness.”

Morgan and Liam looked up when they returned.

Liam took the water bottles Belle handed him while Adam reached inside his suitcase for a clean shirt.

Morgan tilted his head toward a small pile of food for each of them. “After tonight, we need to limit our food intake to once a day.”

Belle stared at her ration. Did hers contain an item or two more than the others?

Liam asked the blessing, and they sat in silence and munched on whatever had been placed in front of them.

Belle brushed the crumbs off her hands and turned to Adam. “The rain has started, so I think this is a good time for a story. Tell us about yourself.”

He shook his head. “My story isn’t interesting, Belle, but if you want to hear, I’ll give you the shortened version. I enlisted in the Navy a year after high school. During that time, I married my high school sweetheart. I remained in the Navy until I got news she had a fast-spreading cancer. She died five years ago, and I switched careers. End of story.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your wife, Adam. What was her name?”

“Debbie.”

No one said anything for several moments, until Liam cleared his throat. “Are your parents still alive? Do you have siblings?”

The pilot nodded. “My parents are alive, and I have two sisters—one older and one younger. They are married and have two children each. My wife and I always wanted children, but this didn’t work out.”

Adam turned to her. “What’s your story, Belle? I’m sure yours is more interesting than mine.”

“I’m twenty-five and the only child of parents who own several five-star restaurants in Dallas. From an early age, I traveled with them to Europe to meet with suppliers. I grew to love the people and the varied dishes from different countries, but all this international travel created hard times for me in public school.”

She didn’t want to continue, but Liam looked as if he would ask a question. Morgan stared at her with a strange expression.

“Kids at school picked on me and called me *spoiled rich girl*, and the girls turned mean when I started to attract their boyfriends’ attention.” She grimaced. “I wasn’t interested in their boyfriends, and I wasn’t spoiled. My parents raised me to be grateful for what we have and to not look down on others who don’t have as much. Several days each year, we work in soup kitchens and homeless shelters to keep ourselves grounded in reality, and our restaurants provide the Thanksgiving and Christmas meals in several parts of the city. Mom and Dad work an excessive number of hours to get where they are, and they expect me to work as hard.

“I got tired of all the lies and bullying and asked my parents to let me do a study abroad program to finish out my senior year. I spent that year in Madrid, Spain, gaining fluency in the language.

“The next year, I went to a cordon bleu school in Paris to expand the knowledge I’d gained in my parents’ restaurants. I love to cook and to see people enjoying what I’ve made. I have from a young age.”

Adam watched her face. “You speak French?”

She nodded, “Spanish, French, and Italian.”

Liam straightened. “*Hablo español también. Viví en América del Sur la mayor parte de mi vida*.”

Belle stared at the younger man, her eyebrows raised, and repeated what he said in English. “You speak Spanish because you lived in South America for most of your life?”

He nodded and answered in English. “My parents were missionaries. I’ve lived in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, and Uruguay.”

Adam studied her face. “Do you have a boyfriend or husband?”

She grimaced. “No. Finding a man who is interested in me instead of my parents’ money is much harder than I expected. I want a home and family with a man who loves me for who I am and who doesn’t care how much money I have, but this dream seems to be out of my reach.”

Morgan watched her face. “If you find this man, would you expect to live in Dallas near your folks?”

She shrugged. “Not necessarily. I’m flexible. We have a horse ranch east of the city. I spent many summers there learning to ride and enjoying the open spaces. I visit when I want to avoid the rat race of the city. I love the country too.”

The muscles in Morgan’s jaws moved. He looked as if he would ask something else but changed his mind. The intent look in his eyes gave her pause.

“Colton, why were you on the flight?” At Adam’s words, they turned to Morgan.

“I’d been hunting whitetail deer in Louisiana. I told one of my clients I would meet him in Phoenix to attend a large gun show. We planned to return to Montana together for the start of the hunting season. Guess our plans have changed.”

Adam raised a brow. “Belle, what were you doing on a flight from Denver to Phoenix if you live in Dallas?”

“I was in Denver on business. I intended to meet a friend in Phoenix. We were going to spend several days together before she returned to Oregon.”

Adam nodded and turned to Liam. “And you?”

“To lead the morning and evening worship and praise services for a Christian writers’ conference this weekend.”

Belle stared. “How many people attend such a conference?”

“About seven hundred.”

Belle shuddered. “I’d be terrified to stand up in front of that many people.”

Liam smiled. “But you’ve never heard the beauty of seven hundred voices worshipping in unison in a large auditorium. I am sure, once they hear of the crash, all of them will be praying for us.”

Her eyes met Liam’s. “Sing. Sing what you would’ve sung there.”

Without hesitation, Liam sang. The words flowed as if they came from the depths of his soul. She closed her eyes. She could listen to his exceptional voice for hours.

When night came, they lay side-by-side in the A-frame and listened to the whipping wind and the booming thunder.

Belle spoke her thoughts. “If the searchers don’t find us tomorrow or the next day, what will we do?”

Morgan answered, his voice quiet. “We need to start looking for signs humans have been here. If they have, they will use trails that can take us back to civilization. We can’t stay here. If we do, this will become our tomb. I can smell and feel a change in the air. We’ll get snow soon.”

Belle thought her heart would pound out of her chest.

Liam turned toward Morgan. “What kind of signs?”

“Initials and dates carved into tree trunks, blazes indicating direction, orange tape on brush, or deadfall someone cut with a chainsaw to allow easier passage for horses or mules. Colorado archery and muzzleloader seasons have started, so we listen for shooting. We watch for hunters in camouflage and bright orange vests. We watch for mule or horse tracks or droppings.”

Belle forced herself to take deep breaths. Easy for him to know what to look for. “Snow in September?”

“I’ve been in the Rocky Mountains in September looking for cows, Miss St. John. I had to hole up for two days because the snow piled up to a foot.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “Your life sounds beyond difficult, Mr. Morgan.”

“I don’t know about that. Some days are hard, some days are easy, but this is the only life I know. I can’t think of anything else I’d rather do.” His eyes met and held hers. He seemed to be trying to convey a message beyond his words—a message she didn’t understand.

Morgan remained silent for several moments. “We can pair up and work in widening circles from our camp.”

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The next morning, Belle and Adam headed east, while Morgan and Liam turned to the southeast.

They’d made plans to search for three hours before returning to camp to share what they had found. They filled every water bottle and divided these among themselves.

Belle looked around as she followed Adam. “How will we know how to get back to camp?”

“We pay attention to landmarks and the location of the sun, now that we can see the sun, and we mark our trail. As we move farther from camp, I’ll hang these red cloth strips on branches on my right. To return, we’ll keep the markers on our left.”

Belle’s fears at being in such an alien environment eased as she followed a couple of steps behind him.

When she was a pre-teen, she dreamed she was in the driver’s seat of her parents’ car when the vehicle started rolling backward down the drive. The car picked up speed, and she didn’t know what to do. She believed she would be killed if the car rolled into the street and another driver hit her. Even now she recalled the panic.

After several nights of the same frightening dream, she shared her fears with her dad.

“All you have to do is push on the brake and set the hand brake.”

Those few words banished the nightmares after she envisioned herself going through the actions. Adam’s explanation gave her the same feeling.

Every now and then, he would point and say, “This place would make a good shelter.”

Belle studied his face. “How do you know so much?”

He shrugged. “Certain types of soldiers are sent to SERE training school. I was one of them.”

“What is that?”

“The letters stand for Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape. Only those of us who have a high chance of being shot down or captured in enemy territory are given this training.”

“Like?”

“Fighter pilots and special forces.”

“Sounds difficult.”

“Brutal is a better word, Belle. SERE school is the most feared type of military training.”

“What did you have to do?”

His eyes scanned the vegetation. “After our orientation course, we had almost six months of training in tactics to survive in forest, desert, coastal, tropic, and open ocean environments. We were expected to become expert in personnel recovery, first aid, rough land evacuation, and hand-to-hand combat.”

He stopped and pointed. “Look. Oak brush. Let’s gather as many acorns as we can to take back with us.”

They didn’t have any containers, so Belle lifted her long sweater to form a basket, and Adam harvested several pounds of acorns.

She didn’t ask if they were edible. After hearing about his training, she figured he knew what he was doing and followed him back to camp.