

## Chapter 1

I knew the cancer would steal my mother. What I didn't know was how hard it would be to go on without her. At the funeral, I'd stood beside Mom's grave with my dad and little brother, Michael, silently grieving as the lingering traces of my old life slipped away like the last mournful notes of a song.

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"Kennedy." Michael's voice jerked my attention. "Why do we have to go to Aunt Vicki's? I want to stay home." He crossed his arms over his chest, sulking in the back seat of my Honda Civic.

I concentrated on the rear view mirror a second longer, meeting his brown eyes that were dulled with sadness. "I don't want to go either, but this is something Dad needs us to do. He promised he'd catch up."

"Why doesn't he come now?" Michael tugged at the baseball cap covering his dark, disheveled hair. Only six years old, there was a lot he didn't understand.

I sighed. The funeral was three weeks ago. Three weeks of trying to pretend that everything was normal. Aunt Vicki's words to our Dad before she left played in my mind. *"Nathan, why don't you send Kennedy and Michael to stay with me for a while? They don't need to be involved in the final decisions, and it might make it easier on them...if you should decide to clean out some of Mary's things."* My hands clenched the steering wheel until they were numb. At eighteen, I wasn't a child, and I resented her meddling. My mother's things were none of her business.

“He’s got work to do,” I said. “And besides, Aunt Vicki wants to spend time with just us.”

I tapped the brakes, and slowed at the intersection heading into downtown. Falls City, Oregon, population 1,052, had always been my home. I was born and raised in this old logging town situated in the shadow of the forest. I glanced at the small post office where Dad worked. My heart ached.

“You’ve been through a lot,” he’d said at breakfast this morning. “I want you to go and have a good time. You deserve a vacation.”

“So do you, Dad.” I’d picked at the toast on my plate.

My father was mourning, but he wore his mask of composure almost convincingly. I knew enough to look deeper, to catch the faint crease of grief around the edges of his eyes, the subtle change of his voice guarding his emotions.

“I know,” he’d admitted, “but I’ll join you in a few days, okay?”

“Okay.” My eyes had returned to the toast as I’d swallowed against the lump throbbing in my throat. My father was not going to include me in his silent agony.

From the post office, my gaze drifted across the street to the library. The pink rose bushes near the front entrance made my throat sting. I remembered the day Mom planted them. I swiped my eyes. Like my Dad, I didn’t want to cry. I was an Alberhill. We were strong. I was determined to follow my father’s example and do my best to get back to life – which right now centered mostly on Michael and reassuring him we would be okay. My mother’s illness had delayed my college enrollment and part of me wondered if Michael’s recovery would do the same. *But I could always catch up, right?*

“I wish Sarah could come to the beach.” Michael slumped farther into his seat, drawing my attention back to the mirror.

“Aunt Vicki doesn’t like dogs,” I said. Michael frowned and stopped scrunching his pillow, his eyes misty. “She’s going to be sad without us.” A painful tug wrenched my heart. *I wanted Sarah to come too, and already missed that yellow Lab.*

“I suppose so. But it’s only for a couple of weeks... not forever.” I’d added the last part as much for my benefit as Michael’s. Since his birth, I couldn’t help doting on him. Michael was the brother the doctors said I’d never have.

We coasted down Main Street. Helen Lowry stopped sweeping the sidewalk in front of the drugstore to wave at me, a wisp of gray hair slanting across her brow and a kind smile in her blue eyes. I forced a smile and waved back. Helen. She’d been there for mom during those months of chemotherapy.

Almost the entire town came to the funeral. In Falls City, there were few secrets, and even fewer strangers.

I glanced back at Michael again, startled at my quick reflection in the windshield. For just a moment, I thought I saw my mother. That I looked like her shouldn’t have startled me; people were always making the comparison. My brown hair and serious-minded demeanor came from my father. But it was my mother who passed to me her slender build and wide-set hazel eyes. I wasn’t gorgeous, but I was pretty in a non-dramatic sort of way, even if my pale skin turned blotchy after too much time in the sun.

“Look, we’re getting close,” Michael said, pointing to the ocean in the distance.

I realized the damp smell of forest pine had subtly shifted to salty ocean air. I rolled the window down further and pulled in a deep breath. A flock of seagulls took flight off a nearby

cliff as I caught sight of a road sign. Lincoln Beach – 4 miles. I turned on the radio and heard the end of a weather report given in a polished feminine voice.

“Strong rip tides and large swells have been reported along the coast line. Not the best day for swimming folks, despite the unusual heat wave surging in from the east. We’ve got radar tracking it, but I have to say, in my fifteen years as a meteorologist, I’ve never seen anything like this.”

I noticed the weird rise in temperature too. Sweat beaded my forehead. I guessed it to be somewhere in the 90’s – nothing like our normal 70’s June weather.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” Michael said, squirming.

“You didn’t go before we left the house?”

“I forgot,” he told me, fidgeting, his hands pressed on his thighs.

I shook my head. “We’re almost there. You’ll just have to hold it.”

“I can’t, Kennedy! I really have to go!” Michael bounced harder on the seat.

*Great.* I let out a loud breath and took the Kernville exit off of the Oregon Coast Highway, rolling to a stop outside of a mini-mart connected to a gas station. “Make it quick,” I said, unfastening my seatbelt. The odd heat left me irritable, and I couldn’t help wrinkling my nose at the heavy scent of brine settling in around me. I’d never known the ocean to smell this strong before and the overpowering odor almost triggered my gag reflex. I hoped it wouldn’t seep into my clothes and make me smell like dead fish.

“It stinks out here!” Michael coughed. He held his nose and slammed the car door shut.

We hustled into the store, partly to use the bathrooms and partly to escape the building heat and oppressive humidity. The store was filled with customers milling around. We pushed our way to the back and found the restrooms in the corner.

“When you’re finished, wait for me right here.” I pointed a finger at the narrow alcove outside of the men’s bathroom. “And don’t be gross and forget to wash your hands.”

“Duh, Kennedy.” Michael looked indignant. “I know what to do. You don’t have to tell me everything.” He pushed open the bathroom door.

“Hurry up!” I called after him, impatience edging my voice. Even inside the store, the heat was miserable. The bells on the front door jingled, announcing another patron’s entrance. But more than that, the open door also let in a hot burst of wind. The torrid gust stole my breath and made me feel like I’d been lit on fire. The temperature must have jumped another ten degrees in only a matter of minutes.

I hurried into the bathroom. After I finished, I gave the wooden door a tug. It didn’t budge. *Had I locked it?* I couldn’t see a lock, so I pulled harder. It stayed stuck. I noticed a sheet of white paper taped to the wall, a warning scribbled in black ink: Caution – door sticks. Pull hard.

I gritted my teeth, grabbed hold of the knob and put my weight into it. This time I felt the stiff latch release from the doorjamb.

*Stupid door.* As soon as I escaped the women’s room, I spied Michael waiting where I had told him. “Let’s go.” I glanced at my cell phone. “I promised Dad we’d be at Aunt Vicki’s by dinner.”

Michael took off through the store. Just as I rushed past the clerk at the cash register, I realized that I had left my backpack on the bathroom counter. “Hold up,” I told Michael. “I left my pack in the bathroom.”

Already half way out the door, Michael hollered back at me. “Can’t I just wait in the car? Nothing’s going to happen.”

I glanced around. We were still in a small, sheltered town. “Okay. But lock the doors. I’ll be there in a second.”

He nodded, and eyed a seagull, more interested in bird-watching than listening to me.

The small restroom was empty when I stepped inside to grab my pack. A darkening shadow moved over the miniature window near the ceiling, drawing my attention. Soft pattering told me it was raining. My eyes widened in disbelief.

I’d seen rain before. Lots of it. But never like this...never neon blue. It coated the dusty glass in a fine sapphire mist, each drop glowing like a little blue flame. But fire and rain didn’t mix...how was it possible? Mesmerized, I could only watch.

It was exotic, energizing, beautiful.

I turned the knob, eager to see outside, but frowned when the door wouldn’t open again. I jiggled the knob with both hands, trying to release the latch. I pulled harder, but it didn’t move. I was trapped inside the bathroom.

“Hello! Anybody?” I pounded on the door for help.

That’s when the screaming started.

Cries spilled under the restroom door and through the tiny window above my head. At first they were shouts of confusion and panic. Then they changed to bone-chilling screeches that sounded like raw agony, fear and pain. I beat harder on the door, trying to make my own screams heard over the surrounding din. No one came, leaving me inside my prison.

“Somebody let me out of here!” I whacked the door, then shook it until it rattled against the frame.

The rhythm of the rain increased, battering the rooftop and snaking vibrant blue streaks down the glass pane. *Michael!*

I gave up on the door and bolted to the window, my heart pounding as the shrieks encircling me increased in volume. Even on tiptoes, I wasn't tall enough to see the parking lot. My gaze shot around the room, looking for something – anything to stand on. The only option was the trashcan under the sink. I slammed it to the floor beneath the window, crying out when I still came a few inches short of the narrow ledge.

I dug my fingertips into the sill, and hefted myself up, my biceps burning from supporting my weight. I slipped and scrambled up again, sinking my nails into the soft wood for leverage. My head wouldn't fit through the opening, much less the rest of me, but I tried to break the glass any way. My efforts proved worthless; it was too thick.

*Where was Michael? What was happening to him?*

I couldn't see my brother through the distorted glass. *Was he in the car?* I pressed my face closer to the window, smashing my nose and straining my eyes. Those outside in the parking lot, the ones without shelter from the storm, were hunched over in painful contortions, writhing and shrieking and ... CHANGING.

The rain was CHANGING people! Their skin, their faces, and especially their eyes – blue flames as bright as the rain itself.

“Michael! Michael!” I screamed. *Please let him be in the car.*

I fought to make sense of the blue streaks and the watery images in front of me. I couldn't breathe. But however terrified, I couldn't look away. Emaciated people continued to writhe and convulse beneath the fierce blue downpour. The howling figures arched and twisted into unnatural poses – poses that made them look barely human.

I jumped off the trashcan and lunged for my backpack on the floor. My hands shook as I pushed buttons on my cell phone, noticing too late that I had no service. In a simultaneous flash

of realization, the electricity blacked out, plunging the room into darkness. The only light was the eerie blue glow coming from the window.

The howling turned into high-pitched wails that hurt my ears and sent a new rush of adrenaline through me. I'd never heard a sound like that before, not even from a wounded animal. It made me dizzy and sick with fear.

I bolted for the door again. "Anyone!" I shouted. "Can you hear me?" I scooped up the metal trashcan and used it like a battering ram on the door. I only succeeded in chipping the wood and denting the doorknob. Frustrated, I hurled the can across the room and clamped a hand over my sweaty forehead. *There had to be a way out of this bathroom!*

My eyes burst open and I looked up at the ceiling. Maybe there was a vent I could slip through.

There wasn't. The disappointment hit me like a punch in the gut.

"Hey!" I yelled loud enough to hurt my throat. "Somebody let me out! Let me out!"

Both of my fists connected with the door, pummeling it with everything I had while my feet kicked against its base. The sound of steel shelving crashing to the floor and trampling, scuffling shoes drowned out my pleas. I needed to get to Michael. I screamed louder, kicked faster, pounded harder, until blood ran down my knuckles. "Open the door! Let me out! Please! He's just a baby!"

My voice broke on the last syllable, and I slumped against the door, letting my body slide to the tile while sobs wrenched through me. I had lost my mother and now I was going to lose my brother. The dam of emotions I'd so carefully guarded broke free, consuming me in its devastation.

The minutes stretched into agonizing hours. More blue storms stopped and started in unpredictable patterns. The screaming both inside and outside of the store eventually faded while I laid huddled on the floor, oblivious to the ache in my back and the cramp in my legs until I heard movement again inside the mini-mart.

Footsteps, slow and cautious, approached the bathroom. I jumped to my feet when they paused outside the door.

“Please help me,” I said, my voice hoarse as I twisted the doorknob. “I’m trapped in here...”

The doorknob rattled from the other side. “It’s jammed,” a man’s voice said. “Stand back, I’ll get a crowbar.”

I moved to a safe distance, chewing my lip while I waited for the footsteps to return. “I...didn’t know you were in here,” the same voice said a few seconds later. “Most of us were just trying to get out...get away. I hid in the storage room,” he said. “I can’t stay.”

The sound of metal wedged and scraping inside the doorframe caused fresh tears to blur my swollen eyes. I clamped my hands over my temples, ticking off the seconds as wood broke and splintered, then finally gave way.

A rush of sunlight spilled into the bathroom and I sprang forward, urgency once again fueling my body. I dodged past the man with the crowbar, the clerk I’d seen earlier at the cash register. I started in surprise when he grabbed my arm and shoved his pudgy face in mine.

“The rain...” he said, his eyes bright and animated and slightly crazed. “It’s not over. Run while you can.”

He dropped my arm and followed his own advice, scurrying from the store without a backward glance.

The parking lot was empty with the exception of several abandoned cars. For the moment, the blue rain had disappeared, taking the scorching heat and strong smell of brine with it.

I ran outside, veering past a Mazda with a cracked windshield before tripping over a deserted purse beside my car. “Michael!” I pounded on the door with one hand while the other dug in my pocket for the keys.

I cried out in relief when Michael popped up from the back seat of my Civic. His brown eyes were wide and glassy.

“Michael, it’s me. Kennedy. It’s okay. Unlock the door.”

He blinked several times as if trying to focus before hitting the locks. I wrenched open the door, shoving the key into the ignition.

“Kennedy,” he sobbed. “I didn’t know what to do. People were screaming.” He leaned forward, almost into the front seat.

I squeezed his hand. “It’s all right, you’re with me now.” *With me now? How was I supposed to balance my fear and keep him calm when I was freaking out myself?*

I thrust the Civic into drive and nearly took out a street lamp turning onto the main highway. I worked to calm the pulse pounding in my ears.

Like the parking lot, the streets were also quiet and desolate. It felt like even the air held its breath. *Why was everything so still? Were had everyone gone?* It was as if the blue rain had literally devoured people.

Michael’s timid voice broke my thoughts.

“Kennedy, are we going to die?”

“No.” I checked my speed. The highway remained empty. I kept searching the road for signs of life, then back at Michael through the mirror.

“Don’t ever stop at that place again.” He buried his head in his face.

I won’t,” I told him. “I promise.”

Michael sniffed. “I want Daddy.”

My hands trembled on the steering wheel. *Me too.*

A mile marker caught my eye. Falls City – 36 miles. I worked to infuse my voice with confidence when I spoke. “Don’t worry,” I told Michael. “We’ll be home soon. Dad will know what to do.”