

Chapter 9

Brooklyn Barr POV:

The Instagram post appeared the next morning. It was a picture of the cliff in Aspen, stark and beautiful against a grey, ominous sky.

The caption read: "Some places hold our greatest triumphs and our deepest regrets. This is where I found my life, and where I lost my soul. I'm going back to where it all began. @BrooklynBarr, this is for you. I hope you're watching."

My blood ran cold. The sheer, manipulative audacity of it was breathtaking. 

My phone rang. It was Chace, his voice frantic.

"Brooklyn, you have to stop him! He's actually going up there. There's a blizzard warning in effect! Does he have a death wish?"

"He has a hero complex, Chace. It's not the same thing."

"He's not thinking straight! He keeps saying this is the only way to prove it to you, to show you he understands now. He thinks... he thinks you'll come save him again."

A bitter, humorless laugh escaped me. "He's wrong."

Kaden called me minutes later from an unknown number. He must have known I'd blocked him. I answered out of a grim, morbid curiosity.

"Brooklyn?" His voice was thin, whipped by the wind. "I'm here. I'm on the ledge. The one where you found me."

"That's foolish, Kaden. Go home."

"Not until you come! Not until you see! I get it now, what this place means! I get what you did for me!"

"It's too late, Kaden," I said, my voice flat. "My feelings for you are gone. They're not hiding. They're not waiting to be rescued. They're dead."

There was a choked sob on the other end, and then the line went dead. I blocked the new number and put my phone on silent. I would not be a

character in his twisted, self-pitying drama.

An hour later, a video message came through: I watched it, my face a stone mask. Kaden, his face blue with cold, was filming himself as he scrambled up the icy rock face. The wind howled around him.

"Remember this spot, Brook?" he said, his teeth chattering. "This is where you told me you were scared, and I told you I'd never let you fall." He stumbled, catching himself at the last second. "I'm waiting for you."

The video cut out. Another one arrived moments later. He was higher now, the snow coming down in thick, blinding sheets.

"It's getting bad up here," he said, a note of real fear creeping into his voice. "Just like that day. Are you coming, Brooklyn? Please..."

Suddenly, his foot slipped. The phone clattered against rock. There was a sickening crunch, a scream of pure agony, and then the video ended. A final message bubble appeared: Message failed to send. No signal.

I stared at the screen, a flicker of shock momentarily piercing my calm. Then, it was gone, replaced by a profound, chilling emptiness. He had created this. This was his choice.

Joel came and stood behind me, his hands gently resting on my shoulders. "Should we call the Aspen mountain rescue?" he asked quietly.

I thought about it for a long moment. I thought of Kaden leaving me at the hospital, of him rushing to Annmarie's side.

"No," I said, my voice firm. "He has a support system. He has Chace. He has his parents. He has Annmarie. Someone will call for him. It is not my responsibility anymore."

Joel looked at me, a flicker of surprise in his eyes at my coldness.

"When I was in the hospital, Joel, terrified I might go completely blind, Kaden left my side to take Annmarie to a spa because she was 'stressed out,'" I explained, my voice hollow. "He chose. He has to live with his choices now. And so do I."

Late that night, a text came from Chace.

They found him. A rescue team went up after I called. He fell. It's bad, Brooklyn. It's permanent.

I read the message, turned off my phone, and went to sleep. For the first

◀ Chapter 9

time in years, I didn't dream at all.



+120 Points at most