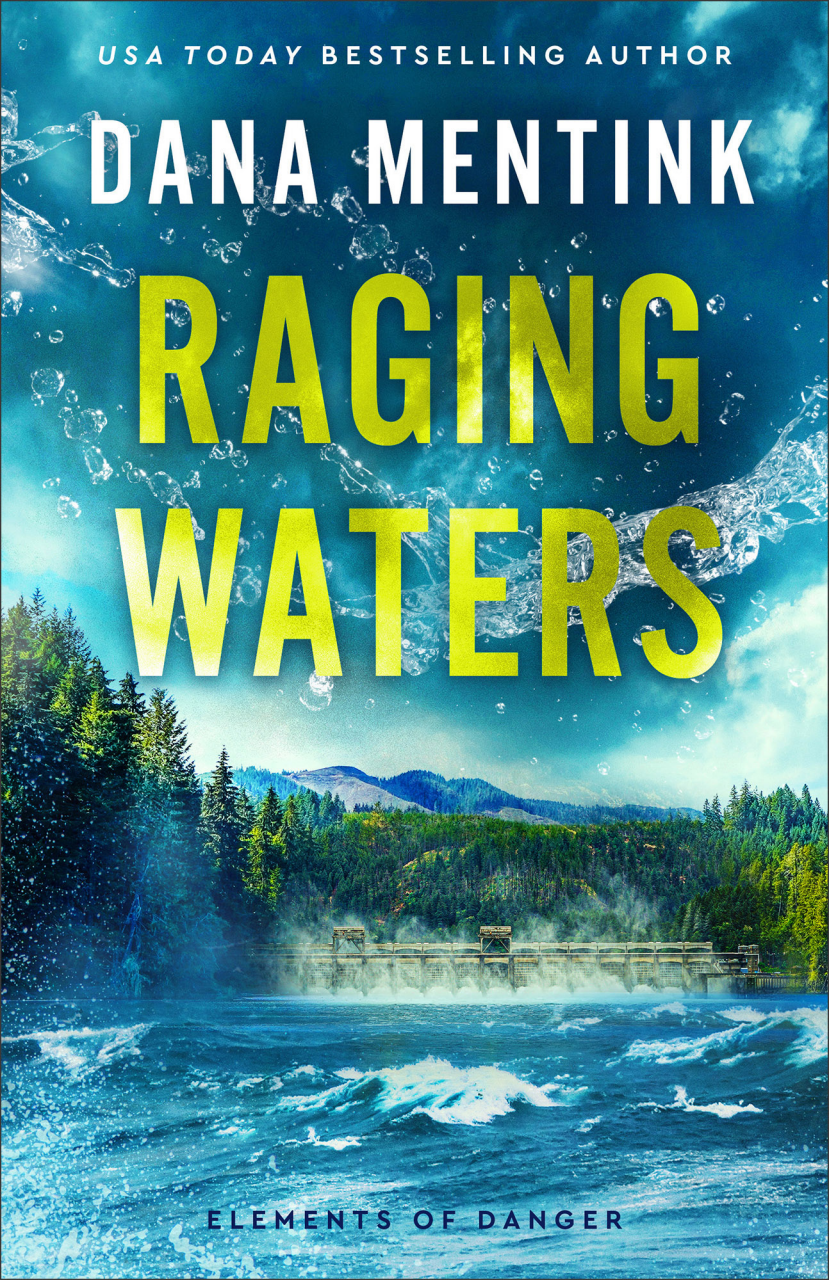
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DANA MENTINK
RAGING WATERS
ELEMENTS OF DANGER

ELEMENTS OF DANGER #2

RAGING WATERS

DANA MENTINK

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To Mom and Dad, thank you for teaching
us the meaning of the word *family*.

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ONE

AS HE DODGED A SKULL-SPLITTING KICK to his temple, Gideon Landry wondered again if this side hustle was going to pan out. His legs ached from fighting the current, and the cold water sapped his strength like a leech on an open wound.

Isn't being an Air Force SERE instructor enough for you, Gid? No, he had to go and set himself up to teach civilian classes during his precious leave time.

In a backwater nowhere of northern Washington.

During torrential rains. With most of his class bailing out at the last minute.

Why hadn't he just canceled the whole thing like a sane person?

Because his service days were numbered, and that was the exit strategy he'd come up with for a variety of reasons. Why should he let a weather calamity put the kibosh on his early preparations? Man against nature. He always thought he'd win. Probably why his brothers never wanted to go camping with him.

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Another splash of bone-chilling river water renewed his resolve.

Suck it up, buttercup.

Gideon continued to tread water, ignoring the pain pulsing in his shoulder as he tried to formulate a rescue plan for the drowning young doe. The animal had flipped from stomach to back, its frantic hooves batting the spray, eyes rolling in terror.

On the muddy bank, the only student who'd actually followed through and shown up for his survival skills class looked, in a word, terrified. Rain coursed from Roger's yellow hat as he watched Gideon struggling with the deer, who'd been trapped in a tangle of branches in the bloated river.

The water on the rugged eastern flank of the Cascades was freezing at the end of February. Of course. Puffs of snow stacked the peaks ringing the town. He and his brothers had camped beside this very river when they were kids, and he'd relished these acres in all their summer glory. This was definitely *not* summer.

But leave was leave, and even a handful of students would be enough to provide glowing testimonials for the website he was planning.

The torrent beat against Gideon as he circled and splashed his way to a better angle to free the drowning deer, whose panicked bleating was growing fainter as it succumbed. Behind Roger, the bushes parted and Gideon's heart sank as a full-grown male deer stepped out.

He yelled to Roger over the roar as he pulled out his knife and sawed through the intertwined branches.

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"Huh?" Roger yelled back from his place atop the bank, his cell phone capturing the action.

Unbelievable.

"The buck, behind you!" Gideon shouted at a volume he rarely attained. Yelling generally indicated a complete inability to deal with a situation, which was exactly where things were headed. He stifled the litany of bad words scrolling through his mind and continued to hack away.

The buck, agitated about his mate's situation, was about to mow down the clueless Roger. Gideon's one and only client was close to having his clock cleaned by a two-hundred-pound deer. That'd look swell on the Yelp reviews. A testimonial would definitely be out of the question. He should give up on the doe.

Go save your client.

But the doe's terrified eyes locked on his, the water millimeters from inundating her quivering nostrils. She had no hope except for him. Her death was certain.

He shouted again to Roger without taking his attention off the knife. He continued to work the blade across the entangling branches, focused so he didn't cut off his fingers with the weapon he kept sharp enough to split atoms.

He didn't think Roger had heeded his command, but he couldn't spare a look. Since the class had only just begun when he spotted the entangled animal, they hadn't yet covered the "be mindful of your surroundings" topic, and clearly Roger had zero prior knowledge on the subject. The man was probably still trying to video the moment for his social media instead of looking for a way to help. *This is real life*, he wanted to shout. *Fix it, don't film it*.

With a snap, the last branch finally gave way. He sheathed

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the knife, grabbed the deer around the neck, ignoring the hooves that battered his stomach, and hauled her to the shore against the pummeling current.

In the shallows, braced in the mud, he shoved at her flanks until she got her wobbly legs situated. It took one last heave from Gideon to propel the exhausted creature far enough onto terra firma for her to find traction. The buck was there immediately, nosing the female away from the water and Gideon before they disappeared into the woods. Mission accomplished. Doe saved.

With all his remaining energy, he hauled himself through the mud and up the bank. His weak shoulder complained every inch of the way. As usual, he ignored it. He expected to see Roger in a crumpled heap when he finally pulled his way clear. No Roger.

He shook the water out of his eyes.

Still no Roger, but someone else was there.

Gideon stood upright, water running down his freezing limbs as he tried to shake away the hallucination. He must be hypothermic, seeing things. But even that made no sense, none at all. Why would he hallucinate the woman he had no desire ever to clap eyes on again? He swiped the moisture from his face, but she was still there.

And Roger wasn't.

Mackenzie Bardine arched a delicate brow at him. "Where's the rest of your class?"

That soft, feathery tone concealed the talons underneath. His stomach knotted into a fist as he barely caught the towel she tossed him.

His mouth finally started to pitch in and help out his

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brain. "What are you doing here, Zee?" The nickname bestowed on her by her brother, Aaron. His best friend.

Her lips firmed into a line. "You can call me Mackenzie. I'm not a teen anymore."

No, she wasn't. She wasn't even the same woman he'd last seen two years before at the funeral, or the one who'd tried to strong-arm him into her cause. She was tall and more slender than he recalled, her wet rain gear plastered around her athletic physique. Drops beaded on her chestnut ponytail, much longer than the previous short bob, as she regarded him with those gray eyes from under the brim of a boonie cap.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated through chattering teeth because he couldn't think of anything different to ask. He looked for her car and saw only his own rain-slicked Jeep Wrangler.

"I was in the area. Thought I'd join your class. You take walk-ins, right?"

He didn't get out a response before she rushed on. "By the way, I suggested your guy, Roger, move to a safer position to save him from being flattened by the buck. Oh, and I told him there's concern about the Cotton Flower Dam. Some signs of pending failure. Whole town's talking about it. He decided to get on the road home. Said to tell you adios and he'd had a wonderful time. I assured him I'd pass on the message."

Anger ballooned in his belly. "You did what?"

She smiled. "He paid up front, I'm sure, right? So no biggie?"

Roger had prepaid, in fact, but that wasn't the point.

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"Wrong time of year for a wilderness survival class, isn't it?" she said. "Wouldn't August be better for the city folk?"

"Turns out people need to survive, no matter what the season," he managed between clenched teeth. "What do you want?"

"Just what I said. I saw online that you were teaching your class again. Thought I'd take a refresher course, but . . ." She shrugged. "No fun with only one student and a storm, and what with the risk of the dam failure and all . . ."

He finally broke through the stupor and stalked to his vehicle, turning his back on her and stripping off his shirt as he went. He felt her watching him as he yanked on a dry one from the back seat and added a jacket before he spun to face her again. "You're lying, obviously."

She stared at him, unperturbed. No explanation. No apology. Typical.

"Why are you really here?" The rain increased to a relentless sheet of misery. She pursed her lips, as if she were considering a reply. He realized he was teetering on a dangerous precipice. *Do not get involved with her.* "Never mind. I don't want to know."

And he didn't want anything to do with Mackenzie Bardine or her plans. Not after he'd declined her request for help with her vigilante social media campaign and received a dose of her wrath to add to his own measure of guilt. Whatever her newest crusade was, it was no concern of his.

"Can I have a ride back to town?" Her casual tone annoyed him further.

"How did you get out here without a vehicle?"

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"Staying at the hotel in Oakleaf. I ran here."

"It's five miles."

She shrugged.

Of course. Five miles would be easy for Mackenzie, who'd been a marathon nut in her college days. He wanted to leave her there and drive away from the feelings she awakened in him. The pain. But the pewter eyes cooly observing him were the exact shade of her older brother's. Aaron could run five miles too, joking the whole way, and handle every problem with a wink and a shrug . . . until the last one that took his life.

And nestled deep, way down in Gideon's soul, was the knowledge that he might have saved his friend. Might have, but didn't. Mackenzie thought so too.

He heaved a sigh. "Fine."

He'd use the drive to ferret out her real purpose, buried under the lies. Or maybe he wouldn't. Stony silence was an acceptable option too, and whatever she was up to didn't concern him, after all. Not anymore.

Get her to town and out of your life.

They got in. He cranked the ignition and jerked them onto the road, windshield wipers working double time.

The radio report confirmed Mackenzie's information, though she'd dialed up the timeline of the impending disaster for the hapless Roger. Authorities were concerned about a failure of the Cotton Flower Dam, which had needed repairs for decades. Gideon had known all that. Engineers were monitoring the situation, but residents had been told to stay alert, as evacuation orders could be issued in the upcoming week. He'd totally have been able to complete an eight-hour survival class and get Roger

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safely on the road before midnight. Had she been trying to scare Roger away out of spite? But why show up at his class? Now? There had to be plenty of other people she could harass besides him.

Her expression was impassive. "Still on active duty? Teaching in your spare time at the old stomping grounds?"

Their family friend owned this hunk of soggy land and gave permission to Gideon to use it for free. "Yes."

"Why? Most guys would be feet up in a recliner or on a boat fishing on their leave time."

None of your business. But the manners drilled into him by his parents kept him from articulating the thought. Instead he turned the tables. "Finish the police academy?"

She shook her head. "No. Quit that for good."

He hadn't heard. She'd been working on her academy requirements when Aaron was murdered. He'd assumed she would eventually go on to complete the program and earn her badge. So she wasn't law enforcement. That explained plenty. "That's how you get away with saying that stuff on your podcast."

Her tone hardened. "I don't 'get away' with anything."

"Podcasting theories, no matter how unproven."

"I tell the truth and dig into cold cases."

"Like your brother's."

She looked out the window into the pounding rain. "Yes. Like his. I've covered four so far," she added in a defensive tone. "And thanks to the podcast, three have been solved."

But no one had been arrested for the assassination-style murder of Aaron Bardine during a drug deal gone bad two years prior. Gideon remembered how she'd come at him

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when he'd gone to pay his respects at the house after the funeral. The image of her face, swollen from crying and seething with rage, was burned into his brain.

"Aaron was your best friend. Did you know something was wrong?"

He had, and heard the question she couldn't voice. *Why didn't you make him tell you?* And he caught on to her self-recrimination as well. *Why didn't I do so either?* He blinked away the memory. The rain continued to smash against the Jeep's windshield as he drove.

It was hard to look at her and not see Aaron.

A wet, windblown branch caught in the wipers. He saw her glance in the side-view mirror at the white truck he'd noticed when they turned into the town of Oakleaf. Only five hundred residents lived in this wooded hollow settled in a valley rich with stunning views. Several of the shop owners were busily boarding up their windows. The ones who'd already invested in storm shutters had rolled them into place. None of those measures would help if the dam failed, which they well knew.

Survival meant hoping for the best while planning for the worst. No place for pessimists.

Her fingers gripped the door handle as they rolled toward the main drag. He pulled to the side to allow the white truck to pass. The driver wasted no time speeding by, a bearded guy behind the wheel soaking in Mackenzie's profile as he went. Not out of the ordinary. Mackenzie was not a cover girl type, but there was something about her that made people, particularly men, pay attention. Gideon had been paying attention forever, or so it felt.

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Her gaze stayed forward-facing, but he saw her making note of the plates as the truck vanished down the street.

"What's going on, Zee?"

"Not much. Just a little vacation here in lovely rural Washington. Figured it was time to get out of Seattle. How about with you?"

"Knock off the coy routine." He jutted his chin. "Who was that in the truck?"

"I don't know."

"Sure it doesn't have something to do with your online crusade?"

She didn't look at him, but her jaw tightened. "I use my platform for good. You don't approve of that?"

"Depends on your motivation." Still, she gave him no eye contact.

"And what do you think that would be, in my case?"

He shrugged. "I'm sure the advertisers on your podcast are thrilled with your follower count. Close to twenty thousand, right?" He cringed inwardly at his slip.

"Flattered that you looked me up. If you'd helped me, like I asked . . ."

He heaved out a breath. "Let's not fire up this whole argument again."

Mackenzie was silent, fingers drumming on her knee.

"Look, Zee. Like I told you then, I—"

"I know. You couldn't go on camera because of your job. And you wouldn't review the timeline of that night, your impressions, anything related to the case because you'd gone over it all with the police. You had other priorities."

"You should too," he snapped. "This is a police matter.

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You have to move on with your life, like I told you when you asked me."

"And what if I can't do that?" A ripple of emotion crossed her face, a shimmer of anguish—there, then gone—hidden under quiet anger.

He didn't know the answer, wasn't sure he'd done much better than she had in accepting Aaron's death.

She'd thrown herself into the podcast, and he'd watched her grow more brash about her theories as she told her viewers that the kingpin responsible for a huge portion of the drug trafficking in the Pacific Northwest, a man she referred to as "Bullseye," would be brought to justice. She didn't shirk from stating that she believed Bullseye—someone who fed on desperation and peddled pharmaceutical relief—was responsible for Aaron's death as much as if he'd pulled the trigger himself. As far as she was concerned, Aaron was an innocent victim in the whole mess.

Gideon wasn't as convinced, which was another reason he'd declined to help her investigation. Better for her to grieve the brother she'd known.

The FBI and DEA also had Bullseye on their radar, and Gideon imagined they didn't enjoy her taking the case to the social media world.

A vein still jumped in her jaw.

Only another mile until he delivered his passenger. Might as well try not to inflame things further. He took a breath. "So you're here because of your podcast."

"I have a contact in this area."

This area. His suspicions were correct. "That's why you're in town?"

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A sly grin overtook her anger. "What? You don't believe I'm here because I wanted to take your class?"

"Not in any way, shape, or form."

She chuckled. "You always were a suspicious one, Gideon, that's why you have a permanent furrow between your manly eyebrows."

And you always knew how to disarm my defenses. Annoying, the way she commanded his attention. He could still picture her in that green dress, her eyes dancing in a way that would disappear forever in a matter of hours when her brother was murdered.

He recalled a similar gaze—her brother's—on that sultry August night in California when Gideon had discovered Aaron wrecked in a ditch on the base where they'd both been sent for SERE training. He'd reeked of whiskey.

"*Oh man, Gid. Glad it's you. Not gonna rat me out, are you?*"

And Gideon had made a choice that night, one with deep roots reaching all the way back to their high school trauma.

"I'm sorry, Aaron. I can't do it again." And he'd called it in. Aaron was remanded into the equivalent of Air Force jail until his discharge.

Publicly, Aaron laughed about it to anyone who had the bad taste to bring it up, as if the whole episode was a youthful prank, though Aaron had landed back in civilian life stripped of his pension and military benefits.

Mackenzie's gorgeous silvery eyes, so like her brother's, were hard now, stripped of their luster.

He shifted on the seat, kicked up the windshield wipers to full against the blasting rain. "When's your meet?"

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"Depends," she said with a vague shrug.

They drove by the police station, a squat relic with ugly cement trim and putty-colored paint. Mackenzie scanned the building.

"My contact was arrested yesterday. She's here being processed."

Arrested. Interesting. So the cops would have forty-eight hours to charge the detainee or cut her loose. Was that why Mackenzie was here, in case the woman was released? Waste of time otherwise. No one would be let in unless they were a lawyer. His vague unease began to swell. "How do you know that?"

She hesitated. "Sources."

"What sources?"

"None of your business."

So much for civility. "Bummer for your podcast. Must have been a blow to have your contact arrested before you could record her." He didn't keep the sarcasm from his voice, nor did she react to it. Strange. Their rapport since Aaron's death had been at the matches and gasoline type of reactivity level. Now he was getting nothing. "Think they'll charge her?"

"Yep."

Mackenzie had her nose in everything. So why would she wait around? *Not your concern, Gid.* He had to offload Mackenzie before the match touched the fuel. At least he could do that much. "Where do you want me to drop you off?"

"Coffee shop, please. There."

He eased into the nearly empty lot of The Daily Grind. Only two vehicles and a squad car were parked on the

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slick asphalt. The rain slackened for a few moments, but the gunmetal clouds proclaimed it was only temporary. A monster storm was coming, and soon. The dam was about to be sorely tested, along with anyone who stayed.

He idled, waiting for her to get out. When she didn't, he fiddled with the heater and waited some more.

She turned to him. "How long are you on leave?"

"Another week."

"Seeing your folks?"

"Yes."

"Your mom doing okay?"

The fact was, his mom and dad were struggling to maintain their family farm.

His oldest brother Duncan was up to his earlobes with sole custody of three kids, and his other brother, the newlywed Cullen, couldn't do everything, even though he loudly proclaimed that he could. His cousin Johnny helped out when he wasn't deployed with the Navy. It was Gideon's turn to step up, and he wasn't going to let anything divert him. "They're fine."

She nodded, rubbing a spot of mud from the knee of her leggings.

Was she making small talk? His nerves prickled with an undercurrent of danger, though he couldn't for the life of him decipher why. It felt like the moment before a storm touched down in a completely different place than expected. He scraped a palm over his chin. "Look. Why don't you just tell me what's really going on with you and why you're sitting in my car? And don't give me that excuse about taking my class. You know I don't play games."

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"Oh, but I love games." The mischievous grin enticed him in spite of himself.

Get rid of her. "I don't want any part of whatever you're . . ."

But Mackenzie's attention was diverted as someone exited the shop, a stocky older man holding a to-go cup as he wrestled with his hood. She watched the man.

"Who's that?"

She didn't answer, just continued to watch and fiddle around with something in the footwell before she got out, walked around to his side, and gestured for him to roll down his window.

"Thanks, Gideon. For the ride, I mean. I know we aren't exactly buddies, and I appreciate it." Before he knew what happened, she leaned in and kissed him, touching his cheek with one fingertip.

Her lips were warm and soft. He hadn't been this surprised since his brother called to say he was trapped by an erupting volcano. There was no way he could get his brain to command his mouth to offer one single word in the wake of that kiss and the sparks it sent cascading through his nervous system.

A smile tugged the corner of her mouth. They were playing a game, but he didn't know the rules.

"And I really am sorry I scared your student away," she said.

She actually did sound regretful. Maybe he'd misjudged her.

"I stowed a bag in the back of your Jeep while you were swimming with the deer. Would you mind hauling it out for me?" She touched her neck. "Pulled a muscle."

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He got out and opened the rear door. Abruptly, she moved behind him. He was unprepared when she looped a foot around his ankles and toppled him stomach first to the ground.

The air whooshed out of him. Shock didn't begin to describe it. "What are you doing?"

"Give me your wallet," she shouted.

His what? "Zee, this isn't funny."

Her knees pressed into his shoulders, grinding his chin into the wet pavement. He made a move to turn over, but she leaned harder on his back.

"Sorry, Gid. Nothing personal." Then she started barking out commands again, as if she was a bad actor in a television drama.

He didn't move. This was some kind of a bizarre dream. Had to be. "Are you joking?"

"Like I said, I'm sorry."

Anger began to bubble in his gut as his thoughts came back online. He figured she was trying to create some zany footage for her podcast, but her phone wasn't in her hand. There was no one else around to catch it on video.

"Mackenzie, I'm about to toss you off of me like an old backpack, so you'd better have a good explanation—"

"No, Gid," she said, sad and sweet, and then her voice rose to a sharp command. "Give me your wallet."

He saw from his uncomfortable position that her antics had attracted attention. The rotund man who'd just exited the coffee shop jerked a look at them, spun around, and bolted inside.

"Zee," he said through gritted teeth. "I don't know what

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you think you're doing, but now we're gonna have cops involved. Get off me. We'll tell them it was a joke."

She didn't move.

"Quit messing around."

"We'll be done here soon." She pulled the wallet from his back pocket.

"Mackenzie, so help me . . ." He started to roll over, but the coffee shop door flew open, and a uniformed cop with a damp coffee splotch on his shirt barreled out, gun drawn.

"Police!" the cop roared. "On your knees, hands up."

The cop hustled over, ordered her onto her belly, and cuffed her hands behind her back. A second officer appeared to check her for weapons. Gideon climbed to his feet, all the while trying to understand what had just happened.

With her cheek pressed to the asphalt, Mackenzie gave him one lingering smile.

Hours later, Mackenzie sat in her stiff coveralls in a holding cell, waiting. The bare cement space, gray upon gray, was cool, and she wished she'd been allowed to keep her jacket. At least they gave her soft slip-on shoes, but they didn't do much to warm her toes.

The jail was charged with energy, a hum of urgent chatter and feverish movement in the corridor that made her think the officers were dealing with increasing flood-related issues. That'd be ironic, if the dam really was going to fail immediately, like she'd casually hinted to Gideon's student. The beginnings of a smile curved her lips when

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she flashed on the memory of Gideon's face, made even more vibrant by his outrage.

Why did he have to be so handsome? And why had the man actually believed her about her reason for needing a ride to the coffee shop? He was smart, savvy, clever, and yet he'd acquiesced. Guilt over how he'd refused to help her go after Bullseye, maybe? She swallowed a sudden lump in her throat. Ends justified the means, in this case. The impending trouble with the dam might even work in her favor by adding to the distraction level in the jail. All sufficient thoughts to push away her unease at duping Gideon.

Arms folded around herself, she waited. Through the narrow rectangular cell window, a slice of the wall clock was visible. Eleven a.m. No wonder her stomach was growling. She'd skipped the free breakfast bagel and reconstituted eggs at the hotel in order to be sure she didn't miss Gideon before he led his student into the wilderness or outright canceled his class due to the rain. The run from the hotel was easy, fairly flat if somewhat muddy, and she'd made good time—but now she regretted that she hadn't hammered down at least half a bagel beforehand.

Her stomach rumbled again, and she tried to find a more comfortable position. Hopefully a meal of some kind would be offered. And she'd wait until it was provided and eat it without complaint, whatever it was. She'd been a hairbreadth away from putting on a badge herself, and she knew serving in law enforcement was an impossible job. No need to make it any more difficult for them by asking for food or anything else. Hunger could wait anyway. There was only one thing on her agenda. Her informant.

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Pleased as she was that her podcast had thus far contributed to the solving of three cold cases she'd highlighted, the last few months had focused mostly on Aaron's murder. Recent episodes outlined Aaron's last moments. She publically theorized from the very first session that her brother had died meeting a dealer who worked for an operation run by a shadowy boss nicknamed Bullseye. She'd overheard Aaron say that name while on his cell phone.

Lorraine, the woman she had arranged to talk to in Oakleaf, would provide details about that very clandestine network, but she was scared. Confirmation, that was all Mackenzie needed. Some mortar to cement the facts.

Lorraine's untimely arrest had thrown a wrench into the plan, but not an insurmountable one. Gideon's presence in the area was a happy accident that made Mackenzie's altered scenario easier to execute. He was her ticket in, and she'd punched it.

The new plan was still the longest of long shots, a reckless attempt, but it had been now or never. Lorraine's fear was palpable in their brief messages. She believed she was being watched, targeted even, at her place of work, a shipping company owned by Bullseye. She'd disappear the first moment she was able to, so the meeting had to happen now. With an arrest pending, Mackenzie wasn't sure if Lorraine was trustworthy or not. Mackenzie had no other choice.

There wasn't a guarantee she could even locate and talk to Lorraine, but she figured she'd have a slim chance since it was a small-time jail with a communal eating area, according to her research. Slim chances were better than none. It wouldn't take long. A five-minute exchange. That

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was all she needed. Worst case, with the help of her jail accomplice, a filing clerk she'd paid handsomely, perhaps she could slip a written message with the first of her two vital questions. *Is Bullseye headquartered here in town?*

The answer had to be yes. She believed it down to the cell level. She'd meticulously tracked every tiny tremor of activity through various social media avenues and on web channels where people spoke in code looking to score drugs or dealers arranged sales. If there was a dark cyber alley, she'd crawled down or slithered through it. As much as she could, she protected herself, never showing her face or broadcasting her location, using a virtual private network to conceal her IP address, stripping metadata from images.

She had scores of fake identities she used to monitor the stinking channels of her cyber web for all the cold cases she'd investigated. Some tidbits she'd gleaned from local police reports, all public information she'd scoured, analyzed, mapped, cultivated, obsessed over, like Gollum with his ring.

Or maybe she was more like a giant spider, waiting for the slightest vibration on the elaborate web she'd spun. It wasn't pretty, inhabiting the same places as the lawbreakers she was trying to expose. Sometimes she felt as if no endless shower of hot water would scald the taint from her skin after a particularly long research mission in those lightless corners.

She wriggled on the hard seat.

You're doing what's necessary for Aaron and all the other people whom you've helped.

Each tiny quiver of information pointed her to this

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region, this town, and hours of research and inquiries had led her to her source. Lorraine would confirm if she was correct or not. In a best-case scenario, she would also answer Mackenzie's crucial second question. *What is Bullseye's real name?*

Or maybe Lorraine would give her something else to narrow the field, point her to someone who could help. But one way or another, Bullseye would be exposed.

Mackenzie had gained a following on her podcast, *Boots on the Ground*, thanks to the modern fascination with true crime and the cases she'd been able to help solve. Every time she launched a new case, tips flooded in, but the majority never panned out. She garnered her share of haters too—mostly men who objected to her message, her words, her presentation, her clothes, her age, and her very existence. The same type of hatred she'd seen in the eyes of the bearded guy driving the white truck. Just an unfriendly local? Or one of Bullseye's people who had somehow tracked her? She'd abstained from posting updates since she hit town, but Bullseye might be every bit as adept at tracking as she was. She'd made no secret of the fact that Aaron Bardine was her brother.

And Bullseye was a filthy drug lord who was going to pay for his death.

Her body still tingled from the strip search. Hot shame licked her cheeks. Though she'd been treated respectfully, there was no way to avoid feeling humiliated and exposed while standing naked in front of a rubber-gloved stranger. It pained her to be deceiving the police. Part of her identity would always be law enforcement, even though she hadn't finished the academy. Down the road she'd have to

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come clean with the cops and FBI about what she learned and how she'd collected the information, but that wasn't important now.

Aaron often said, *"Use your powers for good, Zee."*

And she intended to.

An image of her parents swam through her mind, how they'd react when they heard what she'd done, their daughter, arrested for robbery. Her parents did not have the will to fight. Instead they comforted themselves with a future reckoning. *"No one escapes God's justice,"* her father said. *"He wins in the end."*

But God put her here on this planet to act, and act she would.

Her mission was not a quest for attention, as Gideon believed.

His expression when she'd taken his wallet was not something she'd ever forget. Shock, anger, and the worst emotion, disappointment, cascaded over his face. He had no idea what she was doing, and she wasn't sure why it mattered anyway. Gideon wouldn't want to even try to understand someone who reminded him of how he'd failed. She experienced agony whenever she recalled how she had done the same.

Her mom and dad would understand someday that it was the only way, the best chance she had to get enough information to help her prove that Bullseye was responsible for employing the dealer who'd murdered Aaron. He had a network of people who sold for him, transporting the drugs on small planes from Canada into the US. She knew it, from a thousand different bytes of information, but she couldn't prove it.

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Not yet, anyway.

"Hungry?"

She snapped out of her reverie to find a cop talking through a slot in the cell door.

"Oh. Yes, actually."

"There's a light snack in the dining hall. I'll need to shackle your ankles."

Mortifying, but her chance had come. She stood.

"Okay."

He started to unlock the door. "We're working on your arraignment details, but the—"

Another cop hustled up before the door swung open. "We gotta evac the prisoners to county," he said to the first cop. "Two trips. I'll drive the women out first, Dan will follow to back me up. We'll get the males out next."

Evacuation? Mackenzie's chest tightened. *No, no, no.* Once they reached the larger county jail, she might never have her chance to talk to Lorraine.

"Wait," she started, but the officers weren't listening. It was clear the unit was in "handle it" mode. In a matter of moments, she was handcuffed and escorted to a covered garage and loaded into a small van, where her cuffs were fastened to the welded O-rings on the side of the vehicle. There were no windows save for the front, where she could get a partial look.

She strained to see as two other women were ushered in, one with a frizz of gray hair and the other younger with braids tight to her head and . . . Mackenzie stared . . . a broken front tooth, the only physical descriptor she had for her informant.

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"Lorraine?" Mackenzie said to the woman across from her, as loudly as she dared.

The woman's freckled brow creased. She nodded, chewing her lip. "Yes."

Mackenzie's heart soared. *Thank you, God.* "I've been hoping to talk to you."

Her eyes flew wide, the little freckles on her brow dancing. "You're Mackenzie?"

"Yes."

Lorraine gaped. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to find you."

"I thought for sure it was all off when I got arrested."

Mackenzie waited impatiently while the officer rechecked their seating arrangement and restraints. He let himself through a cage and locked it behind him before he strapped in and turned on the engine. Through the caging, she watched him ease the van into the storm. The deluge was instant, the front wipers barely able to keep up.

"What'd they get you for?" Lorraine asked.

"Robbery. After I heard you were in here, I figured it was the best way I might be able to see you."

Lorraine's complexion paled. "You got yourself arrested to talk to me?" She grimaced. "Wasted effort. It's all out of control now."

Mackenzie tried to break into the woman's tirade, but Lorraine continued, chewing on her dry lower lip. "He's not done punishing me. I know it. He's got people everywhere. If I talk to you, it'll get even worse. He'll end me."

"No one will know."

"He will. He already does." She yanked on her cuffs.

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"That's why I'm in here, don't you see?" Tears collected on her lashes.

"Tell me what happened."

"I was arrested at my job. I work in the front office for a delivery company downtown that Bullseye owns. Somebody reported me for stealing, and they found the money in my company locker. It was so humiliating. But I didn't do it." Her voice raised in pitch. "Don't you get it? They found out I was communicating with you. Jail is the price now, but if I talk to you, it'll get worse." Her voice broke on the last word. "How am I ever going to get another job now with an arrest on my record?"

Mackenzie's stomach churned. Lorraine was suffering because Mackenzie had reached out to her. Why hadn't she anticipated such a thing? She'd been arrogant enough to think she was hidden from Bullseye.

"I'm sorry. I never meant to cause you trouble." She so badly wanted to take the woman's hand.

Lorraine sniffed. "I should have known better. I thought I could help you and maybe you could shut him down and he wouldn't find out. What was I thinking?"

"It's not over. The only way through this is to send him to prison, and we can still do that." She leaned forward, wrists cinched tight against the restraints. "His headquarters is here? In this area?" Lorraine nodded and Mackenzie's excitement flamed. Question one answered. "Do you know his name?"

Lorraine went still, and the hunted look in her eyes told Mackenzie the answer was yes. The moment had come. "I need to know."

"I can't tell you. He'll have me killed for sure."

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"I promise I will never reveal to anyone that we spoke." She had to talk loudly enough to be heard over the rain.

"They might be following us right now." Lorraine looked around, jutting her chin at the other prisoner. "What about her?"

But the woman with the silver hair stared out the front.

"She's not listening. Please tell me what you know. This will be our only chance, Lorraine. You know that." Her throat clogged. "He can't go on ending people's lives. Help me shut him down. Please."

Lorraine cocked her head. "Aren't you afraid of what he'll do to you?"

"My brother's dead." She felt such a rush of white-hot anger, it took her a moment to finish. "He's not taking anything else."

Lorraine was silent for a beat before she swallowed hard. She was going to talk. Her bravery was breathtaking, and Mackenzie would see to it that she used every mote of information to its full advantage.

"You need to do something for me," Lorraine said.

"I will if I can."

"My mom is hoping to move to Jamaica next month to live with her sister. You need to help her, make sure she gets there. She'll be safe then."

"I'll try."

"No," Lorraine snapped, tone steely. "You'll do better than try. Even if you have to put her on the plane yourself, you're going to make it happen. Promise, or I don't tell you a thing." Her fingers were twisted together, jaw tight.

Mackenzie looked at her. "Lorraine, I promise I will make sure your mother gets to Jamaica."

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"How do I know you'll do it?"

What could she say to vouch for her integrity? "My brother's gone. That's why I'm here. That's why I got myself arrested. There is nothing else in this world I want more than to bury Bullseye in a prison cell and shut down his drug dealing permanently."

Lorraine went still, thinking.

Mackenzie's whole mission hung on Lorraine's decision. What if she was right about Bullseye's reach? That even now the drug lord might know exactly where they were. How would he choose to deal with his two betrayers?

She held her breath and waited as the police van rolled on through the pummeling rain.

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