

Chapter One

“Tell me again why we’re going out into the middle of nowhere for a bonfire? That’s like holding up a sign *begging* some ax murder to come along and mass murder us.”

Jules Rodriguez kept her eyes on the road—sad excuse that it was. Her truck rocked and shuddered as she muscled down the deep ruts. “We’re not going to get mass murdered.” Though her best friend, Aubry, had a point about it being in the middle of nowhere. They’d been working their way off the main road for almost twenty minutes and there wasn’t so much as a taillight in sight. She pushed down the knot of anxiety for the seventeenth million time today. She was on a mission, and she wasn’t about to let herself—or Aubry—talk her out of it.

Grant was back in town.

“How do you know?” Across the bench seat, her best friend had her knees pulled up to her chest and was staring out the side window like she expected that ax murder to come sprinting at the truck at any second. “I think I hear banjos.”

“Aubry, you live in Devil’s Falls. I would think you’d be used to the banjos by now.”

She frowned. “I do my best to pretend they don’t exist.”

“Denial. It’s not just a river in Egypt.” She finally caught sight of light through the sparse trees. “There!”

“Who invited you to this thing again? Because if we’re not going to be mass murdered—and I’m still not convinced on that note—who’s to say they aren’t luring us in for some sacrificial killing?”

“Has anyone ever told you that you have a deeply troubled obsession with murder?” Jules pulled in next to the open space at the end of a line of trucks. She recognized most of them from around town—Devil’s Falls wasn’t exactly a place hopping with new people. The last person to

move in from out of town had been Aubry—and that was five years ago. “Besides, a sacrificial murder requires a virgin and that ship sailed for both of us years ago.”

“Good point.” Aubry let loose a melodramatic sigh as she turned off the engine. “Remind me why we’re doing this again.”

“Because Grant’s back in town.” Jules hadn’t seen him since he dumped her ass on his way out of town after graduation—he hadn’t even come back for holidays. Nine years later and his parting words were still ringing in her ears. *You and me, Jules, we just don’t work. You’ll always take the safe road, and I want better than a life that’s going to bore me into putting a gun in my mouth and pulling the trigger before I hit thirty.* She clenched her hands around the steering wheel, counting to ten twice. It didn’t do a damn thing to stop the anger eating away at her.

It wasn’t just Grant who thought that—she’d heard variations of it time and time again as she got older—but he was the first who put it into words. “I just want a look.” Hopefully he’d gained the freshman fifteen—and another twenty for law school. Or something. *Something* to prove that she was better off having been left behind, to prove that her life here wasn’t a sad shadow of what it could have been if she’d had a little more courage—if she was a little more *exciting*.

“I thought we agreed that your ex is a douche canoe.”

“We did. And I’m past it.” Mostly.

Aubry snorted and opened the door. “Right. You’re so past it that you’ve dragged us out to be maybe-killed-maybe-sacrificed to hang out with people who are still clinging desperately to their high school glory days.” She looked around, her brows drawn together. “Because, seriously, who goes to bonfires when there’s a perfectly adequate bar in town? *Two*, in fact.”

“The cool kids?” That was always who’d been out at bonfires when she was in school. She’d avoided the whole scene, though. They came out here as an excuse to drink without the town

sheriff bothering them, and that had never been Jules's thing. She barely drank the hard stuff now, let alone when she was sixteen. And trying to navigate the roads back to town while buzzed? No thanks.

“Oh, God, this really is a nightmare.”

Jules looped her arm through her best friend's. “An hour. After that, we can go back to town, grab a bottle of wine, and play that horribly violent game that you love so much.”

“Deal.” Aubry grinned. “And don't act so put upon. You love it as much as I do—you just suck at it.”

“Truth.” She pulled them to a stop at the edge of the clearing. There were trucks parked in here around the fire, too, their tailgates down and people situated around them, chatting and drinking and a few women even dancing. It looked like something straight out of a country music video. She recognized most of the kids she'd gone to high school with a million years ago, ones who'd stayed behind. Their town usually had half the senior population bolt as soon as they got their diplomas, but a good percentage of them ended up back in Devil's Falls in time for their ten year reunion.

Next year. God, where did the time go?

“Jules? Jules Rodriguez?”

She froze. *Too soon. I'm not ready.* But since the only other option was dropping Aubry's arm and fleeing into the night, she managed to turn to Grant with a smile pasted on her face. *No freshman fifteen there. Damn it.* In fact, he looked even better than he had when they dated. His jaw was crazy defined and he'd obviously spent some of the last nine years in the gym because he filled out his T-shirt nicely. She jerked her gaze back to his face, hating the blush that heated her cheeks when he gave her an indulgent smile at catching her checking him out. He'd always

managed to do that—make her feel like a bumbling idiot with just a look.

Stop staring and say something. She cleared her throat. “Hi, Grant.” Aubry coughed out something that sounded suspiciously like *douchecanoe*, but she managed to keep her smile firmly in place—and subtly elbow her best friend. “How are things?”

“Oh, you know, going great. I just graduated from Duke. Top of my class.” He gave a smile that was all teeth, like a politician. “I have a position waiting for me in my father’s firm.”

“That’s great.” Her voice was too high, too enthusiastic, but she couldn’t get it under control. “Just great.”

“And you? I think I heard that you own some sort of cat café in town?” He laughed. “Can’t say that’s surprising. It sounds just like something you’d do.”

Beside her, Aubry went ramrod straight. It was only a matter of time before her friend went postal on his ass, but Jules tried to keep her bright tone. “It’s been a real hit with the locals.”

“That’s what I always liked about you, Jules. You never do anything surprising. You’re exactly the same as you were when we met.” His smile wasn’t mean, exactly, but it was patronizing in the extreme. “I always knew what to expect when it came to you. I hear you’re still single. You want to go get a drink sometime?”

Suddenly, Jules was a whole lot less worried about keeping Aubry back than she was about pressing her lips together to keep from laying into him. It wouldn’t solve anything and, in a way, it’d just prove him right. The truth always stung a whole lot more than lies. She looked around at the people circling the bonfire. A full half of them were watching this little drama play out.

Did he seriously just ask me out? After what he said before he left town?

No. No, absolutely not. Nope. Never.

She had to do something, and fast, or she’d chicken out and say yes, and then she’d be forced

to spend an evening with him, and it'd be like high school all over again. *He left her.* What was more, she'd learned from being dumped by Grant. She had a list now, and he sure as heck didn't fit it.

But with everyone's eyes on her, she could already feel her resolve wavering. Her gaze landed on her cousin across the way. Daniel stood next to a lowered tailgate next to his friend Quinn. And with them was... She blinked. *Holy shit, it's Adam Meyers. I didn't realize he was back in town.*

Just like that, a stupid and reckless plan clicked into place. Grant was still waiting for her to say yes and fulfill his expectations, but she managed a laugh. "That's really sweet, Grant. It was great seeing you, but my boyfriend is waiting for me."

He frowned. "Boyfriend?"

"Oh, yeah, it's a new thing. We haven't exactly gone public with it—you know how Devil's Falls can be—so you wouldn't have heard." She gave him a pat on his arm. "It was nice seeing you. So great. Really, we'll have to catch up sometime soon." And then she stepped around him, dragging Aubry behind her.

"What are you doing?" Aubry whispered.

"Winging it." She stopped by the trio of men, all too aware of Grant watching her. "Hi Daniel. Quinn. Adam."

They raised their beers. Daniel looked over her shoulder with a frown. "Is that your piece of shit ex-boyfriend I see?"

"The very one." She disentangled her arm from Aubry's. "Speaking of, I need a favor."

"Anything for you, kid."

She tried not to roll her eyes at him calling her kid. He was a whole five years older than her.

Not exactly ancient. “Actually, it’s not you I need the favor from.” Before she could talk herself out of it, she sidled up to Adam and put her arms around his neck. To his credit, he didn’t shove her on her butt in the dirt, merely raising his eyebrows. Jules kept her voice low so there was no chance of Grant overhearing. “So as you’ve noticed, my ex is watching me really closely right now, and I might have told him a tiny white lie about us dating in order to avoid a devastating dose of humiliation.”

“I see.”

There wasn’t a whole lot to work with in those words, but he also had let his free hand drift down to settle on her hip, so she just kept talking, “If you could just play along and maybe kiss me like you want to do filthy things to me in the bed of your truck, I’d really appreciate it.”

If anything, his eyebrows rose higher. “That guy bothers you that much?”

“You have no idea.”

Next to them, Daniel made a sound suspiciously like a growl, but neither of them looked over. Adam’s hand pulsed on her hip, the heat of it shocking despite the warmth of the night. His callouses dragged over the sensitive skin bared by her T-shirt, and she shivered. *Maybe this was a terrible idea.*

She didn’t have time to really reconsider, though, because he set down his beer, cupped the back of her neck, and dealt her the single most devastating kiss of her life. He took possession of her mouth, his tongue tracing the seam of her lips and then delving inside. He tasted of beer and something darker, but she didn’t get a chance to figure it out before he lifted his head. She blinked up at him, all too aware of her body pressed against the entirety of his, of how he was hard in all the places she was soft, of how goddamn *good* he smelled. “Wow.”

There went that eyebrow again. “You think it was believable?”

She'd almost forgotten she was kissing Adam Meyers because he was supposed to be her boyfriend to prove a point to her real ex boyfriend. *How do I get myself into these messes? Oh. Right. I jump in headfirst without checking for water. Every single time.* She licked her lips. "Um, yes. Totally believable. Thank you."

He still didn't let her go. Instead he turned and lifted her onto the tailgate as if she weighed no more than a paper doll. "You want something to drink?"

"Uh, sure." She should get down and walk away...which she would as soon as she got control of her shaking legs. It would have taken a stronger woman than she was to not stare at Adam's butt in those tight jeans as he ambled over to the cooler. She turned to find Aubry doing a silent slow clap. "Don't judge me."

"Oh, I'm judging."