

I'm about to collapse from the heat. We've just made it to the tree line, and the sun is relentless. My headache has returned, not as potent as it was, but more of a warm throbbing ache behind my eyes. My hands are warm, and I feel the same throb, almost like a pulse but long and slow, one beat every ten seconds. I focus on the pulse, time my steps to its rhythm. I have to focus to stay standing.

I can hardly keep my feet under me; the loose shale makes me stumble. Every few steps. I want to sit down but then I remember how, an hour ago, Ryan turned and wordlessly tried to take my pack from my shoulders. How I shrugged away from him and gave him the stink-eye to end all stink-eyes. —*Screw you and your chivalry.*— I'm regretting that decision right now. If he would turn around again, I'd...

I feel it before I hear it. The ground is suddenly unsteady, vibrations prickling up my legs. Ryan shades his eyes and turns his gaze up the mountain. His furtive scan freezes as he spies something. I follow his gaze, about 500 yards up the side. The rocks are moving. Moving down. Moving toward us. Very fast.

"Shit—"

He unfreezes. Snaps out of his deer-in-the-headlights pose. Then he's moving. It's a good thing, because I can't remember how. Three steps back to me, and then I'm in his arms, pack and all. And we're moving again. Forty paces ahead, I think that's where we're going. It must be. A granite outcropping, small, but it might offer us protection if it doesn't get pulverized by the tons of rock heading our way at a rapid pace. Only forty paces. That little space, that sliver of air between rock and rock, is what will save our lives.

We don't make it there.

The world around me shifts. Suddenly I'm falling. Rocks fall around me, peppering my arms and legs like fists. I keep going—I feel gravity yanking me down the slope. My fingers clutch at the loose shale to slow my fall. I feel a sudden jerk in my shoulder socket and a tight noose of fingers around my wrist; Ryan swears. His shirt is a mess of blood, and his shoulder blade is protruding at a wrenchingly bad angle. The fingers loosen. I fight my way upward. It is a choice. Let go, or fight. Upward, toward the rocks. And Ryan. I choose the latter.

Ryan pulls himself over me. I can barely breathe under his weight. Pressed tightly between his body and the ground, I feel everything he's trying to say through the tension and anger in his frame. I look up. There is a massive boulder on its way to meet us, gouging craters out of the rocky slope, fifty feet above. It won't miss.

I'm suddenly furious. We are about to die, and I am livid. After everything we've been through already. —*Fuck this.*—

Something snaps. I somehow wriggle myself out from beneath him. I can hardly see; everything is a haze of *bright*. Not white light, not a vision of the afterlife—I'm still in this one, but everything amplifies tenfold, and it's like staring at the sun from underwater. My hands aren't mine anymore. I don't feel them. I watch them raise themselves over my head, fingers outstretched to the point of dislocation. Outstretched to the wall of granite towering over us.

"No—" it's a strangled whisper. My throat is raw with silent screams. The thing that has been building inside—the pulse—is just beneath every inch of my skin.

I close my eyes and let it go.