



# **OPERATION KRINGLE**

A HOLIDAY TIME TRAVEL THRILLER

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**“People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.”**

***- Albert Einstein***

# CHAPTER 1

THE WIPERS WORKED FURIOUSLY on the old Ford Aerostar as it slipped and slid its way down the Sprain Brook Parkway north. Kelly McCormick eased off on the gas a little bit more and noted that now they were traveling at 25 mph.

Gritting her teeth, she pictured Metro Max from the local news station. He had a lot of explaining to do.

"The snow is coming down harder. We should turn around," Oz, her completely put upon fifteen-year-old son, said from the back of the car.

Gripping the steering wheel tight and her patience tighter, Kelly shook her head. "We're not turning around."

"Did you even check the weather report? Pretty sure it's not safe to have us out here in this," Oz mumbled.

She took what she hoped was a calming breath, only to find that it most definitely was not. *Do not yell at my son. Do not yell at my son.* She'd been repeating the same mantra for the last two hours. The entire stressful car ride Oz had shifted between dead silences punctured by heavy glares, to heavier sighs with rolling eyes to unsolicited advice on her driving acumen.

"It really is coming down pretty hard," Archie said softly from the passenger seat.

Her temper cooling, Kelly flicked a glance over at Oz's twin. The boys were fraternal but were often mistaken for identical, with their dark blonde hair from their father and their hazel eyes, which were compliments of Kelly. Despite their appearance, their personalities were night and day. "I know. I swear I checked the weather forecast. They said it was only supposed to be a light dusting."

*More like a dust storm*, she thought sourly.

This whole trip so far had been a disaster. It started with her breaking the news to both boys that the camps they had their hearts set on for February break were not going to happen. Even now, she cringed at the memory.

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Standing in the kitchen, Oz's face was red. "It's not fair!"

At the table, Kelly gripped her coffee mug. She wanted to argue against his outburst, but she couldn't because she completely agreed with him. It wasn't fair.

"I'm sorry, honey. But you know we needed to fix the car. And there's just not enough money to send you to Orlando or Archie to JPL."

She turned to look at her other son who sat quietly next to her. But instead of teenage angst, he just gave her that grim nod. Once again, she'd been struck by just how different they were. Oz the athlete, gregarious, always jumping into life. Archie, the brain, always had his nose in a book, and, ever since his father had died, he always seemed to smile a lot less than he should.

"It's okay, Mom. I understand." Archie said, no anger in his voice, only resignation and acceptance.

That response probably hurt more than Oz's. Archie had worked so hard and been so proud when he'd gotten accepted into the Jet Propulsion Laboratory program. The robotics program only accepted ten students each year. Although she'd fully supported him applying, a large part of her worried about the cost. But she promised herself she'd figure out a way to get the money.

She really thought she had. She'd managed to put away enough to

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cover his airfare and some walking around money. Everything else had been covered by a program stipend.

And then the transmission had all but fallen out of her minivan and the brake pads had gone too. It had eaten up all the money she'd put aside for both boys. She'd tried everything to figure out a way to make it work, even checking if she should just junk the car and find something cheaper. But a used car wasn't cheap. Besides, there weren't a lot of reliable options below a 1992 Ford Aerostar.

No matter what type of magical calculations she ran, including her working overtime with no days off, she just could not come up with the money.

Oz had looked at her with tears in his eyes. "I hate this. I hate that we never have money. I hate that you don't make more money," he said before he stormed out of the room.

A charged silence filled the air at his exit. Blowing out a breath, Kelly gave Archie a small smile. "I really am sorry, Arch. I just couldn't make it work."

"I know, Mom. I can probably apply again next year." Standing, he gave her a smile that didn't quite work, either.

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Now she blew out a breath, her mind continuing its futile attempt to make the numbers work. But she simply couldn't swing it, not after all of her funds disappeared into the hands of a very apologetic mechanic named Manny.

Shortly thereafter, they'd all hopped in the car for the supposedly two hour car ride that was now stretching into four hours. They got stuck in traffic at the bridges because, well, of course, they did. Getting off Long Island was an absolute test of patience.

A test Kelly failed every single time.

Then, as soon as they were off the island, the snow had started to come down even heavier. And it was that wet, thick, heavy snow that made it impossible for tires to grip the road. She had snow tires, thank God—a gift from her landlord and Guardian angel Gabe Miller and his

partner Angel Ramirez one weekend. They hadn't even told her. They just took the car in and had the tires put on.

She promised to pay them back, and they glared at her until she just said thank you. They really were family, glares and all. And paying them back had put her on this road today.

Gabe was selling the cabin. The sale was going to close just before Christmas. Kelly had volunteered herself and the boys to pack the place up. Gabe had tried to say no, but his grandkids all seemed to have back to back Christmas activities that required an audience. And she knew Gabe didn't want to miss any of that, so he'd relented.

The wipers worked furiously, but were barely able to remove the snow before new snow hit the windshield. Oz popped up from the back seat again, leaning in between the two front seats. "We need new windshield wipers. Those aren't doing the job."

Struggling to keep her voice even as she nodded. "Thank you. That's very helpful."

"I'm just saying," Oz grumbled before he flung himself back against the back seat.

*Do not yell at my son. Do not yell at my son,* Kelly repeated again to herself.

But her nerves were stretched tight. She hated driving in this kind of weather. Long Island didn't get a lot of snow. When it did, the entire island basically shut down. A half inch would grind the place to a halt.

Her husband, Ben, always used to laugh at that. He'd grown up in upstate New York, just outside Buffalo, where they got feet of snow rather than inches. And even that didn't stop the city. He simply did not understand what was wrong with Long Islanders.

A pang of grief shifted through her chest. It had been eight years since Ben had died. Many well-meaning people had told her that time heals all wounds. But it didn't. And Kelly had accepted that grief was just going to be a constant companion. There was no getting over Ben. There was just living with the loss.

"Seriously, we really should turn around," Oz said from the back as Kelly slowed the car even more, struggling to see the highway.

"We're not turning back," Kelly announced before adding in a

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lower voice, "Although Metro Max is going to get one really angry email."

From the passenger seat, Archie gestured to the window. "It's not his fault. Weather prediction has become increasingly more difficult with climate change."

Kelly sent him a tight smile. He really was a good kid. "Okay, hon. No angry email to Metro Max."

"We're going to be stuck here for days," Oz complained from the backseat. "We'll probably die here and won't be found until the spring."

"Well, at least we'll all be together," she said with false cheer.

"That's not funny," Oz grumped.

Spying the car in the lane in front of her with its hazard lights, she slowed a little more. The smile slipped from her face as she mumbled, "It was a little funny."

## ***CHAPTER 2***

LIGHTS GLOWED along the top of the four story concrete monstrosity sitting a hundred feet behind the barbed wire rimmed fence. There were no trees between the fence and the building. Despite the dark that had descended, the lights reflecting off the wide open, snow covered space made the area appear like a bright afternoon.

Not ideal.

Hunched low along the tree line just four feet from the fence, Nick Santelo studied his target one last time. Flicking a glance up at the sky, snow coated his face. Night had fallen a few hours ago, and it had only grown heavier. This was definitely not one of his better plans.

Even so, anticipation danced along his skin, or maybe it was just the cold and snow. But he had to admit, he was excited to finally be doing something.

The lab's day staff had left early to try and make it home. And a few of the security staff had called off sick. It was the perfect time to go in.

Yet still he hesitated. He had control of the security system. That wasn't a problem. Neither were the lights. He'd be able to shut them off long enough for him to cover the open expanse. No, electronics weren't the problem. In fact, machines were never the issue.



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No, it was always the humans.

He'd just learned of this lab yesterday. There hadn't been enough time to do a full recon and get the security's movements. He had to make do with what he could find on their system: staff schedules, security patrol routes, etc.

Normally, he'd spend a few days gathering more intel. But time was not something that was currently on his side. Part of him knew the safe approach would be to abandon this mission all together.

They could send another team . . . maybe.

And it was that maybe that had him crouching in the snow. For six months, he'd been chasing after an undefined threat. Two days ago, that threat finally had a name: Leo Malone.

If the predictions were right, he could not afford to rely on a maybe. The world could not afford for him to rely on a maybe.

Still, the lack of intel left Nick unsettled. He rolled his hands into fists, picturing Malone. Only twenty-eight years old, he'd been handed every privilege this world had to offer. He was beyond the 1%. He was part of the .05%.

Anger simmered under Nick's skin. The work and sacrifice of so many was all at risk because of an arrogant, entitled, party boy.

He couldn't let that happen. It still wasn't clear what exactly Malone was up to, although Nick was pretty sure it involved a Maverick relic. It was the only thing that made sense.

This site was the most likely holding place for it. He flicked a glance down at his wrist. The metal bangle looked unremarkable. But under its casing was technology that lives had been lost for.

The battery, though, was running low. This mission had lasted so much longer than any of them had expected. Protocol dictated that he should have returned six months ago.

But when he learned of the new threat, he couldn't leave. Staying though, that was a risk too. In his gut, though, he knew the bigger risk would be allowing Malone's actions to go uninvestigated.

Flicking a glance over his shoulder, he looked for his partner, but didn't see her anywhere. Good, she was following orders. With Ruby, that wasn't always a guarantee.

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Rolling his neck, he tapped his watch face. A countdown appeared. 3—2—1.

The lights extinguished, plunging the area into darkness. Nick bolted for the fence.

## ***CHAPTER 3***

THE SNOW MIGHT BE horrible to drive through, but it made this part of the state look absolutely picturesque. There was a full moon, which only added to the magical effect. Some of the stress slipped from Kelly's shoulders as she turned onto Basket Hollow Road. The road had recently been plowed. The headlights highlighted the three-foot embankments of snow on either side and the flakes still falling.

Snow always made it feel like Christmas. Granted, a little less would be nice right at this moment. But the little cabin tucked in the woods would look, and hopefully feel, like a winter wonderland.

A grin slipped across Kelly's face. She'd been so busy lately that it barely felt like Christmas was only a few days away. Between her job as a paralegal and the final she'd taken for Technology and Law, she'd been beyond stressed for most of the month. She'd managed to get the Christmas tree up last weekend, but that was as far as the decorating got.

Now, though, with the snow falling, it was definitely beginning to feel a little like Christmas. In fact, the old song slipped into her mind and she found herself humming it softly.

Archie looked over at her and grinned. She returned the smile and flicked a glance in the rearview mirror. Oz was staring out the window.

Nope, she was not letting him ruin the beginning of her good mood.

"There we are," Kelly murmured with a smile as the headlights caught on the mailbox anchored in an old metal milk urn.

As she pulled into the driveway, she hit the brakes. It looked like a plow had accidentally turned into the drive and cleared about eight feet, just enough. She reversed back out and then reversed in so that the front of her car was facing the street. She was pretty sure she would have to dig her way out of the snow in the morning, but with it at the end of the drive, it would be much easier.

Cutting the engine, she smiled at Archie. "Made it."

"Whoopee," Oscar mumbled from the back seat.

Once again, she ignored the comment. She knew how much he'd had his heart set on going to the soccer camp. His whole team was going. Everyone, except for Oz.

As a single mom, it seemed her boys were always having to miss out on activities that their friends could afford. Normally, they handled and hid their disappointment pretty well. But they couldn't always.

They weren't the only ones disappointed. She'd really been proud of being able to send them.

With a sigh, she grabbed her gloves and slipped them on, placing her hat on as well. Then she stepped out into the snow, which nearly reached her knees.

Walking to the back of the Aerostar, she pulled out the snow shovels. As Archie joined her, he took one from her. "I'll shovel a path to the house."

Turning, he started creating the path. Kelly sent a little prayer of gratitude out into the universe that she had one child who did not fight her every step of the way.

And then there was the other one: Oz slumped out of the car, arms crossed over his chest as he stood in just a sweatshirt, no hat, no gloves. "What do you want me to do?"

Ignoring his tone and the fact that he had also ignored the winter boots she'd left in the back of the van for him and the jacket, Kelly thrust a shovel at him. "Dig out the front of the driveway. I don't want to be stuck here tomorrow morning."

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He rolled his eyes as he took the shovel and headed to the front of the car. "Whatever."

Trying to hold on to her compassion, she took a deep breath. But she was beginning to feel more than a little resentful of his attitude.

Besides, Archie had to be just as disappointed if not more. The JPL program was a major accomplishment. The school superintendent had even contacted her wanting to do a little article for the local newspaper.

When Archie had shown her the acceptance letter, Kelly could see the pride in his eyes. Just the same way she'd seen the disappointment when she'd explained that they couldn't afford it. She hadn't planned on telling them until after the holidays. But then Oz had come home with the registration form and kept insisting they fill it out.

Finally, she'd blurted out that they couldn't afford it. And their responses were a perfect example of their differences. Archie accepted it with a maturity well beyond his years, and Oz lashed out.

"It's not fair!" His words rang again in her ears. And the truth was a dagger to her heart.

It wasn't fair that all the other kids on his soccer team were going to be able to go to the conference in Orlando.

It wasn't fair that Archie was missing out on an opportunity that could literally change his life.

It wasn't fair that Kelly's husband had died of cancer eight years ago.

It wasn't fair that as hard as she worked, she was still struggling to make ends meet.

None of it was even slightly fair.

But that didn't change a thing. Her shoulders slumped. It was amazing how far she was from the future she'd envisioned for herself. She and Ben had gotten married young, but she didn't regret that. She'd gotten pregnant her first year of law school.

She didn't regret that either.

Between her, Ben, and Gabe, she'd managed to get through two years of law school before Ben's illness derailed them. Eight years later, she was one class away, and it felt like miles.

*Life is not supposed to be this hard,* she thought as she slipped her

backpack over her shoulders and grabbed the empty crates from the back of the van. After closing the tailgate, she quickly headed down the path that Archie had created. He was now widening it to give them a little more room.

She smiled as she passed him on his way back. "Thanks, honey."

He gave her a grin and continued toward the van. Just short of the porch, Kelly stopped, looking at the little cabin. Snowflakes fell gently around it with the moon perfectly positioned above. Its weathered, wooden exterior had been softened by years of exposure to the elements. The roof, patched in places but sturdy, sloped gently.

On the small porch, a couple of weathered rocking chairs sat beckoning someone to take a load off. Or at least did when the wind-chill wasn't heading toward single digits.

In the back of her mind, Kelly had hoped that one day she might be able to buy it from Gabe. He'd gotten it from a friend years and years ago. He brought his daughter up here with him in the summers. She and Ben had brought the boys out here before Ben had gotten sick, at least for two weeks every summer.

There were a lot of really good memories wrapped up in this place. In fact, this place had been her and the boys vacation spot for a few years after Ben's death, until their friends became more interesting than taking hikes in the woods with their mom and before Oz became the surliest teenager on the planet.

Letting out a breath, she knew that title wasn't entirely fair. He wasn't the surliest teenager on the planet. In fact, both of her boys were really, really good kids. Oz was just someone who let his emotions fly. He was disappointed, and she didn't blame him for it.

More than anything, she wanted to give him all of the perks that all of his friends had. But making it these days required two paychecks. And she had no interest in dating, nor any time for it.

So unless a man literally fell in her lap, that wasn't going to happen.

Her gaze straying over to the trees, her heart warmed as she remembered scavenger hunts in the woods behind the cabin and roasting marshmallows at the fire pit. This place had been a gift.

And it was time for the cabin to move on to someone who could

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enjoy it. She hoped that whoever Gabe sold it to made as many good memories as they had.

Archie stepped up next to her. He now stood a head taller than her, her shoulder reaching his bicep. His gaze was on the cabin, a small smile on his face. "I really like this place."

Leaning into him, she nodded, feeling a catch in her throat. Maybe they had time for one last good memory. "Me too. Well, let's get started. If we get everything packed up tonight, we can take off early tomorrow morning."

"Thank God," Oz muttered as he stomped past them to the front door.

And with Scrooge McCormick rattling the front door in annoyance, the bubble of sentiment burst.

Who was she kidding? This was not going to be a great bonding experience with the boys. Oz was going to be a dark cloud over every moment they were here and no doubt for the entire drive home.

So Kelly gritted her teeth and followed him. For once, she was in agreement with her grumbling son: the sooner they got out of here, the better.

## **CHAPTER 4**

IT WAS AMAZING how much work you could get done when one son was not talking to you. Since Oz wasn't regaling them with stories or jokes, he simply got to work. In a few short hours, they had everything packed up.

In fact, all of Gabe's stuff except one crate with a few last minute essentials was now packed in the back of the van. If they had left earlier in the day, they actually would have been able to return home the same day.

But since the boys had school, and they had left late, they'd have to wait till morning. The snow had gotten worse and with the dark and cold, even the plowed roads were no doubt turning into ice rinks. The temperature had plunged ten degrees since they'd arrived. It was just above zero. So, they were definitely staying put for the night.

Luckily, it was going to warm up a little overnight, so the morning drive shouldn't be too bad. As soon as daylight was upon them, they would be on the road. The heavy snow was supposed to stop falling in about an hour, so she hoped that all the roads would be cleared tonight and they'd have smooth sailing in the morning.

Looking around the cabin, though, Kelly couldn't help but smile. With the snow piling up outside, and the soft glow from the fireplace,



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it was really cozy. The cabin was just one large room with a small full bath and a loft with a wooden ladder leading to it.

The small kitchen was only a few cabinets with a sink, a fridge, a stove, and a small island. There was a queen bed tucked into the corner next to the kitchen and a futon with two overstuffed chairs sat in front of the fireplace. The wood floors were original to the cabin, and the walls had been insulated and covered with drywall. The ceiling, though, was still the original wood.

Kelly really loved this place. Now, she walked into the kitchen and grabbed the bag of takeout and the microwave-safe dishes.

"I think we're going to need some more firewood," Archie said.

"You're probably right." Kelly glanced over at where the firewood was stacked next to the small fireplace. A few years back, Gabe had installed a wood stove insert which kept the place toasty warm. Next to the fireplace was the log holder, but there were only two in it now. She shivered at even the idea of going outside. But she did not want to run out tonight.

"I'll get it." Oz grabbed his jacket. The wood was stored near the shed on the side of the house, in a covered area a good hundred yards from the house.

Outside, it was pitch black, and the wind howled. Glancing at the windows which had started to frost along the edges, Kelly pictured the dark that surrounded them. She took a step away from the counter. "I think I should—"

Her younger son shot her a glare. "What?"

It was amazing how much could be conveyed in a single word. She raised her hands. "Okay, okay. Just be careful."

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, Mom. I'll be careful walking 100 yards from the house when there's no one around for miles."

Flinging his jacket on, he jammed his feet into his sneakers. Then he opened the door and slammed it shut behind him. Kelly jumped at the loud bang. Letting out a sigh, she moved over to the window to watch Oz head for the old shed. The motion lights blared on as he made his way around the side of the house.

She winced, watching him trudge through the deep snow, once again only wearing his sneakers. What was with teenage boys and

their inability to wear snow gear? She couldn't count the amount of times Oz had gone to school wearing shorts and a sweatshirt when the temperature hovered around freezing.

Her stomach tightened watching him, although she knew Oz was right, at least about there being no one around. This part of the country was definitely busier during the warmer weather.

Still, she couldn't help but keep an eye on him from the window. Of course, if he turned around, she would be sure to duck out of view.

The moon seemed to have shifted behind some clouds, leaving only the outside lights to offer any illumination. A shiver rolled over her in part from imagining how cold it must be, but also at how eerie it looked.

Oz's steps slowed, and she had the feeling he was regretting his offer to retrieve the wood. The forest might look magical in the daytime, but at night it definitely looked like the beginning of a horror movie.

He approached the shed cautiously and then went still. The hair on the back of Kelly's neck rose. Something was wrong. She straightened.

And that's when she saw the figure slink out of the shadows.

## ***CHAPTER 5***

HEART RACING, Kelly let out a gasp as the four-legged animal stepped into the light. For one heart-stopping moment, she thought it was a wolf. But then she recognized it as a red golden retriever-type dog. It stood watching Oz. Oz stood still, watching the dog back.

Oz loved dogs, as did Archie. The two of them had begged for a dog for years when they were younger. She and Ben had planned on getting the boys one. In fact, they'd even picked out a puppy, but then Ben had started to not feel well, and they decided to wait until he was better.

He never got better.

Archie who'd joined her at the window, peered out. "Is that a dog?"

Nodding, Kelly tried to peer into the dark to see if there was anyone with the dog. Where had it come from? The closest house was nearly a mile down the road.

"It must be lost," Archie said.

The wistfulness in Archie's voice was impossible to miss. "We are not taking in the dog."

"But maybe it needs help. It's cold out."

Even as she knew it would be crazy, she also knew there was no way she could let an animal stay out there tonight. "Fine. If it follows

Oz back to the house and looks safe, then we can let him stay for the night and figure out who he belongs to in the morning, okay?"

Archie grinned back at her in response. Kelly shook her head. Then she saw the dog back up. Oz took a step toward it. The dog backed up a little further and then turned, disappearing back into the shadows.

"Do not follow the dog. Do not follow the dog," Kelly murmured. And, of course, Oz headed straight into the woods.

## **CHAPTER 6**

“YOUR BROTHER IS GROUNDED FOREVER,” Kelly growled as she hurried over to the door and tugged on her snow boots. Next to her, Archie did the same as Kelly grabbed her jacket, gloves and hat. Then she hurried over to one of the packed crates and pulled out two flashlights. She thrust one at Archie as she opened the door. “You stay right next to me, do you understand?”

“Got it,” he said, looking pretty excited about their evening adventure. Kelly was decidedly less enthusiastic.

Icy wind and freezing air slapped Kelly in the face as she stepped onto the porch. Shivering, she yanked her hood up over her hat as she and Archie followed in Oz’s footsteps toward the shed. The snow was still coming down, seeming to leave a thick blanket on the ground every minute.

“I swear to God, that brother of yours is never going to use a phone again,” Kelly grumbled. What was he thinking heading into the woods at night, without a light, during a snowstorm after some strange dog?

“Mom, he’ll be fine,” Archie said.

Kelly shook her head thinking about all the grief Oz had given her over the last few hours. “No, you know what? I’m not just going to take his phone. I’m going to replace it with one of those non-smart-phones that only makes calls and can barely handle texting.”

Then she pictured the phone she got for the kids first when they were eight years old. It was a giant phone watch. It only could call Gabe, Ben, her, and 911. Yeah, that's what she was going to get him. A giant turquoise phone watch.

But even as she plotted her son's punishment, she worried. What if the dog was rabid? It didn't look rabid, but with the snow coming down so hard, she wasn't sure she'd be able to tell.

Oh my God. What if it wasn't even a dog? What if it was a wolf? What if it was leading Oz to its pack?

She knew her thoughts were spiraling, and so too was her panic. Their part of Long Island was not exactly a wooded oasis. They were a five-minute walk from the train station, with houses on postage-stamp-sized lots and lots of apartment complexes. And she was pretty sure that at most there was one tree at each house and maybe a few bushes.

Oz hadn't even been a Boy Scout. Archie had been, but Oz had quit after a month.

"Mom, we'll find him. We just need to follow his tracks," Archie said quietly. "And any bears would be hibernating."

She stopped in her tracks staring at Archie. "Bears?! Oh my God, I didn't even think about bears. What if one gets up for a mid-winter snack? Do they get up for mid-winter snacks? Oh, why don't I know more about nature?"

"Breathe, Mom," Archie whispered.

"I am breathing," she snapped, immediately feeling bad and slightly lightheaded. Realizing she had been holding her breath, she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself down.

Focusing her beam of light toward the woods she could make out Oz's path easily. That was good, right? That meant he wasn't running or anything. Plus, there were no screams—no screams were good.

Up ahead, she saw the footsteps veer to the right. Hurrying forward as best she could in the tall snow, she rounded a tree and stopped still because if she didn't she would have run smack dab into Oz. With a relieved sigh, she grabbed his shoulder. "Oz, what are you—"

Her words were cut off as she spied the dog sitting only four feet

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away. It whimpered at her. But it wasn't the dog that had her full attention.

No, it was the body lying at the dog's feet, half-buried in snow.

# **CHAPTER 7**

“OH MY GOD.” Kelly grabbed Oz and pulled him behind her, which was kind of a crazy reaction because obviously the guy was not going to leap up and try something. There was at least an inch of snow covering him. He’d obviously been there for a little while.

His body wasn’t lying at a weird angle, suggesting something was broken, and the snow was pure white around him. The dog whined again and looked up at her with hopeful eyes.

“We have to help him,” Archie urged from next to her.

“Hold on, hold on. Just give me a minute, let me think.” The town of Peekskill and the police department were at least twenty minutes away. And this guy definitely was not going to benefit from another twenty minutes of being out in the snow.

Even Kelly was starting to feel cold with her boots, gloves, and puffy coat. And she doubted this guy’s skin tone was normally this pale. Shining her light on his face, she noted the blue cast to his lips.

The dog whined again, and she took a close look at the animal. Despite the fact that it was wet from the snow, it looked like it was in good condition—not too skinny, not scruffy. It had been taken care of. There was a collar around its neck, so she was guessing the dog belonged to this guy.



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That had to be a good sign, right? Someone who took care of their dog couldn't be an awful human being, could they?

Of course, she wasn't sure why he was this far in the woods. Maybe he'd gotten lost? Although why he'd be wandering out here tonight was beyond her. Was he suicidal? Death by snowstorm? Seemed a strange choice.

Her mind scrambled, trying to think of serial killers and wondering if any of them had a dog. They can't have dogs, right? Serial killers don't sit around with a cute puppy. They kill the cute puppy. She shook her head, pushing that thought away.

"Mom," Oz prodded.

Kelly let out a breath. She couldn't leave the man here. Whoever he was, he needed help. It's not like anyone else was going to stumble across him this far in the woods. "Okay. Let's see if we can figure out a way to get him back to the cabin."

Once they got back there, she'd call the cops, they'd come grab him, and her good deed of the day would be done.

## **CHAPTER 8**

THE TRIP back to the cabin wasn't exactly easy. And it wasn't just the snow. The man was heavy. The fact that his clothes were weighed down by snow definitely didn't help. Before they picked him up, Kelly checked and saw that he was breathing, but his skin was awfully cold.

Oz got behind him and picked him up from underneath the shoulders while Kelly and Archie each took a leg. Then they made the slow walk back to the cabin. They had to stop on four separate occasions to give their arms a break. It should have been a quick walk, but with the snow, it was like high stepping with weights on. By the time they reached the cabin, Kelly's thighs were burning.

Together, the three of them managed to get the guy onto the futon, the dog walking right behind them. The drop to the futon was not graceful or easy. Kelly nearly fell over when she released him. She threw out her hand to brace herself on the futon frame to keep from falling on top of him.

Archie grabbed the back of her jacket. "Mom."

"Thanks honey," she said straightening with his help.

And through it all, the man didn't stir. "Oz, grab the extra blankets from the car. Oh and we still need that wood."

"On it," Oz said hurrying for the door.

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Frowning down at the man, Archie said, "We've got to get those wet clothes off of him."

While Kelly knew that was correct, she was hesitant to undress a strange man in front of her boys. "Boots and jacket only. And then we need to get the fire burning hotter and keep it hot until the cops arrive to take him."

Reaching down, Kelly pulled the man up as Archie unzipped his jacket and started to pull it off. Then together, they carefully lowered him back down. She undid one boot while Archie did the other. She was relieved to see his socks looked dry. Good.

His rolled-up sleeves revealed a striking silver bracelet on his wrist, catching the flickering light of the fireplace. It was an intriguing piece, with evenly spaced dark green glass rectangles embedded in its sleek design. The craftsmanship felt purposeful, as though it served more than just an ornamental function. For a moment, it looked like the green glass glowed. When she blinked, though, it was gone.

Must have been a reflection of the lights.

Flicking a glance at his face, she raised her eyebrows. It was strange. He didn't strike her as a jewelry guy. He had that rugged, square-jawed movie star look. He had to be about her age and with his jacket off, he wore a thermal shirt that clung to his chest. Yup, the guy was definitely in good shape.

*And not something I should be noticing,* she chastised herself. The poor guy was hypothermic and here she was, checking him out. Of course, it had been a while.

After dropping her and Archie's jackets and gear by the door, her gaze was drawn back to the bracelet. Just above it was a tattoo: two dark, parallel black lines crossed the front of his wrist.

"Hey the dog's collar matches," Archie said.

Glancing over her shoulder, Kelly's eyebrows rose. Archie was right. The dog's collar was a larger version of the bracelet.

A jewelry guy who also liked to match his dog. Not at all what she would have thought. She couldn't help but imagine the two of them in matching flannel pajamas. "Twinsies," she murmured.

"Huh?" Archie asked.

"Nothing, nothing." She tugged on Archie's arm pulling him back

from the futon. As soon as they were out of the way, the dog took their place. She placed her head on the edge of the futon with a little whine.

Unable to resist, Kelly rubbed the dog's back. "It's okay, girl. We're going to help your dad as best we can." She turned to Oz. "Go grab a towel. We'll dry off the dog."

Turning back to study the man as Archie headed to the bathroom, Kelly couldn't help but note his high cheekbones and the smoothness of his skin. He looked like he'd just stepped off a calendar. *Pretend you didn't notice*, she told herself.

But then she frowned. He was wearing all black. Why would he be dressed like that in the woods? Shouldn't he be wearing a reflective vest or at least light colors?

Archie returned with a towel and knelt next to the dog, as he began to dry her off. The dog stayed perfectly still, letting him.

Oz reappeared with a stack of wood balanced on top of the crate of blankets.

"Gee, that was fast," Kelly grumbled.

He just grinned at her before he placed the crate on the floor and fed the wood to the fire. Grunting, Kelly couldn't help but think that if he had done that earlier, they wouldn't be in this situation. Of course, she immediately felt bad about thinking that. The man would have died out there.

Quickly, she unfurled one of the blankets and tucked it around the man. Finished drying off the dog, Archie grabbed a quilt and did the same. Oz closed over the gate on the fireplace insert. "Wood's in."

Although she knew it couldn't heat up that fast, the place already felt warmer. Nevertheless, she nodded towards the futon. "Let's see if we can get him closer to the fireplace, okay?"

The three of them grabbed the edge of the wooden frame and started to push it across the room.

Oz let out a laugh as the dog reached up with two paws next to him. "Look, she's helping."

"Now what do we do?" Archie asked once they had the futon in position.

Frowning, Kelly still didn't like the pallor of his skin. She grabbed another quilt off the queen bed and tucked it around him.

## ***OPERATION KRINGLE***

"Mom?" Archie asked.

Flicking a glance between her boys and the man, Kelly debated. The man was safe and out of the cold. Part of her thought they should leave. She could just take the boys and go. She could call the cops from the car.

Moving to the window, she glanced out. There was at least five inches of snow on the car. The road situation hadn't changed. Whatever had already been cleared no doubt had iced over. Yeah, they weren't going anywhere tonight.

Turning, both her boys watched her intently, as did the dog.

"Mom?" Oz was now the one who asked.

"Let's get some help." She pulled out her phone and dialed 911.

## **CHAPTER 9**

SHE GOT A BUSY SIGNAL.

Mouth falling open Kelly stared down at her phone. A busy signal rang out from the other side of the phone. 911 could be busy? She didn't think that was possible.

It took four more tries before she finally reached a harried, female dispatcher. "911. What's your emergency?"

Staring at the man on the couch, she said, "I-I found a man in the snow just outside my cabin."

"Is he breathing?" the dispatcher asked, sounding surprisingly unconcerned.

"Um, yes?"

"Is he still out there?"

"No. We brought him inside. He's on my couch."

"Is he in distress?"

Leaning over the man, she noted that his color seemed a little better. "Um, he's unconscious but seems to be breathing okay, and his lips aren't quite as blue as they were before."

"Does he have any injuries?" the dispatcher inquired, her tone becoming a little annoyed.

"Um, nothing obvious."

"Look, we have cars stranded in the snow all over the place. A few

## **OPERATION KRINGLE**

people have had heart attacks while going out to shovel snow. I'll put you on the list, but I have to warn you, there are a lot of people ahead of you. Unless, of course, you think you're in mortal danger?"

The woman's tone made it clear she was hoping the answer was no. It was on the tip of Kelly's tongue to lie, but immediately she thought of all the other people who needed serious help. Right now, she and the boys were more inconvenienced than in danger.

With the weather, emergency crews had to be run ragged. And unless the guy took a serious turn for the worse . . . "No, I think he's okay for now."

"Good. Keep him warm and if anything changes, call us back immediately. Otherwise an officer will be dispatched when they become available. But I have to warn you, it probably won't be until morning."

Kelly's jaw dropped open. "Morning? I don't know this guy."

"Then I suggest you keep an eye on him. An officer will be dispatched as soon as they are available." The dispatcher disconnected the call.

Once again, Kelly found herself staring at the phone.

"What did they say?" Oz asked.

Pulling her gaze from her phone she looked at her youngest, who seemed to have forgotten that he was mad at her. "It looks like we have some guests for the night."

Grinning, Oz stepped toward the futon. "Awesome. I'll stay down here."

Taking her son's shoulders, she turned him around. "Oh no you won't. You two are sleeping up in the loft. I'll stay up and keep an eye on our guest."

"Mom, you fall asleep by 9:30 every night," Archie responded, looking doubtful.

He wasn't wrong. Nevertheless, she placed her hands on her hips, using her best Mom tone. "Hey, I'm still the mom. Let's eat, and then everyone's having an early night."

Oz raised his eyebrows.

"Except me," she said quickly. "I'll be staying up."

Within an hour, they'd reheated the Chinese and had a fast meal.

Kelly had given some to the dog, who'd gulped it down. The conversation had been light and easy, as they shared memories of past trips to the cabin. All of the earlier unhappiness seemed to have disappeared with the arrival of their guests.

With some regret, she chased the boys upstairs. It had been nice and cozy, even with the unconscious man on the couch.

Now she sat in the club chair she'd pulled over near the loft stairs. She had a log leaning against the side, her phone on the armrest, and a blanket over her lap. She didn't know what the night would bring, but she was as ready as she could be.

Taking a sip of coffee, she blew out a breath. *Okay. An all nighter.*

She hadn't done one since college. But she was determined. Patting the log, she nodded. *I've got this.*



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