

Chapter 1

Red Nelson hadn't counted on crosswinds. Panther Gorge's meadow looked so neat on the map, but the small plane bucked as it descended between the jagged cliffs and craggy trees on either side, way too close to the ground to be stable. Before she could stall or be dashed against the rocks, she angled the nose of the Piper Cub towards the meadow's center and came in deliberately steep and fast. Wind outside the cockpit keened past her ears as the ground rushed up, and for a moment her fingers gripped the yoke harder, twitched towards the throttle, to pull up, abandon the plan.

But she knew it was too late to change her mind.

Her father talked about crashes. How a stunt flyer could anticipate it, the point where everything was out of the pilot's hands and the plane took over. Red wondered what her dad did when the ground rushed up too fast or a spin started that couldn't be stopped. Who did he pray to? Her mind frantically scanned the short list of prayer-worthy souls she could call on—her desperately ill mother? The sister she hadn't ever met? Nobody could rescue her, that was clear. She braced herself, as

she always did, and pulled back. Felt icy sweat bathe her arms, nausea churn her gut. Then the concussion of the impact, a small machine meeting rocky ground at high speed, vibrating from the soles of her boots to the palms of her hands.

The cockpit swung crazily as the tiny aircraft slammed down, and the metal cocoon around her shuddered, thrusting her forward in her seat. The plane bounced twice, catching a clutch of tree branches, and Red felt the tearing sound as it skidded to a stop. The engine coughed only once before it died.

Then all was quiet.

Red sat, breathing hard. She ached in a hundred places, but she hadn't hit her head, a damn miracle. She'd heard the crunch of landing gear. When she peered out the tiny window into the twilight air, she saw the rocks—boulders almost—scattered across the field. Around her spread a stark wilderness such as she'd never seen, a northern wilderness: the narrow meadow lay dusky and deserted, except for the snaking river that had guided her in. She remembered how it had caught the sunset from the air, glittering like stage lights. The High Peaks of the Adirondacks loomed darkly over her, and she thought of their names, learned from the map: Giant, Mount Marcy, Algonquin. All watching her, huge masses against the last light.

She released her fingers from the yoke, her whole body shaking from the effort of hours in the air, and patted the Piper's silent black dials. Twelve hours had passed. More. She couldn't see past the blur of images she'd run with. They'd have found Vern by now, her sweet ex-husband's face pressed to the green carpet of the backstage dressing room. The thin slip of saliva near his bruised mouth, the huge hands unnaturally

still. Soon someone would discover her car at the airport parking lot, and Vern's new plane missing.

But nobody would know for certain where she was. Her mother would never tell. Not even a word to Alex, the woman Red had loved for years.

The gust of her sad exhale briefly fogged the plane's windshield. She shivered once, violently, lonelier than she'd ever been. She'd need to find safe transport—if she could be that lucky. Until then, food and shelter, warmer clothes than the nylon cargo pants and hoodie grabbed from backstage. Much colder here than back home in North Carolina; probably dip to twenty degrees by midnight. Her pilot's jacket hung behind the cockpit seat, and she reached for it, feeling the stiffness in her forearms from gripping the yoke. She pulled on the jacket, then searched under the seat for the spare wool hat and extra gloves she'd stashed at one of her fuel stops.

Only last night, she'd been lauded on Twitter, rocking a sold-out club in Charlotte, grinning at Alex across the stage. Tonight, they should be playing Nashville.

Instead, she sat in the middle of the Adirondacks, in a busted plane, following her dying mother's wish. Running from her own life.

Red could smell gasoline as soon as she crawled out of the cockpit into the cold night air. She clicked on her flashlight and got to work examining the plane. The landing gear, nestled against one of the bigger boulders, was completely crushed. Even if she could get help repairing it—and where would that happen?—it was doubtful the Piper could manage a takeoff from the meadow. Vern loved this new plane, mortgaged his soul for it, but he wouldn't care now. She swallowed at that,

then scolded herself. Easing her way around the wings and fuselage in the half dark, she carefully felt for damage there too, sucking in her breath as her hand encountered a jagged tear. Her fingers came away wet.

She knew what happened next. Both her parents were pilots, both full of stories about dangers of explosion. How fragile an aircraft could be, how buoyancy in the air made it vulnerable on the ground. Too soon, if her rotten luck continued, fuel would stream through the opening, saturating the field around the plane. Worse if there was a short. And, sure enough, as Red reached back into the cockpit, scrambling for her gear, the landing and avionics panel lights flickered.

Cursing, she slammed the cockpit door and angled her flashlight into the dark field, stepping carefully until she stood a safe distance from the aircraft.

The October moon had not yet risen. Wind was calmer now, but it still blew in clouds, carrying the scent of rain and the remnants of the squall she'd passed through before landing. A cold gust scoured her cheeks. An electrical short could ignite that gasoline in a heartbeat. The little fires she'd set as a teenager with her friend Billy, just for fun, became dangerous sometimes—because Billy liked danger—but never deadly. Except the one that blazed out of control, that burned the building when she was fifteen, Billy sixteen. She couldn't forget that one. She remembered watching it, standing so close she felt the hair on her bare arms crackle.

As if it read her thoughts, there came the first whoosh of flame, a burst of brightness blooming beneath the engine compartment. And despite herself, despite the danger she knew—she did!—Red clicked off her flashlight for an instant, no more. Just to watch, like she had as a teenager, to become

transfixed by how fire illuminated everything: the field, the trees, the sleeves of her jacket.

Soon the smoke billowed, black and noxious, and she shook herself from the trance. *Don't be a fool*, she told herself. *Git*.

She hoisted her backpack and ran across the field, her long red hair flying behind her. The heavy load bounced against one shoulder, making her unsteady. Stupid not to take a minute to strap the pack on properly, but no time to fix it. Panic filled her now; every second counted. She hadn't figured on the rocks near the river, their surfaces grown slippery with evening dew. She hopped from stone to stone as carefully as she could, aware of the growing heat of the fire on her back, how it lit up the woods ahead of her.

"Go, go," she chanted, a fast-beat song to will her sturdy boots to find footing.

North Carolina caught plenty an unwary pilot in its sudden coastal storms. Red's father taught her how to smell them coming, fly to their edge but not beyond. All part of her stunt training. Yankee weather had given her no such warning. She'd been taken by surprise twenty air minutes before she reached her chosen landing field, remote enough to hide a small plane, all Google-mapped during the flight. Descending below the weather, she saw Panther as a good alternative, a welcoming hole in the mountainous landscape, a place to wait out the storm. Another grave mistake to add to her tally.

Too many of them now. Almost to the riverbank, she heard the explosion. A sudden twist to look back, to be sure she was far enough away, and her foot slipped on a rock, almost as if the force of the blast pushed her. She fell, crashing against a granite boulder. The backpack fell too, its contents scattering.

A sharp pain shot from her left ankle, and in the intense fire-light she saw the new rip in her pants near the calf. Then a small patch of dark blood. But the noise of the fire frightened her more than any wound. In seconds, the few flames had become an inferno.

She scrambled in the half-light for her belongings, gathering them as fast as she could, and hefted the pack back onto her shoulder. Her left ankle throbbed. A serious sprain, maybe a break, but no time to tend to that either. She pushed herself to a stand and hopped down the muddy bank to the river's gravel edge.

The field around the Piper burned fast and hot with the twilight winds—fat, fiery devils chased each other to the trees that lined the riverbank. If they caught, they could torch out, sending sparks hundreds of feet high—something else she'd learned from her family's flying stories, their Search & Rescue adventures. All those stories scared her now. The shadowed rush of river in front of her offered a few stepping stones, and she tried to keep her weight light on her injured foot as she left the gravel and entered the water. But with each step, the pain almost toppled her, and the depth of the river threatened to sweep her off her feet. Finally, she gained the opposite bank where she let herself huddle on a flat rock to catch her breath. One finger touched to her aching leg came away wet and sticky. She searched in her backpack for a spare T-shirt and eased up her pant leg, then wrapped the shirt around the gash and secured it with a rough knot.

Shivering, she tried to remember her life just eight hours ago. Taking off from the small airport near Charlotte, signing Vern's name to the flight plan, hearing her mother's gravelly voice through the phone relaying the coordinates of her half

sister's home in the Adirondack mountains. "Blood tells, my darling," her mother promised. "Kate will take care of you. No one will suspect you're there. Not even Billy Cotton."

But Kate didn't know Red existed. And Billy, still in prison, evidently had arms long enough to reach Vern, to do such unspeakable things to him. Why wouldn't he find her wherever she ran? She shouldn't have escaped the attack backstage. But she had. And what awaited her now?

Smoke from the burning plane filled the air, clouding her view of the meadow behind her. She coughed hard, the poisonous taste almost gagging her, and sank her sleeve into the river to press to her mouth and nose. As her head cleared, another realization hit her. The riverbank she'd just climbed down, her boots uneven in mud—she had left prints. Probably all over the edge. "Go carefully, my darling," her mother had whispered. "Leave no trace." Fool that she was, she'd practically carved her name in the rocks of this remote meadow. She angled her flashlight across the bank and saw one full print in the mud near the gravel. In her rush to escape the fire, she'd stepped off the rocks and into the soft muck.

Dismayed, she stared at it. Maybe she could rest here until the fire died down, then slip back, somehow erase the print. But no. There were probably more. Too chancy to delay any longer, to risk discovery by local searchers—sure to be onsite by daylight, if she could believe her mom—soon followed by National Transportation Safety Board investigators and police. Better to press on. Maybe any search dogs would lose her trail if she kept to the shallows of the river's edge. The map said she'd need to follow the river through the forest, climb past Giant Mountain's false summit, then head down to the state road, about nine miles total. Thunder

rumbled above her, the mountains echoing, and Red felt the first raindrops.

“Get going,” she told herself. But when she set the sole of her left boot on the ground, pain from her ankle shot clear to her hip.

A thick branch lay near the black water. She grabbed it. Held under her arm, it barely supported her weight. She moved down the riverbed as carefully and quickly as she could. Behind her, the wreckage of the Piper—and the life she’d left—blazed in the dark.