

FORTUNE FALLS BOOK 1

FORTUNE FALLS



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Fortune Falls

The Chronicles of Jess Maddox, Volume 1

Lou Vane

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I'm haunted by the memory of a girl. A girl who loved and was loved, who dreamed of building a better world and being part of it. I'm haunted by the memory of the girl we sacrificed.

That girl was me.

Chapter 1

I LOSE COUNT OF THE number of times I fall as I skid my way down the muddy track, hurrying to catch up. As the bank drops steeply in front of me, I hesitate, then grab hold of a tree branch, using it to slow my descent until my feet wedge safely against a tree root.

I let go of the branch and take another step. Both feet immediately slide in front of me, throwing me off balance. My arms flail and I overcompensate, throwing myself backwards and land heavily on the ground with a thud ... again.

This is ridiculous! I kick at an exposed tree root. *We aren't really going to continue in this weather, are we?*

I look further down the slope and see him waiting for me. His face turned away as he strains to hear the others, who I can just make out through the trees near the top of the waterfall. They're yelling to him, but I can't hear what they're saying. Their voices drowned out by the river echoing off the gorge walls and the rain pounding on the hood of my jacket.

Suddenly they begin to run towards us.

"What's going on?" I yell above the roar of the river, now so loud I can feel it.

He spins around, eyes wide with panic. "RUN!" he screams as he scrambles back up the slope towards me. "JESS! ... RUUUN!"

His panic spurs me into action. I roll onto my knees so I'm now facing uphill, frantically grabbing at branches and tree roots, anything that will help to pull myself up. Finally, I'm standing, but my feet can't get traction as the earth slides beneath me. The roar continues to increase until it's deafening ... terrifying. I *am* terrified, but I have no idea what of. All I know is that I need to get away from whatever it is they're running from.

The ground shakes, making the mud flow faster, the thunder in my ears reaching a crescendo as I make agonisingly slow progress back up the slope.

And then, almost as quickly as it starts ... it stops. The ground stops shaking, the noise returning to the low rumble of the river.

I collapse to the ground, panting, and roll over to look back down the slope, expecting to see the others coming up the trail behind me. But the shock of what I see takes my breath away.

They're gone, all of them.

But not *just* them ... *everything* is gone. The trees, the trail, the hillside we'd just been walking on. It's all gone.

My hands begin to shake, then my whole body. But this time it isn't the ground that's shaking, it's all me. I try to slow my breathing, to push down the panic. Willing myself to keep it under control.

Come on brain, stay with me. Don't abandon me now.

I shuffle to a nearby tree, clinging to it for protection in the hope that it will stop me from disappearing too. I remove my backpack and take the coil of rope slung across my shoulder and loop it around the tree. My hands fumble as I tie the rope in place and then attach it to my climbing harness. Only then can I breathe.

You're okay. You can't fall now.

I slump against the tree, blinking back tears as I stare at the spot where I'd been standing moments earlier. My entire body shudders as I realise what has happened.

The whole hillside has given way, crashing through the gorge below. The force of its power gouging away rock, so that the river that once flowed over the cliff in a waterfall has now been rerouted around it as well.

This can't be real ... This can't be happening.

My lungs draw ragged breaths as I lower myself onto my stomach and begin to crawl down what's left of the slope. I let the rope out slowly, making sure it stays taut in case the ground crumples out from beneath me. I force myself to go as far as I can until I reach the edge.

I scan the chasm, searching for signs of my friends ... hoping they've somehow survived and are waiting to be rescued. But I can't see anyone. There's nothing but mud and broken trees and rocks and more mud.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no ...”

I feel the panic begin to rise again. I try to hold it down but I can't, my body shaking uncontrollably.

They're all gone.

Chapter 2

Two weeks earlier

I LOOK BACK AT THE man grumbling impatiently behind me and then to the queue of people that's formed behind him. Anxious heads search for the source of the noise growing in intensity somewhere out of sight. Everyone's on edge. Trapped with no means of escape. They know what's coming. We all do. And we're powerless to stop it.

No one can stop a crying baby.

I hear an exasperated huff and switch my gaze back to the man again. He's staring ... no, he's glowering at me. *Seriously?* I frown at him. *What's your problem? It's not as if your seat's going anywhere.*

I glance down at his empty hands—there's not a bag in sight. He's still glaring at me when I look back up at his sour face. *I guess you carry your baggage on the inside, don't you, pal?* I shake my head sympathetically and then return my attention to the young man, still hunched over his phone in the aisle seat.

"Excuse me ..." I repeat, adding a gentle tap on his shoulder this time.

Finally, he looks up, taking off his headphones, and I realise he's younger than I thought. Probably not much older than me.

"Hi. Sorry. I've got the window seat."

"Oh, sure," he says, undoing his seatbelt.

As the boy begins to stand, Mr. Impatient decides he can't possibly wait fifteen more seconds and tries to push past, rudely thrusting me forward. I fling out my hands to stop myself falling, but my hands shoot straight past the headrest and I fall ... chest first ... into the boy's upturned face.

"Oh my god!" I yelp as he lets out a smothered grunt, trying to push me off him.

I flounder against him, struggling to untangle myself. I'm completely mortified, certain *nothing* could be more embarrassing ... but I couldn't be *more* wrong. Because as we part, so does my blouse, opening all the way to my waist.

"Oh my god!" I shriek even louder, frantically doing up the buttons. "I'm so sorry!"

"It's fine, really." He laughs as he steps out into the aisle. "You don't need to apologise, seriously."

I cringe an embarrassed half smile, too mortified to make eye contact, and slide past him to my seat. From the corner of my eye, I see him looking at me but I'm still too flustered to look back, and begin rummaging in my bag for my phone.

Calm down, Jess, it's fine. You don't know him. He'll go back to looking at his phone in a second and you can just forget this ever happened.

I pull out my headphones, wishing they're noise-cancelling ones, as the child's wailing grows louder, and look up to see a frazzled woman carrying three bags and a toddler. I forget my own embarrassment as I watch her strained face shuffle slowly towards me, grimacing apologetically as she makes her way down the plane. She pauses at the row in front of me and I hold my breath, willing her to keep going, then let out a loud sigh when she begins to usher her children into the seats. *Dammit!*

"Hi, I'm Matt." I almost don't hear him over the ear-splitting screams.

I look over at the boy I smothered and he immediately stretches his hand across the empty middle seat. His brown eyes twinkle cheekily as he grins at me and then yells above the crying, "I figure we should at least be on a first name basis after that."

"It's nice to meet you, Matt," I yell back, shaking his hand. "I'm Jess."

"Nice to meet you too, Jess," he shouts as the wailing suddenly stops. Heads whip around to look in our direction and we both burst out laughing as Matt grimaces and tries to shrink out of sight. The air hostess standing at the row in front of us, pauses to give us a wary look and then returns to her conversation with the mother.

“You can’t be serious!” The mother’s voice rises in distress. “We *confirmed* it would be okay for one of the twins to sit on my lap when we made the booking. I’ve got *three* kids and there’s only one of me. What are you suggesting I do?”

Matt and I exchange a baffled look and then watch the air hostess wave to one of her colleagues further up the plane. As the colleague begins to walk down the aisle, Matt leans forward to get the mother’s attention. “I’d be happy to help if I can. There’s a spare seat right here beside me. We’d be happy to help, wouldn’t we?”

Are you completely insane?

I manage to close my gaping mouth before he turns to look at me. He nods enthusiastically at me with smiley eyes and my head automatically starts to nod back ... and before I can stop myself, my mouth opens and I say, “Yeah sure, if you think one of them would be okay to sit with us?”

Oh my god, Jess! What are you doing!?

The mother speaks to the child sitting beside her and then turns to look at us. “That would be wonderful, thank you,” she says, lifting the boy into the aisle and leading him around to us. “This is Charlie.”

“Hi, Charlie. I’m Matt, and this is Jess. Would you like to come and sit with us?”

Charlie gives a nod, his face breaking into a smile. Matt lifts him to stand on the seat between us where he plops down with a giggle.

“How old are you Charlie?” Matt asks as he puts on Charlie’s seat belt.

“Four and a half. How old are you?”

“Oh, I’m ancient ... I’m 17 and a half.” He nods seriously.

Knew he was my age.

As Charlie wriggles excitedly in his seat, I begin to wonder how we’re going to keep him entertained for the next couple of hours when Matt pulls out his phone and starts showing Charlie a game. Charlie immediately quietens and begins swiping at the screen, and I feel my apprehension easing as Matt patiently teaches him how to play.

“You’re really good with kids,” I say as Matt helps Charlie put on his headphones.

“I’ve just had a lot of practice, I guess. I come from a pretty big family.” He shrugs. “There’s six of us, and I’m the oldest. My youngest sister isn’t much older than Charlie here.”

“Wow, that is a big family. Your parents aren’t Catholic by any chance?”

“Woah, stereotype much! ... But yeah.” He rolls his eyes at me. “I guess you’d call them non-practicing.”

“Non-practicing ... contraception? ’Cos obviously they’ve been practicing the sex part just fine.” I grin at him.

His face contorts into a grimace. “You *do* realise that’s my parents you’re talking about.”

Heat instantly rushes to my face, humiliated at my failed attempt to be witty. *How could I say that to someone I’ve only just met?*

“Sorry ... I didn’t mean to offend.” I look at him apologetically and then notice his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Lucky for you it takes a bit more than that to offend me ... Like trying to smother me with your bosom for instance. But hey, you’ve already done that and I’m still talking to you.” He chuckles.

“Bosom!” Now it’s my turn to grimace. *Who uses that word?* I feel my face reddening again and decide a change of subject is urgently needed. “It must be nice having so many brothers and sisters.”

“Yeah, most of the time. But being the eldest isn’t always that great though. I have to spend a lot of time helping out with the younger ones. Sometimes I wish I could just do my own thing like my friends do. What about you, do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No, it’s just me. I’ve always wanted a sister though. Maybe you could share one of yours?”

“How about a brother? I’m kinda fond of my sisters.” He grins.

“I’ve got two children’s meals and a vegetarian meal,” the air hostess interrupts.

“The vegetarian meal is mine,” Matt says, taking the meal. “And obviously the children’s meals are for these two kids.”

I screw up my nose at him as I lower Charlie’s tray table for Matt to place the meal on.

“Let’s see what you’ve got to eat.” Matt begins to take the cover off Charlie’s food, clearly in the habit of taking care of his brothers and sisters.

I find myself smiling at him, impressed by his kindness towards this little boy and his mother when it hadn’t even crossed my mind to help them. *I wonder how many guys our age would do this? Maybe they would and it’s just me who’s selfish.* I feel embarrassed as I realise there’s probably a big difference between me and people like Matt, and the sudden insight doesn’t sit comfortably.

“I can help Charlie while you eat your meal if you like? You can enjoy not having to look after someone else for a change.”

“Are you sure?” Matt raises his eyebrows at me as I nod. “Well, you know where I am if you need me. Good luck.”

I give him a quizzical look. *What does that mean?*

“What do you want to eat first, Charlie?” I lift the edge of the bread to see what’s inside. “Looks like you’ve got a ham and cheese sandwich.”

“Don’t like cheese.”

“Oh, that’s okay. We can just take the cheese out and then it’s a ham sandwich,” I say perkily. *No big deal, I’ve got this.*

“Don’t like ham.”

Are you kidding me? I catch a glimpse of Matt watching me out of the corner of my eye.

“Okay ... how about we take the ham out too? You like bread don’t you?”

“Mm-hmm. Bread’s okay.”

“Great, well here’s a yummy *bread* sandwich for you.”

Matt snorts into his drink, and then begins to cough.

“You okay?” I give Matt a sideways look.

“Yeah ... I’m fine,” he says between coughs.

I pick up a container of strawberry yogurt, as Matt returns to his food. “I bet you like yogurt though, don’t you?”

“You’ve got to be careful—” Matt starts to warn as I pull back the lid of the yogurt and it explodes out of the container. Charlie erupts into laughter.

“Why would they serve something that would explode!?” I sputter, looking down at my shirt, now covered in splotches of pink yogurt.

“Entertainment value?” Matt cringes, holding out a paper napkin to me.

I take the napkin and begin to daub the yogurt from my face and top, feeling like a complete idiot. I feel like I’ve done nothing but embarrass myself since I met Matt. It’s just been one blunder after another. And although I know I’ll probably never see him again, I like this handsome, smiley boy and I want him to like me too. But at this rate he’s going to think I’m a complete clown.

Matt takes over looking after Charlie so I can eat, and I’m relieved to have a few moments where I’m not falling or spilling food or saying something stupid. By the time Charlie’s mother hands back a small bag of toys for Charlie to play with, I’m determined to show Matt that I’m actually capable of doing something without making an idiot of myself. And yes, maybe it’s because I want Matt to like me, but it’s *also* because I want to prove to myself that I’m not as selfish as I suspect I am.

I offer to play with Charlie as he pulls toy cars from the bag, but it isn’t long before I realise it isn’t helping to dispel my goofball image. I try not to feel self-conscious as Matt grins at me fumbling my way through Charlie’s games, vrooming the cars over his table and mine. That is, until Charlie performs a supersized crash and flings his car directly into the side of my face. My hand jerks protectively to my cheek as I try not to react, not wanting to let on how much it hurts.

“Bet you never realised a four-year old could be so dangerous,” Matt says.

I gingerly touch my cheek bone and feel a hot raised welt and realise the final remnants of dignity I’d been hoping to salvage are now completely in tatters.

“Yeah, that’s going to leave a bruise.” Matt cringes sympathetically.

Great. Why today of all days? This is not the first impression I want to be making.

Matt continues to play with Charlie for the rest of the flight, keeping him occupied. He often looks up at me and smiles as they talk, making sure I'm included. Usually, I wouldn't have cared less if I'm included in a conversation with a four-year-old, but Matt makes me want to be a part of it.

"Thank you so much for taking such good care of Charlie." His mother leans over the back of her seat when the seatbelt sign turns off.

"You don't need to thank us. We've had a great time, haven't we Charlie?" Matt ruffles Charlie's hair and then steps into the aisle and opens the overhead compartment. As he hands down the last bag to the mother, he smiles over at me, catching me watching him, and I feel a tingle of excitement run up my spine.

Come on, Jess, you like him. Why don't you give him your number? You know you want to.

... But maybe he's not interested. He'd ask for it, if he wanted it, wouldn't he?

"Let me give you a hand with those." Matt takes some of the mother's bags as she joins the queue moving down the aisle.

Oh. He's going? I can't believe he's leaving without even saying goodbye.

At the last second, Matt calls back over his shoulder to me, "Catch you later, Jess."

I swallow my disappointment and force a smile. "Yeah, sure. Catch you later, Matt." And then he disappears out of sight.

After the aisle clears, I make my way into the airport and scan the busy terminal hoping to see Matt. But there's no sign of him, so I head to the toilets to check out the damage.

I sigh as I see my reflection. *No wonder he didn't want your number, you look a mess!* Not only do I have a red welt on my cheek, my hair and shirt are spattered with yogurt. I lean over the sink and use the tap to rinse the ends of my hair and then dry them with the hand-dryer. I change into a

fresh t-shirt from my bag and take one last look in the mirror. It'll have to do.

I make my way through the bustling airport, following the signs to the baggage claim where I'm supposed to be met by someone from the Institute. My disappointment about Matt begins to disappear, replaced by a growing feeling of anticipation as I get closer to the meeting place. I've been looking forward to today since I received my acceptance letter from the Youth Leadership Programme three months ago, and now it's finally here.

I know that in the next few hours I'm going to meet people who will change my life forever. This programme isn't just about teaching us how to become better leaders, it's about making friendships and connections that will last a lifetime in the hope that we'll work together to make the world a better place.

"Naïve idealism," my dad had said to me when I told him I got accepted into the programme. I was floored by his response. He knew how much getting into this course had meant to me. He knew that I lay awake at night worrying about the kind of future that's in store for us. Yet he still didn't understand why I felt the need to do something, to be part of the solution.

"I can't sit back and watch as our world continues to be let down by its leaders," I replied. "Change needs to happen now, and at this rate it's going to be up to my generation to do it. I want to be a part of that."

"I agree, honey, and I'm proud of you for wanting to be part of it." My mum hugged me. "And maybe it is naïve idealism." She gave my dad a pointed look. "But that's exactly what makes the potential for change possible."

I find myself smiling at the memory of Mum's words as I ride the escalator to the baggage claim. I scan the line of people holding placards at the bottom until I get to a man holding two signs, one saying 'Priya Amin' and another saying 'Jessica Maddox'.

I step off the escalator and walk over to the man, fixing the most confident smile I can muster, and hold out my hand. "Hi, I'm Jess."

“Hi, Jess, I’m Marley. How was your flight?” He shakes my hand, returning my smile.

“Surprisingly good, actually!”

He gives me a strange look as though my response was unusual. I guess it was a little strange, but meeting Matt *had* made it a surprisingly good flight. Not that I can tell him that though.

“The um, view ... it was incredible. I’ve never seen such huge mountains before, they’re amazing.”

Marley nods. “They certainly are. I prefer to see my mountains from the ground though. I’m not really a fan of flying, myself.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Can make your arms tired. Better to let the plane do it.”

Marley doesn’t seem to appreciate my joke, but at least someone does, as I hear laughter burst out behind me. I turn to see who it is and my stomach cartwheels.

Chapter 3

“HEY! I THOUGHT YOU’D left already.”

“No, not yet, just getting my bag,” Matt says, looking down at the small wheelie bag at his side.

“I’m so glad to catch you. I didn’t think I was going to get the chance to say goodbye properly. I was thinking ... I don’t know if you’re interested, but I was wondering if you—”

“Looks like you two already know each other?” Marley interrupts.

“Oh, yeah, we go way back. We’re *bosom* buddies, aren’t we, Jess?” His eyes twinkle mischievously.

Laughter explodes out of me, taking us both by surprise. “Yeah, we’re *breast* mates,” I manage to reply between fits of giggles.

“Oh, nice one!” Matt slaps me on the back, laughing.

Marley is looking at us like we’re completely mad.

“We met on the flight,” Matt explains as we try to stop laughing. “Bit of a long story.”

“So, you’re on the leadership camp too?” I ask.

“Yeah, small world, huh? It was a surprise to me when I saw your name too.” He looks towards the signs Marley’s holding.

Marley spreads them out in a fan and I see there’s a third one that I hadn’t noticed before saying ‘Matthew Davidson’.

“What were you saying before?” Matt asks. “Something you thought I might be interested in?”

You can’t exactly give him your number now that you’re on the camp together, can you?

“Hi, I’m Priya, you must be from the Institute.”

I turn to see a girl holding out her hand towards Marley as she introduces herself.

Oh, thank god for Priya!

“Hi, Priya, I’m Marley. This is Jess and Matt, they’re also students on the course.”

“Hi.” She gives us a friendly wave.

“Hi.” I smile back, immediately feeling inadequate. She’s average height, but that’s where our similarities end. Her mahogany hair is so long it reaches the middle of her back and is gorgeous, like everything else about her. I can’t fault anything, and I’m trying hard to find a fault. But she’s picture perfect—her clothes, her body, her skin, her teeth. I catch the subtle scent of jasmine as she flicks her hair over her shoulder. She even smells great.

I look down at my jeans and pull self-consciously at my t-shirt, feeling frumpy and boring in comparison. I push my hair away from my face, wishing I hadn’t just had to dry it in a hand-dryer, cringing as I get a waft of strawberry yogurt.

“Hi, Priya, nice to meet you.” Matt’s face lights up with the same warm smile I saw on the plane. I swallow as I realise that either Matt does this with everyone, or he thinks Priya is just as beautiful as I do.

“Now that we’re all here, we can get going. Have you all got your bags?” Marley asks.

“I checked in mine.” Priya looks uncomfortably at my backpack as I nod in reply, and then gives a nervous laugh. “I know we were told we’d be given everything we need, but I brought some extra things just in case.”

“No problem. Let’s go get it then,” Marley replies, turning towards the baggage carousels.

We watch the bags as they come past on the conveyor belt, waiting for Priya’s to arrive. My mouth drops open when she heaves an enormous hard-shell suitcase off the conveyor and then laughs nervously as she turns to see our stunned faces. “I wasn’t sure what I’d need.”

Her face radiates embarrassment and I feel a surge of joy at knowing she has an imperfection after all. I begin to think of something sarcastic to say and then realise I’m just being nasty for no reason ... other than that she makes *me* feel insecure. But it’s painfully obvious that Priya is feeling pretty

insecure herself right now. “Well, you’ll definitely be prepared for any eventuality.”

Relief flickers in Priya’s eyes and she gives me a shy smile before turning to follow Marley to the exit. Marley leads us to a white van in the carpark, and as soon as he lifts the back door open, Matt offers to help Priya with her suitcase.

“Thanks, Matt, I feel a bit embarrassed that I brought such a big bag.” She stands back to let Matt take it.

I have to stop myself from laughing as Matt grunts in surprise as he lifts it into the back of the van. “Don’t worry about it, happy to help.” He looks down at her and I swear his cheeks look flushed.

Probably just exertion from lifting the suitcase.

“You okay, Matt? You look like you might have pulled something.” I grin as I climb into the van beside Priya, moving over to make room for him on the seat beside me.

Matt ignores me and shuts the door.

“I guess not then,” I say under my breath and watch him climb into the front seat beside Marley instead.

Marley calls back over his shoulder as he begins to drive, “Our base is in Falls River. It’s about an hour’s drive from here. That’s where we’ll meet the others. You guys are the last to get here, the rest of the students arrived this morning.”

“How many students are there?” I ask.

“There were supposed to be twelve in your group, but we received a couple of last-minute cancellations this morning due to illness, so there’s only going to be ten of you.”

“Oh, I thought there’d be more students doing the programme,” Priya says.

“There are. We’re running three courses back-to-back this summer. You’re the second group, and there’s one more after you. You’ll get to meet the students from the other camps later in the year at the leadership conference.”

Matt and Marley continue talking to each other, but it's hard to hear in the back, so I stop trying to listen and move my gaze towards the side window. As I do, I catch Priya looking at me.

"I don't mean to pry," she says shyly. "But I can see that your cheek is looking bruised." When I don't answer her immediately, she continues, "I'm sorry, I should just mind my own business."

"No, it's okay. I just got hit by a kid playing with a toy car on the flight. It's nothing."

"I know this is probably hard to believe given how small my bag is." She smiles wryly. "But I've got some concealer if you want to use it to cover the bruise."

"Really? That'd be great, thank you."

Priya reaches into a small bag on her lap and rummages through her things, and then holds out a tube of concealer and a compact.

"Thanks," I say, taking them, and begin to apply the concealer. "Lucky for me you brought a few extra things."

"I feel so embarrassed about my bag." Priya gives me an uncomfortable smile. "My mum bought it as soon as she heard that my school wanted to nominate me for the leadership programme. She was so excited, so sure my application would be accepted. She wanted to surprise me. It was too late to return it by the time we got the information pack saying what we need to bring. I didn't want to disappoint her. She said it was the nicest bag she'd ever had. So, we packed it with pretty much everything I own."

"Everything?"

"Seriously, my wardrobe is almost empty." She laughs.

"My mum was pretty excited about my nomination too. My Dad, not so much. He thinks this is a waste of time and I should be 'using my summer more productively'."

"Really? What could be more productive than going on a leadership development camp?"

"Summer school."

"You go to school over the summer?"

“Usually. He thinks it will give me a better chance at getting accepted into Ashley. He’s got his heart set on me going there. But I couldn’t do it because of this camp.”

“Oh, you’re going to go to Ashley?” Priya looks impressed.

“That’s where my Dad *wants* me to go ... but I doubt I’ll even get in. My pick would be Spurrier.”

“Me too! How awesome would it be if we ended up going to Spurrier together? Maybe we could be roommates?”

“Maybe.” I can’t help but smile at Priya’s enthusiasm.

“I can’t wait to go to college,” Priya gushes. “I love my mum, but she can be a little suffocating sometimes.” She cringes guiltily.

So, even someone as nice as Priya feels this way. Maybe we aren’t so different after all.

“I know what you mean. For me, it’s my dad though. He has this master plan for me. He doesn’t think I’m mature enough to know what I want.” I shake my head. “If it wasn’t for my mum, I wouldn’t be doing this programme at all. But she said if she’d done what her parents had wanted her to do she would never have become a lawyer. She’d be married to her high school boyfriend and working as a receptionist at her dad’s old accounting firm.”

“I guess it’s hard for some parents to let their babies go.”

“Yeah, but that’s the problem. We aren’t babies anymore.”

We continue our journey for nearly an hour, slowing only as we reach a sign saying ‘Welcome to Falls River’. We enter a small town with a wide main street, continuing until we pull off the road just as we’re about to leave the town limits on the other side. We turn onto a short gravel driveway and pull into a car park in front of a building emblazoned with the words ‘Falls River Guides’ above the entrance.

Marley turns off the engine and looks at us in the rearview mirror. “This is it, guys. Grab your bags and let’s head inside to meet the others.”

“I’ll give you a hand with your suitcase,” Matt says to Priya as we climb out.

I begin to reach into the back of the van to get my backpack, and Matt puts his hand out to stop me. “Allow me, it might be *booby* trapped.”

“Oh, ho, ho.” I laugh sarcastically. “They just keep on coming, don’t they.”

“I was planning that the whole ride here,” he says proudly. “I’ve got more, you know.”

“I don’t doubt it. Maybe save some for later.” I shake my head, laughing.

“Oh, come on, there’s just one more I need to get off my *chest* ...” He cracks up, slapping his leg as I give him an evil look. “I’m done, seriously. There’s no more.” He reaches into the van and hands me my bag, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, and then heaves Priya’s suitcase out and begins to drag it across the gravel to the front door.

We enter a large noisy room filled with people and bags, the walls on one side hidden by racks and blue bins. Most of the students are sitting on bench seats around an enormous wooden table off to one side of the room, but there are others looking at items on the racks.

We add our bags to the pile already in the corner and turn around, aware that the noise in the room has quietened as everyone stops talking to check out the new arrivals. The three of us stand awkwardly, unsure what to do.

Marley walks over to us and hands us each a sticker with our name on it. “Why don’t you grab a seat at the table.”

We make our way over to the table and I smile at no-one in particular as I sit beside Priya at one end and Matt sits across from us.

“Hi, I’m Lily.” A girl with shoulder length blonde hair introduces herself.

“Hi, I’m Jess and this is Priya.” I lean back a little so Lily and Priya can see each other more easily. “And that’s Matt,” I say, looking across the table towards Matt who’s already talking to a boy with a sticker saying ‘Dean’ on it.

“Can I have everyone’s attention?” The room falls silent and everyone turns to face Marley standing at the front of the room. “Can everyone take a seat at the table please?” He waits a moment while the rest of the students join us at the table.

“Oh my!” Lily says, and I follow her gaze back to the front of the room and see that Marley has now been joined by three other people. It takes me a moment to work out what she’s reacted to as I look along the line of new faces.

Standing next to Marley are two sporty looking women wearing red polo tops with an emblem of a river cutting through mountain peaks and it says ‘Falls River Guides’ underneath. But Lily’s eyes are fixed on the man on the other side of them, another of the guides, who is laughing at something they’ve said.

He stands half a head taller than either of the women next to him, with dark brown hair poking teasingly out beneath his cap. His physique is muscular, but not in a weight-lifting kind of way. It looks like it’s as a result of doing his job ... in addition to some very good genes. He looks like he doesn’t care about his appearance, which makes me wonder if it’s deliberate. Maybe he doesn’t know how good he looks, or maybe he knows, but doesn’t care. Either way, Lily’s reaction isn’t *completely* unjustified.

“Welcome to Falls River, everyone, and to the first module of the Youth Leadership Programme. I think I’ve managed to meet most of you by now, but just in case we haven’t met, I’m Marley. I’m a Professor of Psychology at Spurrier University and I’m also an associate with The Global Leadership Institute. This is Spurrier’s first year working with T.G.L.I. and we completed our first camp a couple of days ago. You’ll be relieved to know it went extremely well. We had a lot of fun, with only a few minor injuries and broken bones.”

There’s a spatter of uncomfortable laughter around the table, none of us certain whether he’s joking or not. Marley sees his joke has fallen flat and raises his hands as if to placate an unhappy crowd. “I’m kidding. Of course, there weren’t any injuries. A few bruised egos maybe, but no broken bones.” He smiles reassuringly. “So, as I was saying, this is going to be a great experience for you all. But I want to give this reminder at the outset. This is not a holiday. It is going to be hard work. We’re going to push you to your limits with the intention of helping you to learn about yourselves, to grow,

and eventually become better leaders. But we *will* have a lot of fun along the way too.

“And once we’ve finished getting you out of your comfort zone in the great outdoors, we’ll return here where we’ll spend a couple of days challenging your thinking about what it is to be effective leaders,” Marley continues.

“So, to ensure we safely complete the wilderness adventure component of the programme, we have the very capable team from Falls River Guides accompanying us.” He turns towards the guides standing beside him. “This is Emily.” A woman with blonde hair in a ponytail smiles and waves to the group. “Skye.” The dark-haired woman standing next to her nods and smiles. “And Ethan.”

Ethan, the man Lily still hasn’t taken her eyes from, takes off his cap and jokingly bends his head in a small bow to the group. “Pleased to meet you,” he says, grinning.

The other guides laugh at his formal greeting, and Skye ruffles his hair affectionately when he straightens. His hair sticks up everywhere afterwards, but he doesn’t seem to mind and doesn’t put his cap back on, instead holding it in his hand. He smiles confidently, perfect white teeth standing out brightly against his dark skin.

He knows he has everyone’s attention; his eyes take in each of us, skimming from Priya to me, and then on to Lily and continuing around the table. I glance at Lily and she’s actually blushing, as though this is all for her benefit, and I realise I’m cringing. I know I shouldn’t judge him before I’ve met him, but I’ve met guys like him before. They’re always arrogant jerks with over-inflated egos.

How could you possibly be any different? Shallow, vain, thinking you’re the GOAT. And fine, maybe you are the Greatest Of All Time and I’m just jealous because I’m not. But to me you’re just a regular goat ... A very hot regular goat.

Chapter 4

“I KNOW YOU’RE KEEN to meet the rest of the students,” Emily says. “But before we do that, we need to get our gear ready for tomorrow. We’ll be leaving straight after breakfast. Here’s a list of all the equipment you’re going to need for our trip.” She places a pile of paper on the table in front of Priya. “Once you’ve got everything, place it all together with any personal items you want to include. But remember you have to carry everything you take, so be selective about what you choose. If you have questions, ask any of the guides, we’re all here to help.”

I take one of the equipment lists and hang back to see where everyone goes. Ethan stands by the large blue bins and is quickly surrounded by a group of students. The rest have spread out along the racks, so I make my way there and begin collecting items from the list.

I collect a backpack, waterproof jacket, and pants all with the logo of Falls River Guides on them, polypropylene tops, socks, and gloves. I shove everything into the pack as I go.

“Why do we need all this cold weather gear at this time of year?” I ask Emily who is making sure we get the right sizes.

“It gets pretty cold up at the Lodge at night, even in summer. And the weather can change without much warning any time of year up there, so we need to be prepared just in case.”

“Good to know,” I say, picking up an extra pair of woollen socks and putting them in my pack.

Once I’ve collected everything from the racks, I head over to the bins. Ethan is talking to Lily and a girl with long ebony hair called Holly, and I feel relieved that his attention is taken by them. The girls burst into laughter at something he says, Lily laughing so hard she reaches out to touch Ethan’s arm, needing to steady herself. He looks pleased at their response, clearly enjoying their attention.

Ethan is still talking to the girls as I quickly add the final items to my already full arms. I figure I'm home and clear, and quietly begin to slink away.

"Hi, we haven't met. I'm Ethan."

I freeze, and then slowly turn to look up at him. "Hi."

"And you are?" He tilts his head, raising his eyebrows. His whole face asking the question.

"I'm Jess." It sounds robotic, unfriendly, so I smile awkwardly as a kind of afterthought.

"Is there anything I can help with? Do you think you've got everything?"

I look down at my armload of bags and equipment. "I think I have everything." I look back up at his handsome face and his eyes are focused intently on mine. I feel my ability to speak fading ... *Remember he's a goat, he's just a goat!*

"I'm all goat thanks."

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise, a grin spreading across his face, and I'm instantly mortified. My cheeks flood with heat, so hot it overflows down my neck. I want to disappear, but I have nowhere to hide.

"Good, I mean I'm all good thanks." I laugh uncomfortably, shaking my head.

"You like goats?"

"Not particularly ... Just *kidding* around?" I screw up my nose, cringing at my joke.

Ethan doesn't react for a moment and then lets out a loud bark of laughter. I manage a small laugh, relieved that he thinks I'm just trying to be funny, as Lily and Holly's heads whip around to see what's going on. I don't stick around to see their reaction and quickly turn and escape to join the rest of the group sitting spaced out on the floor with their belongings in front of them.

I pick a spot near Priya and empty the bags from my arms onto the floor and begin to unpack everything I've stashed in the backpack. My eyes widen

as I discover a very sharp looking hunting knife in a sheath inside one of the packs from the bins. *What the heck are we going to need this for?*

“For the next week you’ll be sleeping in tents.” Marley begins to read names off a piece of paper in his hand. Priya nudges me with her elbow, grinning at me when our names are called out together. I smile back, glad that I’m going to be with her too.

“Come and get a tent,” Emily says, standing beside a pile of tent bags on the floor. “Once you’re packed, we’ll have some dinner and then it’s an early night. Wakeup call will be at six tomorrow. We want to be on the road by seven.”

I grab one of the tents from the pile and push it into the bottom of my backpack. It takes up half the pack, but I manage to squeeze everything else in and attach the sleeping mat to the outside.

“Right,” Emily calls out. “If everyone’s ready, please bring your bags and follow me.”

We follow Emily through a door at the back of the room into a windowless passageway, past two doors with signs indicating they’re bathrooms. She opens the door at the opposite end of the passage to reveal a large bunkroom with two-tiered bunks lining the walls of the room. “This is your room for tonight. Pick a bed and leave your packs in here and then head back to the common room. Pizza should be here any second.”

I head to the bunk furthest away from the door and pull my sleeping bag out of my pack, quickly laying it out on the top bunk.

“I’m so glad you chose the top bed,” Priya says as she lays her sleeping bag on the bunkbed beneath mine. “I never sleep well on the top bunk. I always worry I might fall off in my sleep.”

“I’ve done that,” Dean says from the bunk next to us. “Not sure what hurt more, my shoulder or my pride.”

“Maybe you should take the bottom bunk, Jess,” Matt calls after me as I walk towards the bunkroom door. “Your pride couldn’t take much more today, could it?”

“My pride is doing just fine, thank you very much,” I reply haughtily over my shoulder as I head through the doorway, pleased he can’t see the grin on my face.

As soon as I enter the common room, I’m greeted by the mouthwatering smell of pizza. Emily and Marley are sitting at one end of the table and I assume that’s where all the team leaders will go, so I sit next to a boy with large black-rimmed glasses at the other end of the table. We introduce ourselves while we wait for everyone else to be seated. His name is Kalen.

Dean plonks himself onto the bench beside me and Priya sits on his other side. The rest of the spaces quickly begin to fill and I cast my gaze along the faces sitting opposite, making my way up to our end of the table. I look up as a figure steps over the bench to sit opposite me. I swallow in surprise, and return Ethan’s smile.

Before he has a chance to say anything, Matt appears out of nowhere and begins to squeeze himself into some imagined space between Ethan and the girl sitting beside him, forcing them both to move apart to make room for him. And now *he* is the one sitting directly opposite. He doesn’t look up until he opens the lid of the pizza box on the table in front of him, and holds it out to me. “Ladies first.”

“Should probably offer it to Dean then.” I shrug.

Ethan bursts into laughter as Matt raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“Finally, someone shows me the respect I deserve!” Dean reaches into the box and lifts out an enormous piece of pepperoni pizza. He takes a huge bite and then continues to speak with his mouth full, spitting food as he talks. “My parents raised me to be a lady. Thank you for noticing, Jess. Truly, thank you.”

“Any chance you could make room for us?” Lily and Holly are standing at the end of the table, smiling down at Ethan and Kalen. “You guys don’t mind scooching down a bit, do you?” Lily bats her long lashes at them.

“Sure.” Kalen grins back with a smile so big I wonder if his face might break and begins to shuffle towards me until I’m wedged between him and Dean, who hasn’t budged an inch.

“Do I smell or something?” Priya mutters, looking at the big gap beside her.

I look along the table past Dean and Priya and see there’s a large space where Lily and Holly could have easily sat, but instead they’ve chosen to insert themselves at the end of the table next to Ethan and Kalen.

Dean leans closer to Priya and sniffs. “Hmm ... you’re not *that* bad.”

“Oh my god, seriously?” Priya looks horrified as she tries to sniff the armpit of her shirt and when that passes the test, she begins to sniff her hair, trying to find the source.

Dean throws his head back, laughing.

“He’s joking, Priya.” I say. “You smell great ... really great, like jasmine.”

Dean’s head swivels to look at me, eyebrows raised. “Jasmine, huh?” He nods as if making a mental note.

I glance across the table at Lily, who’s now sitting comfortably next to Ethan, looking up at him like the cat that caught the canary as he holds out a box of pizza to her.

“Come on, guys, can you scooch down just a little further?” Holly asks impatiently, not yet able to fit beside Kalen.

“You could always sit on my knee?” Kalen offers, semi-hopeful.

I raise my eyebrows at Dean and Priya. “What do you think?”

“I guess we’re ... *scooching*,” Dean says demurely, and the three of us shuffle along to give Holly the room she needs.

Everyone begins to add pizza to their plates, devouring the contents of the boxes in front of us, but I notice that Matt hasn’t taken any and realise why. I stand and walk down the table to where there are still a couple of unopened boxes and ask Emily if she can see what kind of pizza they contain.

“Do you mind if I take this one?”

Emily hands it up to me and I carry it back to my seat. Before I sit down, I hold the box out to Matt with one hand and wave my other in a flourish. “I think this might be what you’re waiting for, m’lord.”

He opens the box and looks up at me in surprise. “How’d you know?”

“You had the vegetarian meal on the flight.”

“Thanks!” He looks impressed that I’d remembered, and then takes an enormous bite. “Mmm, this is really good.” Matt’s words are barely intelligible, his mouth stuffed full of food. “I was so hungry I was about to start gnawing on Ethan.”

“Would’ve made the whole vegetarian thing a bit of a wasted effort though, wouldn’t it?” Kalen retorts.

“Come on guys, Ethan’s not a piece of meat, you know.” Dean shakes his head in mock disapproval.

“Looks pretty tasty to me.” Lily smiles at Ethan.

I hastily cover my mouth with my hand, trying to prevent my mouthful of food ejecting all over the table as I begin to laugh ... and then start to cough, choking on a crumb I manage to inhale in the process. Dean begins to bat me on the back with the flat of his hand as I continue to cough, my face turning beetroot from a mixture of embarrassment and the effort of coughing. Finally, it subsides after Matt hands me a glass of water.

Lily gives me a contemptuous glare as I chug back its contents, before she angrily looks away. And for the briefest of moments, I feel something close to pity for the goat as I watch him squirm uncomfortably in his seat.

Chapter 5

“HAS EVERYONE CHECKED they’ve got everything from the bunkroom?”
Skye calls out.

“Yes,” a few people reply. And then it dawns on me that I’ve left my sleeping bag on my bed.

I’d woken in the dark, an hour before the wake-up call, and decided to get up and have a shower. Not wanting to risk waking anyone, I’d only taken my backpack with me and intended to return for my sleeping bag later, and then I’d completely forgotten about it.

I don’t say anything and go straight to the bunkroom where I hastily pull the sleeping bag down from the bed and start stuffing it into its bag.

“I was wondering who left that,” Skye says from the doorway.

“Ah, yeah, thanks. I was trying to be quiet when I got up this morning.”

“You need to make sure you look after your kit. *You’re* responsible for your stuff here. We aren’t your parents.”

I feel like I’m being told off. “Yeah, absolutely. I meant to come back for it, I just forgot. Thanks for reminding me.”

I feel embarrassed as I return to the common room, aware that I’m the only one who left something behind. And it wasn’t as if it was something insignificant either. *It was your sleeping bag, for god’s sake. You would’ve been screwed without it.*

“Heads up, everyone,” Emily calls out. “If you are *not* carrying a tent, you need to come and collect a food bag. And when you’re finished doing that, it’s time to take your backpacks to the vehicles.”

I wait for Priya to grab one of the food bags and then we head outside. There’s a Falls River guide standing by each of the three jeeps. Priya and I head over to Emily who helps lift our packs onto the roof rack and then we climb into the vehicle. We make our way to the two seats at the back of the jeep, and Dean and Matt take the row of seats in front of us.

A few minutes later Emily jumps into the driver's seat next to Marley and leans around to look back at us. "Everyone buckled up?"

She receives a chorus of yeses and starts the engine. We're the first vehicle to depart. I look behind us as we pull out of the carpark to see the other vehicles following.

We exit the driveway onto the road and head away from the Falls River township, quickly getting up to speed on the open road. Marley turns his head and calls back, "We've got a four-hour drive ahead of us. If anyone needs to stop, just yell out. Other than that, settle back and enjoy the view."

And that's what we do. Other than Marley and Emily talking in the front, the rest of us sit back and watch the scenery unfolding out the windows.

Green pastures soon give way to dense forest as the road begins to wind its way into a gorge with a river snaking far below us. Marley points out the front window and we lean forward to catch a glimpse of lofty waterfalls cascading over bluffs.

Once we exit the gorge, the land flattens into a plateau, a welcome mat for the mountain range looming ahead. It feels like we're the only ones stupid enough to be out of our beds this early, the road completely empty of traffic other than an occasional farm vehicle. I figure there probably isn't much out here other than farms, but then realise there must be a military base somewhere nearby as a convoy of army trucks streams past us, heading in the opposite direction. I glance out the back window as we turn onto a side road and count seven trucks before the other jeeps following behind us block my view.

A few minutes later we veer off the side road onto a narrow dirt track that branches up the hillside on the right. At first, we're able to look down upon the farmland below, but it isn't long before the road enters the tree line and we can only catch glimpses of the valley beneath, and then the forest becomes so dense that we can't see it at all.

The track is pitted with potholes and Emily's able to avoid many of them at first. But before long she has to slow to a crawl as she navigates the dips and bumps on the road and tries to evade the crevice gouged like a

centreline. Now I see why we're in these jeeps; there's no way a van could get up here. We continue our painfully slow pace up and down steep hills, fording rivers in the ravines in between, until we emerge from the surrounding forest onto a large treeless scar. The remnant of a landslide from years ago.

"It's not much farther until the end of the road," Emily calls back to us as she pulls over. "But this is the only opportunity to see the view down the valley, so we'll have a quick break here for lunch. Don't get too close to the edge, okay guys?"

I understand her warning as soon as I get out of the jeep and see how steeply the mountainside drops off beside us. There'd be no surviving a fall down there. We'd been driving in the trees for so long I hadn't realised how high we'd actually climbed, and I have to strain my eyes to make out the handful of tiny farmhouses hidden amongst the patchwork of fields far below. The valley continues into the distance, narrowing until it finally ends at a wall of mountains that run from north to south. The mountain range forming a natural border with Morrison County hidden on its western flank. I pull my phone from my pocket to take a photo and notice some of the others doing the same.

"Has anyone got any signal?" Priya calls out, lifting her phone above her head and shading her eyes to look at the screen from below.

I glance down at the bars on my phone and I've got nothing. I chime in with the others calling out that I don't, when Skye interrupts, "There's no cell phone coverage up here. We're going to be offline for the next week. No calls, no messages, no social media, no access to the internet." Skye smirks as an unhappy murmur grumbles through the group.

It isn't long before we're told to get back in the jeeps and we're continuing along the road in the trees again. But we've only been driving another few minutes when the jeep slows and then stops for the final time.

Emily turns and smiles. "This is the end of the road folks. Now we walk."

We spill out of the jeeps, eager to begin our trek as the drivers pass our packs down from the roof racks. I haven't even finished putting on my

backpack when two of the guides suddenly jump into their jeeps and begin to drive back down the road.

“They’re taking the jeeps?” I ask.

“Yeah. We leave one vehicle here in case of an emergency, but the others are returning to Base Camp for another guiding trip we’ve got booked,” Emily replies. “They’ll come back and pick us up at the end of camp.”

“Let’s get moving,” Skye calls over her shoulder as she begins walking into the trees. “We’ve got a four-hour hike ahead of us and we want to get to the Lodge before dark.”

Emily gives me a smile and gestures for me to follow. We enter the trees at the end of the road and walk single file along the track in the shade of the high canopy. After a few minutes, I understand why the road ended where it did. The trees open to a ravine, much wider and deeper than the ones we’d forded earlier, the bank dropping steeply to a river raging over rapids below. The only way across is via a narrow swing bridge, suspended across the gorge.

Not long after crossing the bridge we enter a small meadow with a stream lining one side. We cross the clearing and follow the stream, making our way along its shingle bank, occasionally passing small piles of stones as we walk. Emily explains that they’re called *cairns* and are used to mark the path so we know we’re still on the right track. Eventually we re-enter the trees at an entrance marked by a red and yellow striped wooden stake.

“We’ve been doing a lot of work on these paths over the last few years, trying to improve the access to the Lodge since we started bringing groups up here,” Emily explains.

“Isn’t this the national park?” I ask, wondering why a private company is maintaining the track.

“No, this is privately owned land. The owners built the Lodge over fifty years ago, but ended up settling in the valley. About ten years ago they agreed to hire it out to us so we could bring climbing groups up here, and after we started running camps with the Leadership Institute, they gave us exclusive use of it.”

“Do you spend a lot of time up here?” I ask.

“We usually have one week on, one week off, depending on the length of the bookings. And when we’re not working, all the guides are on call with Search and Rescue. We try to make the most of the work over the summer months. There’s not a lot of work here over the winter.”

“What do you do during the winter then?”

“Ethan and some of the other guides are students, so they only do this as a summer job. I originally came here for a single summer, but that was over four years ago. After Skye and I got together we decided we wanted to stay here year-round, so we instruct at one of the ski resorts and work with Search and Rescue over the winter.”

“You teach skiing too?” I ask, amazed. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

“Ha, you give me too much credit. Skye’s the one who can do anything. She trained as a paramedic. She’s the first medical responder on Search and Rescue ops. You should see her—no matter how dire the situation, she has this incredible calmness about her. She always knows what to do.”

“I don’t think I could be like that,” I say.

“Sure, you could. You just need the right training.”

“No, I mean, I don’t think I have the right temperament. I’m not a very calm person. I’m more of a ‘Panic! Panic!’ kind of person.”

“Yeah, sometimes it does just come down to personality. But I think a lot of the time, panic comes from not knowing what to do. Training can help with that though. The more you’re exposed to certain situations, the more prepared you are to deal with them. One thing’s for sure though, panic just makes everything worse. It shuts your brain down so you can’t function. It never helps.”

Until now, I hadn’t really understood how coming into the wilderness could teach us anything about leadership. But this clicked with me. How can you lead if you’re panicking?

I follow behind, Ethan, Dean, and Priya at the front of the group as we continue along the narrow trail for the next few hours. I’ve nearly had enough, my shoulders aching from carrying a heavy pack for so long, when I

notice the path lightening ahead, and then we exit the trees into an enormous clearing. Standing proudly in the middle of that clearing, bathed in the late afternoon sun, is a large log cabin.

Ethan turns to face us. "Welcome to the Lodge!"

Chapter 6

THERE ARE WHOOPS AND cheers as everyone exits the trees, realising we've arrived at our destination. I drop my backpack to the ground and sigh with relief as I stretch my arms and neck, trying to release the tension in my shoulders. I hear groans as others follow suit. Lying on the grass with their arms outstretched, faces basking in the warm sun.

The Lodge sits in the middle of a rectangular-shaped clearing, bordered by trees on all sides. A river emerges from the forest at the top corner of the clearing where it is split in two by a raised embankment. One branch of the river continues along the right side of the clearing and disappears into the trees in the direction we've just come. The second runs along the top end of the clearing opposite us. Trees line the bank on the other side of the stream but don't extend far, ending abruptly at the base of rocky bluffs rising steeply behind them.

"I know you're all tired," Emily calls out. "But there are a couple of things we need to do before we can put our feet up for the day."

Her announcement is met with a chorus of loud groans.

"I'm going to quickly show you where the toilets are and then you need to pitch your tents and get them ready for tonight before it gets dark. Come on."

The guides appear amused at how tired we look as we drag ourselves to our feet. I try to hide how sore I am. I figure they're watching us to see how we cope, and I don't want them to think I can't keep up. I'd considered myself to be pretty fit before coming here, but my body just isn't used to carrying a heavy load for so long.

"Hey, Jess, give us a hand, will you?"

I turn to see Matt and Dean lying on the ground behind me. "You look like you've still got lots of energy," Matt says, holding his hand up towards me.

“What do you think, Priya?” I tilt my head, as if weighing up whether or not to help them. “Maybe we should just leave them here?”

“Come on, Priya, don’t abandon us,” Dean pleads.

Priya laughs, reaching down to take Dean’s upstretched hand. “How could I possibly refuse a face like that?”

I take Matt’s hand, letting out an exaggerated groan as I lean back to pull him up ... which turns out to be surprisingly hard to do. He’s much heavier than I expected.

The four of us run to catch up with the others. Emily shows us where the two eco toilets are located in a small hut further back near the trees behind the Lodge. She then explains that a rain water tank feeds the taps in the Lodge and is safe to drink.

“The Lodge has solar panels and a small battery.” Emily points to the roof of the Lodge. “It’s enough to provide power for lights and for the radio, but not much else. There’s an outlet you can use to charge your phones, but use it during the day.”

She then leads us around to the front of the Lodge. “One last thing before you can relax. You need to get on with setting up your tents for the night. You need to work it out on your own. No help from the guides.”

Priya and I pick up our packs and head over to a spot about halfway between the Lodge and a clump of trees and get to work setting up the tent. I look around when we finish securing the fly and notice that we’re the first ones to get our tent up. We’ve all chosen to pitch our tents close together—safety in numbers, I guess—but Matt and Dean’s is closest to ours.

“I suppose we need to take this to the Lodge.” Priya lifts the bag of food out of her pack.

We head over to the Lodge and climb the stairs to the deck where Marley is leaning against the wooden railing, watching everyone.

“Well done on being the first to finish,” he says. “You can take the food inside. Emily will tell you where to put it.”

We open the door and enter a large rustic room where everything is made of wood—the floors, the walls, the ceiling, the enormous rectangular table

dominating its centre. There's a collection of sofas and armchairs nestled cosily around the open fireplace at one end of room, a blazing fire already crackling in welcome. Emily, Skye, and Ethan are preparing food at the kitchen bench on the opposite side of the room.

"Hi," Priya calls out as we walk in.

Ethan turns and gives us a big smile. "Aha. You owe me ten bucks." He nudges Skye with his elbow.

Skye grumbles back at him, and then looks over at us. "You can put the food on the floor in the storeroom."

We make our way past an open bunkroom door to the storeroom directly behind the kitchen and enter a small room lined with shelves stacked with food and equipment. Priya places our bag of food on the floor and we head back out to the kitchen.

"Is there anything we can help with?" Priya asks.

"You get to put your feet up tonight," Emily replies with a smile. "We'll get you to work tomorrow."

We both say thanks and then head outside to join Marley, who's watching the other students still wrestling with their tents. Slowly they join us on the deck as they finish and we remain outside chatting until Emily appears at the door, announcing dinner's ready.

My mouth starts to water as soon as we enter the Lodge, the smell of cooked garlic and onions heavy in the air along with other scents I can't distinguish other than being, well ... food. The table is already lined with steaming bowls of stew, and I realise I'm absolutely ravenous. Talk is quickly replaced by eating and murmurs of appreciation as we thank the cooks, and hardly another word is spoken until all the bowls have been scraped clean.

After dinner we make our way to the seats by the fire where Marley is already waiting, standing in front of the fireplace, holding a cup of steaming hot chocolate in his hands.

"First of all I wanted to congratulate you all on completing your first day of camp. I'm pleased to see we didn't lose anyone on our way here, which is

always a relief.” He chuckles. “I’ve got one housekeeping item I need to cover tonight and then you’re free for the rest of the evening. From tomorrow morning, you’ll be responsible for the preparation of meals, cleaning, and fire lighting. I’ve made up a roster for the next week. Make sure you check it. It’s *your* responsibility to know what shift you’re on and to turn up on time.” He smiles and clasps his hands in front of him. “That’s all I wanted to cover tonight. We’ll get started with group activities first thing after breakfast tomorrow. Ethan, I think you wanted to suggest an activity for tonight though?”

“Yeah, I do.” Ethan walks over from the kitchen. “There’s a hot spring not far from here and it’s a great way to end the day after a hike. Does anyone want to come?”

Without fail, every one of us raises our hand.

“Great,” he says. “Get your headtorches and towels and we’ll meet outside in five minutes.”

The tiredness I’d been feeling a few minutes earlier vanishes, completely replaced by excitement at the idea of going for a swim in a hot spring in the middle of nowhere. It only takes a few minutes for everyone to get ready and meet back at the steps of the Lodge. We’re all going except Emily and Skye who decide to stay behind.

It’s a clear evening and the moon, although not quite full, is bright enough to make out shapes in the distance once my eyes have the chance to adjust to the dark. Ethan leads the way and we follow behind, using our headlamps to help see the ground more clearly.

At first, I think I’m imagining things when I see lights in the distance. But they aren’t hallucinations, their source revealed when we reach a small wooden bridge at the edge of the clearing. The bridge is lit by solar lights at both ends and the lights continue every few metres along a path on the other side of the stream.

The lights twinkle like fireflies through the branches, a magical fairy trail enticing us to follow. We talk in whispers as we walk, afraid anything louder will break the spell. The path diverts to follow a small side stream that