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(In this scene, early in Chapter 2, Sam has just survived a near Grizzly mauling. He's at the hospital, a little wrung out.)

Rescue Me

~Sneak Peek!~

"I need coffee," Sam said. "Tell Sierra, when she gets here, that I'm in the snack area."

He pushed past them, heading toward the vending machine area, a room at the end of the hallway with coffee, snacks and drinks.

The room included two small tables, chairs, and a coffee machine with fixings on a counter. He didn't bother to turn on the lights—the vending machines glowed with their selections. The late hour pressed through the window.

He fished a buck from his wallet and approached the machine, selected a Mountain Dew. Put the dollar in the feeder.

It spit the money back at him.

He pressed down the edges, fed the money back in.

The dollar slid back out.

He smoothed it on his pants leg, turned it over.

It rolled back out.

"C'mon!" He slammed his hand on the machine, the entire mechanism shaking.

He blew out a breath. Put in the dollar.

It came back.

He inserted it again.

Again, it came back.

His jaw tightened, and a crazy dark fist tightened around his chest.

He pressed the dollar in again.

It churned back out.

He closed his eyes, crumpled it and then with a growl, threw the flimsy paper across the room.

He walked over to the window and put his forehead against the cool surface.

Footsteps in the hallway stopped. The door opened. He didn't turn, even at the voice.

"Sam?"

Shoot, his eyes were blurry, his cheeks wet. He wasn't sure how he'd dismantled quite so quickly, so thoroughly, but he couldn't look at her.

"Are you okay?"

"No." He wasn't sure why he admitted that, why he let his voice ring out, broken, febrile. But he just leaned up, stared out onto the lot, the lonely lights puddling against the blackness. "I'm not."

Silence behind him, but she hadn't left, so he took it as a sign.

Maybe if he let her in, just a little, they might get to that deeper place, stir something back to life . . . "I thought I was going to die tonight."

There, he said it, the words raking through him. "I lay there on the ground, the animal standing over me, roaring and I thought—this is it. I'm dying, right here. And not nicely, either. It was going to hurt."

She took a step toward him.

"And I wasn't ready. I mean, who is, really, but—I thought, *not like this*. Not when—well, my mom is still getting over her cancer. And Pete—" He closed his eyes. "Sometimes I think I hate him. So much it makes me want to scream. I want to throw my fist in his face." He closed his eyes. "I'm so . . . tired. Just tired of hurting and being furious and trying to hold it all together." He opened his eyes, stared out at the dark lot. "The strange thing is, I was lying there and suddenly I thought of my dad—at least I probably did. Because his words came to me—the fact that bears, all large animals, really, have a pretty bad gag reflex. So, I guess my dad saved me." He hadn't thought about that until now.

"And the entire ride in, all I could think of was how much I'd failed him. And not just the night he was lost—but . . ." He ran a thumb and forefinger against his eyes. "Esme, of course. I'll never forgive myself for not finding her."

It felt good to say it, even though she probably knew it.

Except, she said nothing.

"And then there's Pete. My screw up brother who I can't seem to save." Down in the parking lot, a truck pulled under the awning.

"I always thought that, after dad died, I could figure out how to put our lives back together, you know? Take care of Mom, and keep Pete from destroying himself. But—"

"You're just rattled, is all, Sam." The voice came gently through the darkness, the sound of it different, as if she might be overcome by emotion.

Or compassion. Because that was Sierra, almost too willing to help others.

"You were afraid—that's normal."

Her soft tone made him grit his jaw. "I wasn't just afraid, Sierra. I was—I was *terrified*. I was out of control. I *unraveled*. I couldn't even shoot straight, and then I was at the mercy of something that simply wanted to tear me apart."

He shook his head, his stupid eyes burning again. And wasn't that going overboard just a little? Still, his breath shuttered and he felt like an idiot, standing there, weeping in front of his girlfriend.

What was his problem? He'd lived, for Pete's sake.

Maybe, literally, for Pete's sake.

"Sam, I'm—"

"Don't tell anyone. I just need a minute, okay?"

She drew in a breath. "Okay."

"But come here."

She didn't move. And he didn't want to say it, but maybe in the darkness of the room, in this moment only, "Please?"

Then her arms were around him, and she was pressing herself to his back, holding him. "It's okay, Sam. You're not alone. And you're not going to die out there in the woods, mauled by some rabid bear. You're safe."

He didn't know why, but her words reached in, wrapped around him.

So he turned in her arms, put his own around her and pulled her tight against him. Feeling her body, soft, molded to his, fitting so perfectly.

This was the moment he'd wanted for them because holding her like this, he definitely felt some sparks lighting inside.

He closed his eyes, pressed a kiss to her head. Then, felt her hand touch his cheek.

He leaned down, letting her kiss him, his eyes closed.

He just couldn't let her see the darkness there. Not that she didn't know, but it even scared him sometimes.

Her touch was sweet, kind, without the passion he hoped might be building inside her. He made a little noise, curling his arms around her, pulling her closer . . .

And then . . .

Yes. He could feel it, a shift in her touch, a little ardor, unfamiliar but, finally, *yes*.

She was moving in wrapping her arms around his neck, pulling him down to her, deepening her kiss.

He sank into her touch, needing her comfort more than he wanted to admit. She tasted salty, like popcorn, and in his arms, she seemed taller, as if she hadn't changed out of her heels tonight into her converse tennis shoes.

And then he realized he'd been running his fingers through her hair.

Her long hair.

He jerked his head up, stared down into her eyes.

Not Sierra's hazel-green, but . . .

Oh. *No*.

"I'm sorry! You were just so sad, and then—I thought you needed something more than a hug and—"

Willow stopped talking, backing away now, biting her lip.

Sam couldn't breathe.

Willow. His girlfriend's flower-child sister-turned-youth-worker. Willow, with the easy laugh, pretty smile, long chestnut brown hair, hazel-blue eyes. Willow, who was about six years younger than him.

Willow, his girlfriend's kid sister.

"Oh . . ." Sam swallowed, unable to move.

She held up her hands, bumping into the table as she backed away. "Listen—I tried to say something—"

“You tried to *say* something? When? I mean, I realize there wasn’t a lot of time in between me blubbering about my dad, and the part where *you kissed me*—but certainly, you might have said something. Anything. Willow! You kissed me.”

And how. For a split second the kiss rushed back to him, the feel of her in his arms, the stir inside him at her touch.

No, *no*—

She was pressing her hands to her mouth, her eyes wide in a sort of horror, even in the soft padding of darkness. “I know. I *know!*” Her voice wavered. “Let’s just—oh, please, can we forget this? Just—I’m leaving. I am . . . so . . . sorry.”

She turned then, knocked a chair over.

“Willow, calm down. Let’s talk about this—”

“Please don’t tell Sierra.” She hit the door, turned, and sounded like she might be crying. “I promise I’ll never talk to you again if you don’t tell Sierra.”

Him? “Oh, don’t worry, my lips are sealed.”

Except they still tingled with her kiss, his entire body, really, on fire.

She slipped out the door, shutting it behind her.

And he let out a long, shaky breath.

Oh no.