



I'll Be There

a
Deep Haven
Montana Fire
novel

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CHAPTER ONE

Conner Young needed just one perfect weekend.

One perfect weekend free of drama. No grizzly maulings, no plane crashes, no firestorms, no criminal accusations, and he didn't think it was too much to ask God for a little sunshine either.

After all, a guy only got married once.

And after everything his fiancée, Liza Beaumont, had gone through this year, she deserved perfect. A crowd of her friends and family showing up to celebrate with her, with them.

If it were up to him, he'd make sure she'd get it.

He flipped his wipers on high, the deluge just short of a biblical flood as it obscured the road. Around him, fog had descended, cutting his vision dangerously tight. He tapped his brakes, took the truck off cruise.

The brake lights of the semi ahead of him cut through the haze of the road, the driver clearly thinking the same thing.

Perfect. Add a few more hours to this trip. Conner's hand tightened on the steering wheel as he turned the defrost on high. Minnesota—just when you thought you'd have a sunny day, the weather turned on you. Worse, the onslaught of rain created the perfect storm for a hydroplane, and

Conner saw in his mind's eye a bumper-car collision from the mess of cars traveling north for the long Memorial Day weekend.

Good thing Liza had booked their cabins for their wedding weekend at the Evergreen Cabins and Outfitters six months ago.

He would have preferred an elopement to Hawaii or Cancun. Had suggested the getaway too many times over the past few months as Liza changed from one reception venue to the next, trying to accommodate her swelling guest list.

Liza had friends from one end of the country to the other.

His side of the aisle consisted of the three groomsmen sitting in the truck with him, currently grousing about the early morning and woeful lack of breakfast.

“Seriously, Conner, just swing through a McDonalds,” Jed Ransom said, sitting in the passenger seat. “I’m dyin’ here.”

Conner shot a look in the rearview mirror, where Reuben Marshall sat, arms folded, staring fixedly out at the horizon. Beside him, Pete Brooks was sound asleep, forehead pressed against his window. He wore his blond hair pulled back with a bandanna, a copper-gold grizzle on his chin. Reuben, at least, had showered and trimmed his dark beard, trying to be presentable.

Maybe he should have let the guys sleep longer this morning instead of rousing them before the gray hues of morning collapsed the night. Or maybe cut the trip from Montana into three sections instead of trying to make it in less than forty-eight hours.

“Why didn’t you pick up a donut at the gas station like Pete and Rube?” Conner said, switching into the slow lane, falling in behind the semi.

“I would have if I knew we were on war rations.”

“I can’t stop, Jed. I’m already a day late, thanks to your OCD equipment check.” Conner glanced at Jed, saw his mouth tighten.

“Really? After last summer, you think I’m being irrational?”

“We caught them, Jed. No one is trying to kill us anymore—”

“Except for every fire we jump into this summer.”

Right. Sure, they’d lived through last summer’s sabotage of their chutes, arson, and a deliberate crash of their jump plane, but that didn’t mean that some natural tragedy didn’t wait to ambush them.

Every time they leapt from the open door of their Twin Otter, a hundred-pound jump pack strapped to their back, arrowing down into the mouth of the dragon, they risked coming home in a body bag.

The death of Jock Burns and his crew two summers ago gave that truth legs. And put a fist in Conner’s chest.

Deep down inside, his gut said he shouldn’t be dragging a wife into that world.

Liza hadn’t said it in so many words, but the idea of spending the summer with him in his tiny fifth wheel, parked near the Ember Fire Base in western Montana, waiting for him to come home from his fire deployments...waiting, praying, and watching the mountains flame around her...

Yeah, neither one of them had wanted to dig into what that might look like for a woman who’d already lived through one life-threatening, harrowing event.

Frankly, he’d rather focus on simply holding onto Liza. Making sure her epic *Yes* to his proposal hadn’t been a side effect of the pain pills, her frustration at her recuperation, and the inspiration of the view he’d given her of a glorious Glacier Mountain morning when he’d proposed.

Most of all, the closer the date crept, the more his brain couldn’t seem to sway from the honeymoon.

Thankfully, he had their living arrangements all figured out. Another reason for his epic lateness and heavy foot on the pedal.

He eased up again. But one side of his mouth tipped up, and he started to hum one of Ben King's new singles sweeping into his brain, lighting a warm simmer through his entire body.

Turn down the lights

Turn up the songs

Come dance with me, baby

Right where you belong

"Stop thinking about the honeymoon," Jed said. "And focus on the fact you'll never get to the wedding if you don't feed us."

Conner glanced over at him. "What—"

"You're like a glass house, dude. Sheesh, and I thought I was bad waiting to marry Kate."

"You drove us crazy. We were ready to ship you off to Vegas."

"I was ready to marry Kate the day I met her. Seven years is a long time to wait." Jed fiddled with the ring on his finger, turning it in a circle.

Behind them, Reuben's mouth tightened into a dark, uncommenting line. Conner glanced at him through the mirror. "Thinking about Gilly?"

"We're not quite there yet," Reuben growled.

Conner caught Jed shaking his head. "What's going on?"

"Gilly has been talking about trying to get more bomber experience and heading to work for the Midnight Sun crew this summer. The terrain is a bit more...edgy. She wants to up her ranking with the NFS," Jed said.

"Alaska? Are you going with her?" Conner looked at Reuben.

Reuben's massive sawyer shoulders lifted in a quick shrug. "She thinks I'll get in the way. Says I'm too overprotective. Whatever."

No one said anything.

“Thanks, guys.”

Jed grinned. “By the way, have you figured out who your best man is going to be? Someone needs to be in charge of the party.”

An old Suburban with paneled sides and rusty wheel wells edged up next to them in the fast lane, boxed them in.

The semi had slowed, and Conner noticed the traffic packing in, the storm deafening as it razed the truck. He didn’t want to think about their luggage turning into a soggy mess in the back.

Just what Liza needed, the tuxedos bleeding out, ruined.

Around them, the traffic tightened, and Conner touched the brakes.

Next to him, the Suburban sped past, shooting up alongside the semi—

“Look out!” Jed slammed his hand on the dash.

The semi had started to pull out into the fast lane, clearly not seeing the Suburban. The SUV hit the brakes, swerved into Conner’s lane.

Conner did the math in a second—hit the brakes, hydroplane and crash into the SUV going sixty, or—

Jerking the wheel, he sent them over the rumble strips into the roughened pavement on the side of the highway, littered with glass, tire debris, and rutted gravel.

“Geez!” Pete said, bouncing awake as the truck’s passenger wheels hit dirt and slammed them all against their belts. Conner fought the wheel as it shimmied, the squeal of the antilock brakes hiccuping them to a hard stop.

Beside—then behind—them, the Suburban spun a full three-sixty, then launched into the ditch, front first. The nose caught, the vehicle flipped.

It landed with a spectacular, horrifying crunch, upside down.

The semi kept going, now in the fast line, oblivious.

Conner's hands viced the wheel, his heart in his mouth.

Jed's other hand had found its way to the dash, and now he breathed out hard. "Good reflexes."

"We'd better see if someone's hurt," Reuben said, already unbuckling.

Pete, too, unbuckled and opened his door, getting out into the mud of the ditch.

He and Reuben jogged over to the overturned Suburban.

Jed unbuckled. "You okay?"

Conner's breath released, finally, over a washboard of what-ifs and could have beens. "Uh huh."

Pete was running back to their truck. "We need a knife—the driver's belt is jammed." He stuck his head in. "It's a teenager. He's pretty scared, but he seems okay."

"Glove box," Conner said. Jed opened it and found Conner's Yarborough and handed it, still sheathed, to Pete. He ran back through the torrent as Conner grabbed his phone.

Not necessary, because he heard sirens peeling from across the highway. And, in a moment, he spied cherries through the fog.

Some other driver, seeing the catastrophe, had called 911.

Conner got out and ran to the wreck, following Jed. Pete and Reuben had already released the driver, catching him and pulling him out of the smashed driver's window.

No more than seventeen, maybe, he seemed unscathed, just shaking. Until— "My brother—he's in the backseat!" He shook off Pete's hands on him and scrambled back to the car.

Reuben stopped him. "We got him." He fell to his knees and peered into the car. When he sucked in a breath and glanced back at Conner, a hollowness rushed through Conner, scraping him out.

No.

Conner couldn't place why the ground suddenly rushed up at him, his legs buckling. In a second, he'd collapsed in the drenched grass, the smells of gasoline, mud, and the cry of the siren a knife, separating now from yesterday.

He could almost taste it, the coppery rush of blood in his mouth, the rank odor of rubber burning.

Hear his parents' screams.

"Conner—?" Jed crouched beside him, put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm fine." Conner jerked away. "I slipped." He didn't look at Jed as he climbed to his feet. Reuben broke the window as Pete returned from the truck holding a sleeping bag from Conner's go bag. He draped it over the glass and crawled into the Suburban.

The teenager had collapsed too, a hand to his head as if unable to move.

The rain poured down, drenching all of them, a ghoulish mist rising from the forest beyond the road.

Pete emerged, pulling the victim out by the shoulders, lifting him onto the sleeping bag.

Jed crouched in front of the distraught teenage driver, put his hands on his shoulders.

"Breathe."

Even Conner had to look away at the crumpled body of a fifteen-year-old kid.

Pete was working on him anyway, giving him CPR, breathing for him.

A feral whimper emerged from the driver, a keening that worked its way into Conner's bones, his cells. One he too well recognized. Conner got up, his stomach writhing, pretty sure he might lose it.

The cruiser had crossed the highway, pulled up, and a state patrolman ran down into the ditch.

Conner lifted his head to the rain, closed his eyes.

“That could have been us, if it weren’t for you,” Reuben said quietly, coming up beside him.

Conner’s mouth tightened around the edges. “It was me, twenty-one years ago. I wasn’t driving, but...” he glanced at Reuben. “I don’t know what my problem is. It’s not like I haven’t seen a car accident before.”

Or watched people die.

But maybe that was it. He turned back, his gaze on the driver, now rocking, weeping as Jed tried to hold him together.

As Pete continued CPR on the whitened body.

It came to Conner then, the source of the roiling of his gut. The one person missing from this weekend was the one other person who’d survived the crash that killed their parents.

The one person who should be celebrating his wedding.

Justin.

Wow, he missed him, although he lived with the wounds scabbed over most of the time. But maybe he’d gone too long without thinking about him, without caring that his brother lay in a crappy grave on a grassy hillside in Montana, his killer free, unknown, and with impunity. Without remembering how his brother loved sunrises and fishing and harassing him until Conner had finally cheered when he left for the military.

And, thanks to one P.T. Blankenship, former lead investigator at the NSA, in charge of his brother’s murder case, never to be found.

Yeah, he should be here. Conner pressed a hand to his stomach and walked up to Jed. Crouched next to the driver. “What’s your name?”

A hitched breath. “Gunnar.”

“C’mon, Gunnar. Sit in the truck or you’re going to go into shock.”

Gunnar raised his gaze to him, brown eyes unseeing.

“There’s nothing you can do,” Conner said softly, but didn’t add any words of absolution. They wouldn’t set anyway. He grabbed Gunnar by the arm, hauling him to his feet. Led him across the grass and mud to his truck where he shoved him into the passenger seat.

Then he reached over and turned the heater on, full blast. Not that it would help.

The cold would seep in, latch on, and frankly, he doubted the kid would ever be warm again.

Conner grabbed his cell phone before he closed the door. He hunched over in the rain as he opened the text app and found Liza’s conversation. *Will be a little late, sorry.*

She didn’t text back, and he guessed the hour still might be early for her. He tucked the phone in his back pocket, folded his arms, and leaned back against the grimy truck, giving up any attempt to keep out the chill. *There’s nothing you can do.*

Conner shivered against his own words.

A siren whined in the distance, an ambulance cutting up along the shoulder of the now parked traffic. The cruiser had pulled out, routing traffic down to one lane, away from the mess. In the distance, thunder pummeled the sky cracked from bursts of lightning.

The ambulance pulled up, and Conner stayed at the truck, partially to trap Gunnar as the EMTs resumed work on his brother, packing him up. Not as hurried as they might be, but unable to pronounce him here.

The patrolman, badge name Monroe, came over, his vinyl rain poncho squeaking. “I need his statement. And yours.”

“He needs a hospital, first,” Conner said, moving in front of the door. Jed came up to join Conner. “Let him ride with his brother.”

Patrolman Monroe’s mouth tightened into a grim line. “Better hurry.”

Conner opened the door. Heat poured from the sauna inside. “You okay to ride with—in the ambulance?”

Reddened, swollen eyes. A swallow, a nod. Gunnar climbed out of the cab, grabbed the side of the truck bed for a second, as if to steady himself. Conner had the crazy urge to hook his hand under his arm, half carry him to the rig. But he'd have to learn how to stand up, walk on, endure this wound soon enough.

“You’ll notify his parents?” Jed said behind him to Monroe as the kid headed to the ambulance. The EMTs were just loading in his brother.

Conner didn’t need to plead his case to the EMTs—it was enough that Gunnar just stared down at his brother, stiffening, unable to breathe.

Yeah, he needed a hospital. That would be the easy part.

Jed was giving his account to Monroe of what happened when Conner returned. Pete came up, wiped his mouth. Blood came away, across his sleeve. Conner reached into the cab, handed him a bottle of water, but Pete waved it away.

Turned, gripping his hands on his knees.

Reuben stood with his back to them, watching the rig pull away, cross the median ditch, and merge back onto the highway.

Conner’s back pocket vibrated. He clamped his hand on his phone, pulled it out, and thumbed in the unlock code.

The app opened with Liza’s return message. *No problem! I can’t wait to see you! We’re going to have a perfect weekend. Drive carefully—it looks like it might rain.*

Another text came in behind it. *Love you. XOXO.*

The ambulance siren blared in the distance, cutting through the weepy, raw morning.

And behind him, Pete lost his morning donut.

#

She’d survived too much to give up now.

“What do you mean, the guest list exceeds the fire code?” Liza hiked the phone against her shoulder as she pulled out the puff pancake her wedding coordinator-slash-caterer Grace Sharpe had made last night and shoved into her fridge.

“The community center can only hold 178 people. And Grace’s last estimates had you at 180—”

“What if we...I don’t know—stand up? Ditch the tables?” Oh, if Grace heard her, she’d murder the bride on the spot. Liza peeled off the cellophane wrapper, then set her oven to preheat.

“I’m sorry, Liza, there’s nothing I can do. That’s the fire code limit.”

Just *perfect*. She ran a finger against her temple, now starting to throb. “I’ll figure it out.” She hung up and noticed Conner’s return text.

Ok.

No smiley face, no *I love you*.

Just *Ok*.

Which probably meant nothing and she was simply hearing the voices that told her that the last thing Conner Young wanted to do was drive halfway across the country, don a tux, and stand in front of a crowd of her friends making promises.

The guy simply didn’t make promises. Not after he’d broken the most important ones in his life. So, him asking to marry her, to make an epic, life-altering, forever vow to her seemed like enough of a sacrifice.

But, no. She had to have the wedding of the century.

A wedding that was careening quickly out of control.

But she had no choice. The wedding had to go off, had to be amazing. Because then she might tell herself that she’d put herself back together. That she was strong enough to follow the man

she loved back into her nightmares. Or at least tell him the truth: She didn't want to move to Montana.

“Are you okay, Aunt Liza?”

Raina Christiansen let herself into Liza's tiny cottage house, setting two-year-old Layla down to run across the room, arms outstretched. The little girl wore a pair of black leggings and shirt that said “Nana loves me.” Clearly a gift from Ingrid Christiansen, who'd turned a little crazy over her grandchildren.

Liza scooped up her niece, kissing her cheek, running her fingers into her side to make Layla giggle. “How's my favorite princess today?”

“Ina gonna be fwower girl.”

“Yes you are, baby,” Liza said, kissing her again before setting her down.

Raina dropped a bag of groceries on the round table. She wore her dark hair pulled back in an orange headband, a matching sun dress, a white sweater. “Okay, I picked up grapes, a melon, bananas, and a watermelon. Is Grace here yet?”

Liza peeked into the bag. “Not yet. But she assembled some sort of German pancake last night and left it in my fridge. I'm supposed to put it in to bake—oh shoot, ten minutes ago.”

“Let's get going,” Raina said. “We have a little party to pull together.” She scooped up Layla, who was rummaging through the diaper bag she'd dropped on the floor next to the table, and parked the toddler on her hip. “Casper said he'd scoot down and pick up Layla so I could stick around and help. He's helping Darek get the resort ready for tonight's campfire.”

Liza ran a hand across her forehead. “This was a bad idea.” She blew out a breath, staring at the food.

“What—what do you mean?”

Liza picked up her phone. “Conner's going to be late.”

Silence, then. “So what? So you push the surprise back a little. Have you even heard from his friends? You never know—their flight could be late. I heard a storm is headed up the shore.”

“Yeah, exactly. In the form of this crazy wedding.” Liza walked over to the front window, staring out past her porch to the pebbled beach along the harbor, the lake lapping the shore under the arch of the cloudless sky. All blue, nothing amiss. The perfect Deep Haven day.

“It’s just pre-wedding jitters,” Raina said. She’d set Layla on the sofa, and was feeding her a cracker from the diaper bag. “I understand—I had them too, right before—”

“It was just you, Casper, and his family. I’ve invited half the town.”

Raina drew in a breath and Liza turned, made a face. “I’m sorry. Of course you were freaking out. Especially after...well, you’d waited so long to finally marry Casper, and with Owen there...”

This was why she needed to stop talking. “I’m sorry. I do this when I’m nervous. Say stupid things.” She gathered Raina into her embrace. “I’m so happy for you. And God worked everything out.”

“Yes, he did.” Raina leaned back, caught Liza’s hands. “Just breathe. You’re going to have an amazing weekend. Perfect. And marry the man you love.”

“Except the poor man desperately wanted to elope, and I’m beginning to see why.” She walked over to her roll top desk and picked up her seating chart. “Three days before the wedding, and the venue says I have too many people. I either cut the guest list or we can’t hold the reception at the community center.”

“What happened? I thought you and Grace went over the list. You mailed out exactly the right amount of invitations.”

“Then I’d meet people in the grocery store and they’d ask when the wedding was, and I...I kept inviting more.” Liza made a face. “I’ve lived in Deep Haven for nearly fifteen years. Who am I

not going to invite? My chiropractor, who lets me come in on Saturdays for emergencies? Or maybe Eli Hueston, the ex-police chief who's pulled me out of the ditch more than once? Or perhaps the Dekkers? Because I can hardly not invite the mayor and his wife."

Raina gave her a pitying look. "Your heart is too big."

"No, I'm a wimp. I can't say no. And now my cake is too small, and Grace is going to strangle me when she finds out she'll have to order more food. And I'm going to have to set up tables down at the park on the harbor and try to keep the seagulls from eating the dinner rolls." Not to mention she'd hardly slept last night, every moment with her eyes closed an opportunity to smell the feral breath on her face, hear the roar, feel the claws rip—

"Sit down." Raina took her hand, brought her over to one of her overstuffed sofas. Sat next to her. "Listen, it's going to be fine. Once Conner gets here—"

Liza winced. "He's going to take one look at this chaos and run. He's not a guy who likes...a fuss. He's a simple man. He lives in a fifth wheel, for cryin' in the sink. Carries practically the sum of his belongings around in a duffel bag. He wanted to elope, keep it simple. Sane. And I'm giving him...the *Titanic* of weddings."

Raina smirked. "It's not that bad."

"It is. The man has a contact list of eighteen people. *Eighteen*. I texted every single person asking them if they wanted to come to our wedding. You know how many responded, besides his smokejumper crew?"

Raina raised a shoulder.

"Six. Jim and Lacey Micah, Mac and Andee McCloud, and Dani and Will Masterson, all from his previous SAR team. Of them, only Jim and Lacey Micah are coming. Two people from his life. He doesn't even have any family."

Raina was frowning, Liza's words obviously seeping in. "Why not?"

Liza fingered her ring, centering her thumb on the beautiful diamond Conner had given her the day last fall when he'd driven her to up to some magnificent view in Glacier National Park, dropped to his knee, and proposed.

He'd suggested even then that they simply get back on his bike and find a preacher.

"His parents died when he was a teenager. Car crash. He and his brother grew up with his grandfather. He passed away a little over a year ago of cancer. And his brother, well he was murdered."

The word registered on Raina's face.

"Yeah, they never solved the case, and for a long time it haunted Conner. I think he's made peace with it, but..."

"So, that's why you planned this little party."

"I thought that getting together with his friends from Team Hope, his old SAR team, before all the chaos started would remind him that this is his special weekend, too."

Her phone vibrated, and she got up to retrieve the text. "Super. It's the florist. They said the arrangements are delayed because of the storm."

"We don't need them until Sunday," Raina said. "And we'll order cupcakes from Lucy at World's Best Donuts for the overflow of guests." She got up. "You're getting married. That's all that is important here."

Liza pressed her hand against her stomach. "You're right. I just wish this weekend was already over, that we were back from our honeymoon...and settled in here."

"I wondered why you weren't packing. He's moving to Deep Haven?"

Um. "I don't know."

Raina frowned and picked up Layla, who had found a sippie cup in her diaper bag. "You don't know."

“He wants me to move to Montana, but I have a number of orders I needed to fulfill, and I don’t exactly have a kiln or a throwing table in his fifth wheel.” She sighed. “He told me he had it figured out, so I’m hoping that means he’s planning on living here.”

“He could join the fire service here,” Raina said.

Liza’s hand went to her upper arm, traced the ugly scar that traversed it, the puncture wounds in her shoulder that still throbbed sometimes, an echo of the trauma from last summer.

“Yeah, maybe.”

She sighed.

“What?” Raina said.

“I just...what if...what if we’re rushing into this. It’s only been ten months since...um...”

“Since you survived a terrible trauma? Since you and Conner saved a girl’s life? Since you became the bravest person I’ve ever met?” Raina raised an eyebrow.

“Since he panicked over nearly losing me to a Grizzly attack and asked me to marry him?” Liza slipped the phone into her pocket. “He never actually *said* he was moving here. I just...oh, no.” She probably needed aspirin for her pounding head. “What are we *doing*?”

“Hey! Catering services here.” Grace Sharpe, formerly a Christiansen, opened her door. She’d cut her blonde hair chin-short, wearing it down. She wore capris and a white T-shirt with the words “Bride’s Side” in pink.

Liza didn’t know Grace well, but the moment Raina suggested she hire her as her caterer, Grace had stepped up to save her. And with her husband Max away on so many week-long hockey trips for the Minnesota Blue Ox, Grace had spent way too many hours preparing.

Yes, with Grace at the helm, it would all work out.

“I come bearing freshly baked muffins. And look who I found outside.” She held the door open for Mona, as Liza’s oldest and dearest friend came in carrying four cups of freshly ground, home-roasted coffee in a tray, direct from her bookstore and coffee shop.

“Liza’s getting cold feet,” Raina said.

“What?” A headband captured Mona’s blonde hair, and she looked put together, exactly how a matron of honor should, in a pair of white jeans and a purple T-shirt. She set the coffee container on the table and tugged out two cups. “You just need a white chocolate mocha.” She sat next to Liza. “Snap out of it.”

Liza offered a slim smile. Took the coffee. “I’m not getting cold feet—okay, maybe a little. I just realized how little Conner and I have prepared for this. Sure, I love him and he loves me, but...I don’t know. Maybe it’s not enough. I’ve been single for a long time. And so has he.”

“So? Even better—Conner is worth the wait.” Mona winked.

For a moment Liza sank into the memory of his arms, those wide shoulders, and the thought of *knowing* him—okay...she took a sip of her coffee. Another.

Mona laughed. “I felt the same way about Joe on our wedding day. Terrified, overwhelmed, delighted—”

“But you two knew you’d live in Deep Haven, happily ever after. Conner is...well, he’s not Reese Clark, penning adventures. Conner actually, well—he *lives* them.”

Mona raised an eyebrow.

Oh, she was in rare foot-in-mouth form today. “I didn’t mean that Joe is boring. He’s amazing. A best-selling author, right here among us.”

“He’s also on the volunteer fire department,” Mona said. “Trust me, that’s adventurous enough.”

Liza looked at her coffee.

Mona touched her arm. "It's okay. And yes, Conner is...well, he certainly lives dangerously."

"He jumps out of airplanes into fire for a living," Liza said. "And *likes* it."

Grace had carried the bags into the kitchen and now returned to the conversation, pulling out a cup of coffee from the tray. "Max gets in fights for a living."

"He plays hockey," Raina said.

"There's a lot of fighting," Grace said. "I hate it. I can't watch when he throws down the gloves, even if it's part of the game. Afterwards, he's like a caged animal, pacing, the adrenaline radiating off of him. I send him to work out, get it out of his system."

"That accounts for the shoulders," Raina grinned.

"And the abs," Grace said, meeting her smile. "I don't hate it."

"Conner used to call me after he came in from a fire, or sometimes when he was out there camping. He was always...tired. And stressed out. And yeah, he loves it, but it's also dangerous and..." Liza took another bracing sip. "I guess I thought maybe he'd give that up once we...oh man, we are *so* not ready." She set her coffee down. "See, I told him we should wait, but he was just so excited, and..."

"And you'll figure it out." Mona took Liza by the shoulders. "Take a breath. Conner Young is crazy about you. And you're crazy about him."

"But what if that's not enough? I can't ask him to give up firefighting for me. He's already lost so much. Firefighting has given him back himself. A team. A family."

"You're going to be his family, Liza," Grace said softly. "Trust me. That changes everything."

Maybe.

"Stop it," Mona said.

Liza glanced at her.

“You’re panicking. And dreaming up a few lies.” She raised an eyebrow. “Again.”

Ho-kay.

“Conner is dying to marry you. Nothing is going to keep him from showing up at the altar on Monday.” She paused. “A Memorial Day wedding. You’re like royalty or something. The princess of Deep Haven.”

“Hardly,” Liza said but Mona, took Liza’s hand, pulled her up.

“You’ll see. This weekend is going to be perfect, and you’re going to live happily ever after.”