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NOAH

Tepid water sloshed over my ankles.

I stepped out of the walk-in freezer in disgust.

“How long has it been like this?” I demanded.

Kyle took an involuntary step back. Jamie kept her eyes on the floor, short chestnut curls creating a curtain across her face. “We’re not sure,” she said. “Two, maybe three days to melt all the ice. We don’t come down to this level every day because the restaurant kitchen is easier to use.”

I put a hand to my face, trying to keep my temper in check. “Damage?”

“Some of this we can salvage,” Jamie said quietly. “The sealed food we can put outside in the snow and refreeze. But the un-packaged stuff, like the meat . . . I don’t know.” She swallowed. “And everything in the refrigerators is ruined.”

I blinked, the magnitude of the disaster setting in. “What’s wrong with the refrigerators?”

“Whatever popped this circuit shut everything down.” Jamie fidgeted with her zipper, unable to keep her hands still. “It’s crazy, I know, since it’s freezing outside, but the furnace is right below us. This room heats up pretty quick if the power fails. And . . . it did.”

I choked back a caustic reply—I could damn well see the electricity was dead, and I was sweating in my jacket. The question thundering inside my head was *why*. The power upstairs was working fine. It wasn’t until this basement level that we’d needed flashlights.

“We just stocked this kitchen. We put everything down here because it was safest.”

Neither Jamie nor Kyle replied. The tension level rose like mercury.

I’d ordered everything gathered from the main resort at the bottom of the slopes, and the ski village on top, cobbling together a fairly solid food supply. Then we’d augmented our stores by raiding outlying houses. I’d insisted everything be kept *here*, in the depths of the chalet, at the heart of our main encampment. Now all of our perishables were gone.

The waste was sickening. Nothing Sarah or Ethan could’ve done would hurt half as much as this power outage. Our mountaintop fortress was amazing for defense, but we were miles from everything else in the valley. Without food, this might as well be a crypt.

The lights suddenly flickered back on. I glared a question at Kyle.

“I sent Richie to check the breakers,” he answered, rubbing his palms on the sides of his jeans. He tried on a shaky smile.

“Guess we’re lucky nothing’s busted for real.”

Lucky. Or something else?

“Who’s been down here in the last three days?” I asked.

At first neither answered. I looked at Jamie, and she shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know. Anyone who felt like it, I guess. Richie and I have been using the restaurant to prepare meals, and keep what we need for two or three days up there. I came down here a half hour ago and found the room pitch black.”

I stared at Jamie until tears formed in the corners of her eyes. Was she lying? Was this an act of sabotage?

I pressed my lips together. Felt a quiver in my stomach. I coughed into a fist, then thrust a finger at Kyle without looking. “I want to know who’s used this kitchen in the last forty-eight hours, and I want to know why the power failed. Go.”

Kyle opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it. He scurried from the room. Jamie hesitated briefly, and I nodded toward the door. She bolted out behind him.

Alone, I unzipped my jacket and ripped it off, then threw it on the ground and kicked it. This was a disaster. Worse, it made me look like a fool. Like I was too incompetent to protect our most valuable assets. Too stupid to live.

What would the others say? What would they think?

A cold fist squeezed my heart. Why would a breaker flip? With so few people staying at the chalet, power usage must be way below what the grid could handle. A surge seemed incredibly unlikely.

Which meant someone did it on purpose. But who? Including me, there were eight people staying at the resort. Which one couldn’t I trust?

Seven people. Akio is gone.

My lips began to tremble. Then my hands. I took a shaky step backward as my breath broke down into rasps. I leaned forward, hands on my knees, then my body went rigid, muscles freezing in place as my pulse accelerated like a runaway train.

Oh no.

No no no no no.

I was having a panic attack, my first since the Town Hall massacre.

My jaw clenched. I began to hyperventilate. I dropped unsteadily to sit on the floor, pulling my knees up to my chest and curling into a ball. My eyes squeezed shut as the walls closed in around me. I felt a streak of terror at being alone so far underground.

Relax. Breathe.

But my thoughts were spiraling out of control. I imagined Kyle whispering to the others about Piper's scorched body. Zach telling them I was losing it. That I was weak and needed to be replaced. I pictured Akio sneaking down here and jamming a fork in an outlet while Richie and Leah cheered him on.

Stop. Stop it.

I forced my hands to stillness. Measured the rhythm of my lungs. Slowly the pressure eased. I opened my eyes and wiped them. The crushing anxiety had passed, but the fear lingered. I'd thought I was past this.

I had to remain cool. Calm. Scary. They only followed me because I had answers, so I had to give them some, *now*, or they'd turn on me like jackals. That was the world we lived in. Crying on the floor like a baby accomplished nothing.

Min has a different way.

I jerked to my feet, ignoring a mind I couldn't trust. I'd wallowed enough for one day. The Program had no time for self-pity.

The Program.

I froze. Could the system itself have thrown this curveball? Shut down my freezers to observe how I'd react? The thought was strangely seductive. Maybe the Guardian was testing my will. Seeing if I could handle it.

Game on.

Suddenly I felt rejuvenated. I scooped my jacket off the tiles and headed out, mounting the stairs two at a time up to the lobby. I chastised myself for losing sight of what matters. The others wanted to see me take control? Fine. I'd take things to the next level.

I stepped outside, took a deep cleansing breath. The crisp mountain air burned my lungs, but I didn't care. Didn't even put on my jacket. I'd conquered my demons and finally knew what to do.

We needed food. So we'd go get it.

Breath misting like a dragon, I was working out the details as I reached the ski village, a tiny collection of faux-log-cabin shops surrounding a central courtyard. The village and the chalet were the only two structures atop the slopes.

I found the others where I'd suspected they'd be—in the large cafeteria-style eating hall at the far end of the complex. The group was sitting at one of the long bench tables, whispering quietly to each other. They fell silent at my approach.

I didn't speak at first, taking the time to glance at each of

them in turn. Inviting challenge. But all eyes dropped as they met mine. Kyle. Leah. Jamie and Richie. Zach and Morgan.

No weakness. No fear. King Kong ruled the jungle for a reason.

Then I noticed someone new in the room, sitting beside Kyle and watching me with calculating eyes. The visitor nodded slowly in greeting. I nodded back.

“You come to join us?” I asked, in a voice so hard I barely recognized it.

“Yes.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Not yet. Ethan doesn’t notice people he considers beneath him.”

I smiled, the last piece of my plan falling into place.

See? The Program might be testing me.

But it provides, too.