

CHAPTER TWO

Piper

Now: Friday, 11:00 a.m.

Revenge is a dish best served cold ... on the summit of an eight-thousand-meter peak, where the air is thin and tempers run even thinner.

Darby's voice curls low in my ear as she transports me to a world away from my cramped airport shuttle. She has a new case and a new cast of characters with murder in mind. Her partner, Kate, cracks a joke about the Death Zone, and then it's time for podcast-sponsor roulette. Is it a mattress company or website builder today?

Apparently neither. I stare out the van window while the two-minute pitch for a meal kit drones on. The sliver of tinted window at the very back affords me a partial view of the narrow two-lane road winding like a snake beneath the wheels.

Too many tired asses have worn down the leatherette seats, so the aging springs dig into my tailbone. They squeak as the van bumps up the old mountain road. On especially violent dips, I bounce so hard that my head scrapes the low ceiling. This shuttle's been poorly retrofitted to seat nine—and I got the worst seat. I, at least, have the decency to be quiet about it. Eden Laskin is complaining loudly about her accommodation one row up.

"Our parents pay sixty-eight thousand dollars a year for Warner Prep, and you're telling me we couldn't afford a luxury bus to this stupid digital-detox retreat or whatever this is?" Her voice carries in the cramped van, inescapable for its target: Ms. Silva, our chaperone, sitting in the front passenger seat.

For once, I don't disagree with my spoiled classmate. Warner Prep has a literal endowment, like a goddamn Ivy League college, and this Senior Excursion is packed to the gills with children of the mega elite. They could have at least sprung for a van made in this decade.

But Eden is milking her discontent. "I know you're, like, super old, and phones don't matter as much to you, but we've never known a life without them," she continues.

It's over the top—par for the course for Eden, I suppose, but still.

Then I see Eden's phone poised just so, to capture our forty-something guidance counselor in profile. Eden's camera zooms in, rendering Ms. Silva's features grotesquely blurry; her pixelated jaw clenches at the "super old" comment. Now Eden's performance makes sense. Her near-million Instagram followers have a front-row seat to the interrogation. Eden's boyfriend, Declan DuPont, sniggers beside her. Be still his prankster heart.

Better enjoy it while it lasts. Silva threatened to take our phones at the airport, but Wyatt did his best lawyer impression and talked her out of it. A détente for the long ride from the Denver airport to the middle of nowhere and up a mountain. Wyatt's next to me in the back seat, jamming his thumbs across his phone screen and letting loose the occasional expletive. I half wonder what game has him so engrossed, but don't dare ask. Wyatt has a habit of moving from mansplaining a game to forcing crypto down people's throats faster than you can say *Fortnite*.

I shift my attention back to Kate in my ear, coming off the product flogging and cueing up this episode's case. "Use our code MURDERGALS to save forty percent off your first order," she chirps. Kate and Darby can get me through the direst of circumstances in high spirits—and flying a thousand miles to rural Colorado for a phone-free wellness retreat certainly qualifies as dire.

We careen around yet another switchback so violently I slide in my seat, hard to the right, my sling bumping against Wyatt's elbow. I wince.

"Shit, Piper, you made me miss my target!" he hisses at me, but before I can even attempt an apology—not that I owe him one—he's glued back to his mobile game. The seat belt wrenches hard into my

shoulder; with the burn of pain comes a spike of fear. Last thing I need is another injury. My elbow throbs a reminder.

Ahead of me, Camille Sutter, Declan, and Eden whoop with delight, arms thrown over their heads like we're on a roller coaster. And in the front row, Delaney Moss and Liam Parker-Yang use the rocky road as an excuse to cuddle. Only Willa Hawley, squeezed on the end of the bench beside Delaney and Liam, mirrors my anxiety. She's clutching the armrest so tight her knuckles have gone white. Her nervousness fuels mine.

Does this van have snow tires, or whatever it is you're supposed to have on your car up here in the mountains? Chains? Rock salt? Cold-weather things we Los Angeles kids have no clue about. The driver seems nonplussed. He yawns—*yawns*—up in the front seat as we sail into a brief straight stretch.

And now I've missed the whole setup for this case. With a sigh, I tap pause on my phone screen and push my noise-canceling headphones off my ears again. I'm too distracted by the classmates I've had the good fortune to mostly avoid the last three years.

Eden ends her live stream as Declan nuzzles her neck and kisses his way up to her ear. "I've already warned Wyatt we'll be sexiling him later," he says, his voice husky, lips curling into a wolfish grin against her earlobe.

"Oh, you mean you're going to stop whining about dogsledding long enough to actually enjoy my company?"

Eden's petulant and pouting, but there's little heat behind her words. She's a full-on sexy baby, and Declan's eyes shine with softness. Here I always assumed they were social-media fake, but watching them up close, the camera no longer rolling, it seems I misjudged. Beautiful rich people in love. How novel.

But Eden's censure has slotted a puzzle piece into place. Indeed, a digital-detox retreat in the mountains is the last place I'd think to see *this* group. The more connected and powerful your parents, the better rigged your odds are at getting first pick of the Senior Excursion options. Everyone knows that. There were so many choices this year too—a French art-history tour, a Hollywood directing workshop, a geology intensive at Yellowstone, a Gothic

literature experience in an English castle, and, yes, even dogsledding in Alaska. Résumé fodder with lax nighttime supervision, that was the deal.

So what is this? A digital-detox wellness weekend with noted hard-ass guidance counselor Ms. Silva. She's literally reported seniors to colleges for lying on their applications, and she got one kid's acceptance rescinded a few years ago, rumor has it. Somewhere there's a dartboard with her face on it, riddled with holes.

So Declan wanted to go on the Alaskan dogsledding excursion instead. Makes sense. And Wyatt goes everywhere Declan does, so ditto him. Wonder about everyone else—who chose to be here versus who didn't? I heard whispering at the airport about the admin paying for this mistake and blah, blah, blah. Standard unhappy Warner Prep student BS. Every day I miss homeschooling. But I know why *I* have to be here. My stomach turns acid.

As we twist around another turn, our suitcases skid and clink against metal. Willa whips to the back, face ashen. Our eyes meet, but just as quickly she darts hers away. What's her problem?

"Okay, this is less fun now," Declan says after another three turns. "I might throw up, and my head is killing me."

"Bet it's altitude sickness," Camille sniffs. "You may feel lightheaded and experience headaches, nausea, and confusion. If you don't climb mountains all the time like I do, it can catch you unawares. Some peaks in Colorado are as high as fourteen thousand feet above sea level."

Camille sets the group off on a round of competitive privilege humblebragging. Eden, Delaney, Wyatt, and Liam name-drop Telluride, Zermatt, and even the Himalayas as places they've been. They know about altitude sickness, thanks. You should hear them trade nanny stories.

Willa and I are the only two with nothing to say. All my family's expendable income has been sunk into gymnastics over the years, with not a lot extra for high-flying (literally) vacation spots, and everyone knows Willa's dad is a teacher at our school, which is how she gets free tuition.

Silently, though, I'm thankful for Camille's good ol' know-it-all nature, rarely welcome at our old gym. This insight explains my own growing headache, which gets worse with each mile. We've been crawling up this mountain for what feels like an eternity. It's been at least twenty minutes since I saw a gas station and general store, ten since the last house dotted the road. Are we there yet?

"Shit! The signal just crapped out in the middle of a level." Wyatt throws his phone into his backpack in a huff.

"There's no service way up here," our van driver shouts over his shoulder. "Total dead zone!"

I confirm on my own device. There's a sad slash through the signal icon. Strange how my spirit sags at the loss. It's not like I was expecting anyone to text me.

"No problem at all! Perfect for our purposes," our guidance counselor intones from the front passenger seat. "And we're T minus five minutes, give or take, before a device-free weekend. I guarantee you won't leave this mountain the same as you came."

Surely I imagine the menace in her tone.

Seven glowing screens illuminate the van's interior as everyone returns to their phones for one last hurrah, scrolling through photo rolls and old texts, whatever's available offline. I turn back to the window instead, watching pine boughs blur past, snow-capped mountain peaks glancing through the gaps. We ride in silence until the van slows to a stop. My stomach tumbles over at the sudden loss of momentum.

"And here we are!" Silva cranes around in her seat to address us. Her dark eyes shine with put-on pep. "Your first lesson for the weekend is hauling your own stuff into the house. Humility!" With that, Silva swings open her door with a metallic creak and hops into the great beyond.

"Did she say *first* lesson?" Declan is incredulous. "As in there will be more of them?"

"Gross." Eden's button nose wrinkles with disdain.

"I'm sure you can cheat off Liam like usual." Delaney smacks the brim of Declan's Dodgers cap and pecks Liam on the cheek in a one-

two move. Liam flushes pink. Shame at the compliment or at the cheating, I can't say.

"You assume these are lessons I'll be good at," Liam says, all head ducking and humble.

"You're good at everything, babe," Delaney reassures him, throwing in a shoulder squeeze for good measure. "Plus, it's all outdoorsy. Totally your wheelhouse."

"Oh yes, babe. You're brilliant, babe," Declan playacts, escalating with more compliments and more *babes*, his voice rising to a faux ecstasy. Delaney's smile is rigid, pasted on, as everyone else laughs. A joke I'm neither in on nor understand.

Willa violently wrenches open the van's side door and propels herself outside.

"Jesus, it's freezing!" Eden shrieks. And thus our exile begins.

I was first in, so I'm last out. Frigid air slaps me in the face as I maneuver with only one good arm to the sliding side door. Dirty gray mush awaits me, an oddly overwhelming three feet down. Normally it would be nothing—I literally vault onto beams for a living—but with my balance all messed up, I swallow nervously and hesitate on the threshold.

An arm appears from the void. "Careful," Liam says. With a grimace, I lean my weight and good arm onto his and jump. Slush rockets over my sneakers and into my socks. It's gross and cold, and I most definitely am not prepared for the freezing great outdoors.

"Thanks," I say, managing a tight-lipped smile. Liam gives an eager-beaver vibe, the kind of person who thrives on positive reinforcement and feeling useful. So I further swallow my pride and ask him to help me with my bags as well. Sorry, Ms. Silva, no lessons in humility for me today. Well, not this kind, at least.

"Normally I'd carry them, of course, but you know." I indicate my elbow, and Liam doesn't have to be told twice.

"Yours is the small black one, right?"

"Good memory," I say, but it might be a better guess. I *am* dressed head to toe in black, and after years of traveling for meets, I'm the master of packing light. I leave Liam to it and take in the surroundings.

The house yawns high above my head. This must be where all that Warner Prep coin went: to a modern chalet in Middle of Nowhere, Colorado, with miles of pristine landscape in view to my right. I find my footing over firmer snow, wandering past the house to the rise of a hill to take in the stunning vista. Far off in the distance, if I squint, I can make out the ski town at the base of the mountain. We're totally isolated up here.

A scream cracks through the air. Fear grips my chest, and the hair on the back of my neck stands on end. I turn toward the sound, toward the danger, my heart pounding.

Then laughter rings out. "Snowball fight!" someone shrieks, and it's an all-out war. The white blob sliding down Eden's sky-blue parka indicates her as the first victim and likely screamer. But Declan's lost his cap and has snow melting down his face, so it seems Eden gives as good as she gets. Snow and bodies fly: Camille hits Delaney, Wyatt pelts Liam, and Willa cowers up on the porch to avoid the fray.

I round back on the van to make sure Liam got my bag, and shift away from the reindeer games to our chaperone. She's corralled the shuttle driver at the front of the van and is leaning in close. Silva slips something into the driver's hands; looks like a hundred-dollar bill.

"Thanks for driving us all the way out here," Silva says. "We'll see you first thing Monday morning?"

"If you've got another one of these? Absolutely."

Friday to Monday feels awfully short. These Senior Excursion trips are supposed to last at least a week. Everyone on the European itineraries left last night and won't be back until next Sunday. So it's all the more disappointing. Not only did we get stuck with the worst trip, but we're being robbed of nearly a week of trip time.

"Hey! Stop that!" Silva hollers at the group, having caught wind of the nonregulation winter sports. Her puffy green parka and long, dark curls blur as she dashes around the van. Taking that as his dismissal, our driver hops into the van and floors it. I jump back to avoid the slurry that kicks up in his wake.

Now—we're truly alone.

Snowball fight squashed, we all trudge up onto the porch with our bags and wait for Silva to unlock the door.

But she doesn't.

Instead, she rounds on us, overplucked eyebrows arching in assessment. Her eyes linger on the front of the pack: Eden, Declan, Wyatt, Camille, Delaney. And then she looks down at their bags. Liam, Willa, and I hang back.

"I need to check your luggage," Silva says.

"You can't do that," Camille says, horrified. "Our stuff is private."

"Yeah!" Eden chimes in. Declan nods vehemently.

Camille crosses her arms over her chest, squaring up to our chaperone despite their marked height difference. Five-foot-two teen gymnast versus the towering teacher.

"Actually, it's a school-sponsored trip, so that's not exactly true," Wyatt cuts in. "My dad's a lawyer, and—"

"We know!" several people snap.

"Come on, quickly now. This won't take long, provided you have nothing to hide." Silva points at Declan. "You're up first."

I shrink back as Silva unzips Declan's roller suitcase and starts to rummage through the contents. "You all know what I'm looking for, so don't look so scandalized," she says.

"We wouldn't be stupid enough to bring booze in our suitcases, ma'am," Declan says, sweet as pie. "Or backpacks," he adds, handing his over for inspection.

No, we wouldn't be. There's no liquor in my bag.

But there *is* contraband. Something I'm not supposed to have. My stomach does a flip, and my head pounds. It's either the altitude or impending doom.

If Silva finds what I'm hiding, I'm screwed.