



ON
THE
EDGE

a novel

T.S. KRUPA

On The Edge

T.S. Krupa

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Cover art by Icey Designs.

ISBN: 9781483553979

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To My Family and Friends who have supported me along this journey.

Without you there would be no adventure.

Chapter 1

I continued to pace in the hallway by the front door, glancing out the window every so often, waiting for headlights to sweep across the driveway. It was well after seven in the evening and Hayden Grace was late, which wasn't completely unusual. Molly, our golden retriever, was on the upstairs landing looking down at me, following my back and forth movements while Casey sat on the stairs fiddling with her phone. I exhaled more sharply than I intended, startling them both when I heard the gravel crunch outside.

"It's about time...you're late," I said with exasperation, when she finally made her way into the house with strands of her long blonde hair sticking out under her knit cap, her book bag and snowboard bag in tow.

"Sorry," she mumbled with no real remorse, as only a fifteen-year-old can do.

"I'm headed out, but Casey is here to babysit you," I said, raising my voice at her retreating figure as she darted straight up the stairs brushing past Casey and Molly, headed to her room, dragging her bags on the floor.

"I don't need a babysitter, Andy," she shouted back as she slammed the door to her room.

"It's 'Mom'..." I shouted back as the deafening sounds of Fall Out

Boy could be heard from her room. Just then, a faint sound of a horn beeped in the driveway.

“That’s me,” I said, taking a deep breath and looking at Casey who was still sitting on the stairs.

“No sweat, Mrs. Parker,” Casey said, giving me a half-hearted smile.

“I’ll be back around eleven,” I began to say as I glanced at my watch. My mind drifted to the hectic schedule I had the following day, “umm...maybe more like ten-thirty,” I clarified to the top of Casey’s head as she continued to play on her phone.

“Molly, how do I look?” I asked playfully, twirling around as I grabbed my long gray winter trench coat off the staircase banister. Molly raised her head and gave me a wag of her tail.

“That will do,” I said quietly and slipped out the front door to the waiting silver Nissan Altima in the driveway.

Noble’s Grill was far more crowded than I expected for a Tuesday night. I could see couples huddling over their dinner plates engrossed in conversations, the twenty-something professionals swarming the bar and not very far away from them the older business men were drinking while trying to keep a subtle eye on those twenty-something professionals. One couple in particular in the far corner caught my eye. They were

done eating, now holding hands and whispering to each other over the table, but I couldn't stop staring at the man. The gentleman was about thirty years my senior, but from his broad shoulders he looked to still be physically fit. He reached back raking his fingers through his short gray hair and laughed over something the women said. Something caught in my throat as I continued to stare shamelessly—he looked like I imagined Stefan would have, had he lived that long. A sudden sadness crept through me.

“Andy?” Gregg said across the table, breaking through my thoughts.

“Sorry, daydreaming,” I said shaking my head and trying to bring myself back from the past into the present.

“I was asking if you were free Friday night?” he repeated as he handed the waiter back the check. I tilted my head slightly to the side, mentally flipping through my calendar.

“Hayden Grace doesn't have practice because of the competition on Saturday,” I mumbled to no one in particular.

“I'm sorry, did you say something?” he asked confused.

“It was nothing.”

“Does that mean you are free?” he asked again, waiting patiently for a reply with a tight smile.

“I could see if Casey is available,” I said, looking at him only to find his dark chocolate eyes staring back at me. “What?” I asked,

suddenly self-conscious that I had food on my face.

“You’re beautiful,” he said simply, and I smiled.

“Yes, I’m free Friday.”

“That’s great because I was thinking...” he started saying, but I couldn’t help and glance back to the couple in the corner...they were no longer there. Clearly distracted, I tried to focus back on Gregg and what he was asking me. He wore black rimmed glasses that I imagined matched his once jet black hair now peppered with gray. Gregg was only a little taller than I was when we were standing side by side, but seated across from me he carried himself with confidence and a sophistication that I found alluring. Breaking away from his norm of wearing dress slacks and a suit jacket, tonight he wore a blue button up shirt with a maroon tie and khakis. I heard him cough, and I could tell he had asked me another question and was waiting for a proper response.

“That sounds nice,” I said taking a gamble with a generic answer and hoping it was adequate.

“Ok, good. Not everyone loves seafood so I wanted to ask,” he followed up. I sighed, knowing that I had answered correctly.

The drive home was quiet as I stared out the window, watching the snow flutter down among the small beacons of light from the surrounding houses. It was only the second week of January and already

the meteorologist on the local news station was promising record breaking snowfall by the end of the winter season.

“Andy, are you okay? I feel like you have been somewhere else this entire evening,” Gregg said when he pulled into my driveway.

“I’m sorry. I’ve just had a lot going on,” I said, making up a reasonable excuse. I could see the clock on the dash; it was just past ten-thirty. This only increased my distraction as my mind raced about all the things I had to do to get Hayden Grace and myself ready for tomorrow.

“I understand,” he said, leaning over and brushing stray strands of blonde hair from my face, capturing my attention. Slowly he moved his fingers ever so softly down my cheek to my lips, sending small pulses of electricity racing through my body. Leaning in even closer he kissed my lips gently. “Have a good night,” he whispered, pulling back. I closed my eyes, letting the moment sink in before exhaling.

“Goodnight, Gregg. See you Friday,” I said at long last opening my eyes and staring out into the night.

“Pick you up around seven?” he asked, and I nodded getting out of the car. Casey was now sitting on the sofa in front of the TV but still playing on her phone. Molly immediately bounded down the stairs to greet me, getting her blonde hair all over my black tights.

“Okay, so that’s thirty dollars for tonight and are you free, Friday at seven?” I asked Casey as we stood by the door.

“Yes, that should work fine,” she said, hesitating. “Mrs. Parker?”

“Yes?”

“If you don’t mind me asking, but why does Hayden Grace even need a sitter?”

“It’s one of the rules her dad had for her...she couldn’t be home alone until she was at least sixteen,” I said, sliding a glance to the picture of Stefan on the wall.

“But he’s...” she started and then stopped.

“Yes, he passed away six years ago, but he is still her Dad and those are still the rules,” I explained in a monotone to Casey just as I had explained to Hayden Grace whenever she argued with me.

“Ok, I’ll see you Friday,” she said and bounded out the door. I closed the door making sure to lock it and turned off the front lights; I could see the snow flurries starting to come down faster as they accumulated on the ground. I sighed with relief knowing that Casey lived just next door, and I didn’t have to worry about her driving in the snow. Molly, who had been following me around since I got home, followed me back up the stairs to Hayden Grace’s room. I could still hear the music through the door, but it wasn’t as loud as it was earlier; I knocked gently getting no response.

“I’m going in,” I whispered to Molly, opening the door. Molly whined and lay down in the hallway.

“Coward,” I said to her as I entered Hayden Grace’s room. Pausing at the door, I glanced around the room; the walls were still sky blue and had been since the day she was born—it was the color her dad picked for

her. I can remember sitting in the corner seven months pregnant with Hayden Grace as he painted the whole room; I had offered my help, but he had refused. He later told me that the color reminded him of the bright blue sky he had seen so many times while sitting on the top of a mountain before he rode down. He thought it was the best view in the whole world. Hayden Grace had started talking about repainting the room before Stefan died, but afterwards she no longer had any interest in changing it. I smiled to myself thinking how funny it was that something so mundane could evoke so many memories. Her walls were still blue, but they were now covered in posters of snowboarding legends suspended in some gravity-defying trick and famous mountain peaks showing staggering heights covered in glistening white snow. Directly above her bed hung her dad's old Burton snowboard, covered in stickers from various mountains he had ridden; it was her prized possession, and she was pretty protective over it. I had once taken it down to wipe the dust down, and she stopped speaking to me for a week.

Her desk was cluttered with papers, books and more pamphlets for the Killington Mountain School she was always pestering me about. Her floor was in a state of chaos with dirty and clean clothes and all her snowboarding gear scattered at random. Sighing to myself, I saw that she was fast asleep in bed with her school books laid out all around her. I shook my head and carefully made my way over to her iPod and turned off the music. Collecting all the books off the bed, I piled them neatly on top of her desk. Looking for her phone, I spotted it barely sticking out from under her pillow. Pulling it out, I took a moment and flipped through her texts, Twitter, e-mail and Facebook. It looked like Hayden

Grace's best friend, Madison, was having some boy issues with a guy named Preston. From the picture Madison had sent he looked like the typical fifteen-year-old boy with long shaggy hair, baggy clothes and too much false confidence. Lucie, Hayden Grace's other best friend, missed practice with the stomach bug and was lamenting about the competition on Saturday as well as the geometry test they had on Thursday. Finally, it looked like her snowboarding Coach, Ronald Davis, or #Coach as it was programmed in her phone, was impressed with her half pipe performance today. Satisfied that she continued to behave as every other teenager on the planet I slipped the phone into the pocket of my dress. She knew better than to take it to bed with her; I made a mental note to remind her *again* about the rules. As I picked up the comforter off of the floor to cover her up, she shifted slightly in her sleep.

“Love you Hayden Grace,” I whispered, kissing her forehead.

“Love you too, Mom,” she mumbled back. They were the best words in the whole world and never failed to bring a smile to my face. Leaving her room, Molly and I headed to the kitchen where I plugged her phone into the charging dock next to my own. After doing the dishes, folding the clothes in the dryer and then moving the clothes from the washer to the dryer, Molly and I finally headed to the back to my bedroom. Once there Molly quickly jumped up into bed to claim her side, I swear she was snoring before I even made it into the bathroom. I undressed, washed my face and brushed my teeth before curling up in bed on my designated side. Remembering my morning meeting in Boston at nine, I set my alarm clock for five a.m. and collapsed into bed.

Chapter 2

The next morning Hayden Grace mumbled greetings as she shuffled into the kitchen just past six, her blonde hair tied into a sloppy bun on top of head. She wore low slung jeans, brown boots and a light green cable knit sweater with a polo sticking out from underneath. It was a signature look of hers.

“Morning. You’re up early,” I commented shocked by her early morning appearance not having heard her get ready as I slowly sipped my morning coffee.

“Couldn’t sleep...” she said, pausing to fix a cup of coffee. I had long given up the fight about her drinking coffee at such an early age and decided coffee drinking was not one of the battles I would win and didn’t want to waste my energy trying.

“Everything ok?” I asked after several quiet minutes.

“Coach is watching today’s practice for the competition rankings on Saturday,” she finally said when she sat down across from me. I nodded in understanding and pushed my bagel towards her, which she quickly grabbed up.

“But he thought you had a good practice yesterday,” I commented, remembering the text on her phone.

“MOM...I hate it when you do that...” she exclaimed with a

mouthful of bagel.

“At least it’s Mom now...and you know the rules Hayden Grace. The phone stays unlocked. I look through it every night, and it charges in the kitchen, not in your room,” I said in a neutral tone, trying very hard not to start a fight so early in the morning and with so little caffeine in my system.

“Dad and his stupid rules,” she mumbled while rolling her eyes. I winced at her comment, hoping she didn’t see my reaction but continued to sit quietly. Several more moments passed before she spoke again. “Yeah, coach said my tricks are getting tighter, and he thinks this weekend is going to go well for me.” I gave her a slight nod of encouragement but secretly cringed inside. Her coach had been saying things were ‘going to go well’ for several years now. Don’t get me wrong—Hayden Grace was an excellent rider and at six years old showed amazing promise. But something changed when Stefan died. Not suddenly, but gradually. She was still a great rider, but her concentration wavered. She used to ride with such passion, but it seemed to have fizzled out and now she was just going through the motions. I had asked her repeatedly over the last couple of years if she still wanted to ride, and she was very vehement that this is what she wanted to be doing.

“Remember, I have to work on the mountain this weekend and your grandparents are coming up from Long Island to watch your competition.” While I worked a normal job as a senior marketing associate at Unique Aspects during the week, on the weekends I worked

at Mount Sunapee. I had been teaching ski lessons and working other odd jobs there since I was eighteen. It was convenient that Hayden Grace was on the snowboarding club there; this allowed me to sneak away from lessons every now and then to watch. Like it or not we were both pretty well known on the mountain; it was one of those places that truly felt like home. But this particular weekend was a big deal. The top three female and male winners qualified for a larger competition, Regional 6, which was like junior nationals, and that competition exposed the riders on a national level. The only hitch was that the Regional 6 was in Aspen, Colorado. All of the other competitions Hayden Grace had competed in thus far were in the New Hampshire and Vermont areas. She had had moderate success at these more local competitions over the years but still had not managed to qualify for any national competitions. So naturally, Regional 6 was all Hayden Grace talked about. In actuality, this was all she ever talked about, and every year at this time she had always been so close to qualifying, placing fourth or fifth the last four years— she was always just out of contention. Feeling bad I had to work during such an important competition, I had persuaded my parents to come up and cheer her on while I worked just to make sure she felt supported. With the competition going on, the mountain was seriously short-staffed, and we could really use the extra money. Even though Hayden Grace and I had already talked about me having to work, I found that constant reminders worked best.

“Do you think Uncle Drew will come?” she asked between bites.

“I don’t know. He hasn’t called me back. I will try him again

today,” I said, and she just nodded. Drew was my younger brother and a financial consultant in New York, but he was Hayden Grace’s favorite person after her father.

“So, how was the date last night? ... That’s date number three,” Hayden Grace asked, trying to be casual.

“It was just okay,” I answered honestly. “We are going out again on Friday. Casey will be here to watch you,” I mentioned as she rolled her eyes at me, *again*.

“One more after Friday and I get to meet him,” she reminded me.

“You are correct,” I replied, responding to Hayden Grace’s eye roll with one of my own. I had made a deal with Hayden Grace several years ago when I finally started dating that I wouldn’t bring anyone home until we had been on at least five dates. I didn’t want to make her life any crazier than it already was. Since then she has teased and gossiped and speculated about my dates because in the entire time I had been dating, no one had ever made it past the fifth date.

“Time to go,” I said, looking at my watch, “you got everything together?” She nodded and pointed at her cup. “I’ll pour it over to a travel mug; go grab your stuff,” I said, taking our mugs to the counter. She got up and headed down the hallway.

“Have a good day at school,” I said as we pulled up in front of the

high school. We were uncharacteristically early for once which didn't seem to brighten Hayden Grace's day at all. She mumbled something under breath about the ability to enjoy high school being an impossible task.

"I'll be back from Boston in time for dinner. Is Madison's mom going to bring you home from practice?" She nodded. Madison was newer to the snowboarding club but had made fast friends with Hayden Grace and was a pretty good technical rider. She and her family had just moved to the area. Her mom Lisa was a bit over involved in Madison's life (if you asked me) but was super organized and always willing to drive Hayden Grace home. Madison had a younger sister, but she was very introverted from my understanding, and her dad traveled a lot for business. The friendship had been good for Hayden Grace, and Lisa was a whiz with a carpooling schedule.

"Today's your big presentation isn't it?" she exclaimed after several moments, bouncing in her seat, and I nodded. "Mom, you're going to do just fine...remember what we talked about. Try not to be old and boring—be excited and fresh. You will nail those bas..." I raised my eyebrows at her before she said the word, and she paused, "you will nail those guys to the wall."

"Thank you," I said simply trying not to get emotional over her interest and support. With that she leaned over and gave me a quick squeeze and a kiss and then grabbed her bags and headed off towards the large brick building that read, Newbury High School. I idled momentarily watching her before heading off to the city.

The commute into Boston from our home in Newbury, New Hampshire, took about two hours on a good day. I hated the drive into the city and was grateful that I only needed to venture in to Boston a couple of times a month, working from home or from the offices in Manchester the rest of the time. It had stopped snowing sometime in the middle of the night, and the light accumulation danced along the roadway as the cars passed by. Glad that traffic was light today, I made it to the office in record time, allowing me to set up the presentation and enjoy my second cup of coffee in silence. My mind raced over my presentation as people filtered into the room while my palms started to get sweaty and my heart raced just a little in anticipation. I nodded in acknowledgment as Tony and Mark sat down next to me with stacks of paperwork. Today each of us, being the three senior associates, had been tasked to give a presentation on marketing ideas and strategies for a women's activewear campaign. It was decided late last week that I would go first. Our boss, Gary Thomas, had assigned each of us this project two weeks ago, placing great emphasis on its importance for our jobs within the company. I had worked on the presentation every spare minute I had and still wasn't sure if it would pass his approval. Last week I had been working on it at home when Hayden Grace came into my makeshift office and watched over my shoulder. She stood quietly for a long time before declaring that the presentation was old fashioned and boring. She then pointed out several flaws in my campaign; I stood back and looked at the presentation through her perspective and decided she was right. I scrapped the whole been-working-on-it-for-sixty-five-

hours thing that night. The following night I sat at the kitchen table and started over; Hayden Grace joined me at the table doing her homework, looking over and chiming in suggestions or comments every fifteen or twenty minutes. We worked that way for several nights as my campaign shaped itself into a much fresher and stronger campaign. I remember thinking that if snowboarding didn't work out, Hayden Grace had a future in marketing.

The three presentations took all morning, but after lunch the day dragged on with a conference call and strategy meeting. By four-thirty I was ready to hit the road to try and get a head of the rush hour traffic. Just as I was packing up my stuff, Gary called me into his office.

“Now Andy, you have been with this company how long?” he asked from behind his large vintage oak desk. Had it been thirty years earlier, I would have expected him to be smoking a cigar, drinking whiskey and maybe even have his feet kicked up on the desk. But instead he leaned back in his chair and ran his hand through his hair, smirking in my direction.

“Ten years.” *Ten years* I thought to myself. I had started with the company in the smaller Manchester office when Hayden Grace started kindergarten—I was twenty-five and she was five.

“Ten years, that is what I thought. You are the most senior of the senior associates here Andy, and I need you to start taking a more active

leadership role. I had you all do these presentations this morning because in reality we just landed a huge account with an up-and-coming sports and activewear company. I am making you the lead on this—your presentation this morning was fresh, innovative and young. It’s just what this company needs.” He looked right at me and raised his eyebrows indicating that this was not up for debate. In the past I had been overlooked for these opportunities because of my commute and my commitment to Hayden Grace. I know that if I had been more willing to miss more competitions, more practices, more dinners, I might have been further in my career, but the little things matter, and with Stefan not being around I had too much guilt already for the things I did have to miss that were beyond my control.

“Thank you for this opportunity. When do we start?” I asked, hoping I sounded excited, but I felt more terrified than anything. It wasn’t that I wasn’t up to the challenge, because I was, but the timing was horrible. Hayden Grace still had four competitions this year, and if she won any of them she might have more; I could feel the stress and anxiety starting to build as I fidgeted with my watch. Maybe the account was still thirty to sixty days before becoming active, I thought to myself. It wasn’t unheard of for the company to make these big announcements yet the project to be delayed by paperwork or the legal department.

“The clients will be here Monday, and I’ll need you in the city all next week. This project is going to require some serious time and dedication, and I know you have the ability to put the work in... Now Andy, if the work isn’t up to par, it might be time to seriously evaluate your position with the company,” he warned. “Take the rest of the week

off and relax—be ready to have your head in the game Monday,” he said, dismissing me with a wave of his hand. My heart was racing, and I had a pit in my stomach during my drive home. It was fantastic news. This was an opportunity of a lifetime, but how was I going to balance work and Hayden Grace? It had long been an unspoken understanding that from November to April I was often working remotely to balance the crazy practice and competition schedule Hayden Grace had. It’s not that I didn’t work hard, but I never took the lead on projects because I didn’t have the time to do it all. I still had nothing figured out by the time I pulled into the driveway back home. Looking at the clock, Hayden Grace was due home in about thirty minutes; it was time to start dinner and get cleaned up, but instead I sat down on the sofa to process the day. When Hayden Grace walked in the door I was still sitting on the sofa in my work clothes.

It was almost eight-thirty by the time we sat down to dinner. Hayden Grace had gotten home from practice and had run straight to her room to shower and get cleaned up which wasn’t uncommon for her. While Hayden Grace was cleaning up, I tried to clear my head so I could pull together a fabulous gourmet meal of salad, rice, carrots and reheated chicken. I knew I was never going to win any ‘cook of the year’ awards with my culinary talents as I looked at the sad options on the table. While I was waiting on Hayden Grace to emerge from her room, my phone rang.

“Andy?” I heard a male voice from the other side.

“Yes?”

“It’s Ron.”

“Oh, Coach Davis, how are you?” I asked in confusion. It was rare that Ron actually called. I usually got debriefed about Hayden Grace on the weekends when I was on the mountain.

“Hayden Grace had a rough practice today. She fell on almost every run—one of those falls scrapped her up pretty badly,” he paused to let the information sink in. I thought of Hayden Grace and how quickly she had rushed in straight to her room.

“I haven’t seen her yet; she went straight to her room,” I confessed after a moment.

“Andy, she has more God-given talent than most of the boys and girls we have here, but there is something keeping her back,” he exclaimed, raising his voice in frustration.

“I know.”

“Despite the performance today, I’m going to put her in the line-up this weekend because I’m not ready to give up on her. Maybe you can talk to her and see what’s going on. She had a great practice the other day, but today was the polar opposite.”

“I understand. I will talk to her. I really appreciate you calling with your concerns.”

“You’re welcome,” he paused, “...how are you doing, Andy?” he asked after a moment. Ron and I had known each other a very long time. He was making waves on the mountain as a snowboarding talent when I

was eighteen. We even dated a short while, but then he got injured, and I met Stefan. We have remained friends, and he always looked out for Hayden Grace.

“Things are good,” I lied. Ron didn’t need to know about the stress and anxiety. He was just being polite, and I didn’t need to burden him with my life problems.

“That’s good,” he replied, leaving an awkward pause. I could hear Hayden Grace coming down the hallway.

“Ron, she’s coming. I’ll talk to you later,” I said and disconnected quickly without giving him a chance to say anything further. When she rounded the corner I could immediately see the scratches on her cheek and a black eye starting to form on her left eye.

“Oh honey,” I said, rushing to her to examine her further.

“Mom, it’s no big deal,” she said, trying to push me away.

“You know better,” I said, taking a closer look. Satisfied with my examination, I went to the freezer and made up a small bag of ice.

“Who was on the phone?” she asked, taking a seat at the table.

“Coach Davis.”

“He thought practice was that bad that he called you?” she sounded surprised and hurt.

“He was worried about your injuries and just wanted to update me,” I said as a half-truth. “What was going on up there today?” I asked, handing her a bag of ice and a dishtowel for her eye.

“What’s this for?” she asking, holding up the dishtowel with two fingers.

“To wrap around the bag of ice,” I said with exasperation.

“Oh.”

“The mountain?” I asked, bringing her back to the issue at hand.

“I don’t know...” she said, struggling with her words. I knew better than to push her and instead sat dinner down in front of her and waited. “I was just over thinking it,” she finally said.

“Was that all?” I asked. Her saying she was ‘over thinking it’ was a generic response. She stopped what she was doing and looked up at me. We had a stare down; the fact that she only had one good eye did nothing to deter me. Neither of us wanted to be the first to talk about the white elephant in the room. Finally, unable to keep up the staring contest, she looked down at her food.

“I miss Dad...I want him to be there with me so badly,” she finally whispered.

“Oh honey, we both miss him very much,” I whispered back putting down my fork and coming around the table to squat down in front of her. I rested my hands on her knees. “You need to know he is always with you,” I said, and a small tear slid down her cheek.

“Do you think he’s proud of me?” she asked as more tears welled up in her eyes.

“Hayden Grace, of course he’s proud of you. You were the love of

his life, and you continue to grow into a beautiful young woman,” I said, wrapping her into a hug. She dropped the ice and leaned down and hugged me back, crying into my shoulder. Molly who had been lying under the table came over and whined at the sight of us, licking both our faces causing us to laugh. The moment was so touching, yet it was breaking my heart.

“Come on,” I said after a long moment, grabbing her hand. Hayden Grace hesitated but got up as I led her out onto the back porch. The cold night air was crisp causing us both to shiver. The moonlight bounced off of the snow which was covered in a thin layer of ice, making it look like glass and illuminating the backyard. Molly bounded down off the porch and frolicked in the crunchy snow.

“Look up,” I told her, and she obediently gazed up into the sky. “What do you see?”

“The moon, the stars, the dark sky,” she responded.

“Okay, focus on the stars,” I said, and I could tell she was looking at them intently.

“Remember what I told you right after we found out that Dad had passed away? Whenever you miss him, look up and know he’s there among the stars looking down on us,” I quietly commented as a small hitch developed in my throat.

“What about during the day?” she whispered while not breaking her stare with the stars.

“The stars are always there day and night. Just because you can’t

see them during the day doesn't mean they aren't there. Just like Dad, you can't see him or touch him, but he's always there...he's always cheering you on," I whispered as the tears fell down my cheeks, causing me to quickly wipe them away so Hayden Grace wouldn't see.

"Can I talk to him?"

"I do all the time," I said, and she looked up at me with questions in her eyes.

"I know he can hear me, and when I look at the stars, I feel like he's talking back," I said, looking up at the twinkling starbursts.

"Okay," she said and looked up.

"Okay."

"Mom," she said after a moment.

"Yes?"

"Can I have a moment... alone... with Dad," she asked shyly.

"Of course," I said in surprise. "Molly, come," I called out to the retriever that was now rolling in the snow. Molly and I stepped inside, and I watched Hayden Grace as she walked to the edge of the porch looking up. I could see her talking, but I wasn't sure what she was saying. The tears flowed freely down my cheeks over the heartbreak I was feeling for Hayden Grace. I could live with my own heartbreak I thought, but her pain felt as if it was going to suffocate me. After several minutes Hayden Grace turned to come back inside, and I quickly made myself busy at the kitchen counter.

“Mom?” she asked, and I turned around.

“Yes.”

“I love you,” she said and embraced me in a big hug.

“I love you too.”

Chapter 3

That evening, after Hayden Grace finally went to bed, I lay in bed constantly repeating the evening's conversation and events in my head. Unable to sleep, an idea started to form, and I crept up into the attic. Being an old house, the attic had a full set of stairs that were hidden behind a closet door in the hallway. They creaked loudly as I ascended; at the top stair I fumbled for the light switch. Once the lights flickered on it took my eyes a moment to adjust to the dim and crowded attic space. It had only been a short while since I had been up here, but everything remained the same—dust and cobwebs collected on the boxes and old furniture that was arranged in the far corner. Various holiday decorations were stacked closest to the door as those were the most frequently used items stored up here. Some of Hayden Grace's toys from her childhood poked out of boxes which were piled next to a wide array of dated snowboard and ski equipment. I scanned the attic for a hunter green footlocker and eventually located it towards the back of the attic next to a clothing rack that was covered in plastic to protect the garments that hung on it. I could hear the pitter patter of paws and the jingle of Molly's collar behind me as she made her way up the stairs. She sniffed around at all the boxes as I dragged the footlocker out into the open space.

It was a large, vintage metal footlocker and in black paint on the lid was scrawled, CPT STEFAN PARKER. I sighed and sank down next to

the solid case. I ran my hand across the dusty lid which caused me to cough slightly. Molly made her way over and smelled the trunk before whining slightly and lying down next to me—she remembered too. It had been six years, but it still felt like yesterday. It was a day that will always be etched into my memory. It was a warm Saturday in April, and thankfully, Hayden Grace was at her friend's house for a sleepover; she was nine. I was home alone with a then two-year-old Molly, attempting to make carrot cake cupcakes for Easter the next day. Molly started barking and pacing at the front door before the doorbell even rang. I remember rushing to wash my hands, not wanting whoever was there to wait. The second I opened the door and saw their faces, I knew. The notifying officer and chaplain introduced themselves and escorted me to the sofa. They spoke a lot about honor, service and country—I don't remember the details, but I do remember when the officer reached over and put his hand on my arm and said 'he died saving a life'.

'Of course, he did,' I remember mumbling; it was so Stefan.

I thought it was painful learning that my husband had died while serving his country, but nothing compared to telling Hayden Grace the next day. By the time she had arrived back at the house from the sleepover my parents and younger sister, Jennifer, who was still in high school, had already driven up from Maryland where they were living at the time. My brother Drew was getting ready to graduate from law school and was in the middle of preparing for exams so he wouldn't be able to make it for another day or two. My dad was close to retiring after spending thirty-five years in the army. Out of everyone there that day he understood more than any of us did; he never said a word to me. Instead

he just gave me a big hug and held me while I cried. He later told me that a day like that was a day he dreaded the most for my mom, sister, brother and me—he thought about it every single day of his time in the service. I had called and asked Stefan’s parents to come over, but they preferred to stay at home and grieve.

When Hayden Grace entered the house she was a normal nine-year-old girl worried about braces and obsessed with Hannah Montana—it broke my heart that I was about to change that. I asked her to take her things to her room and then to come sit with me on the back porch. She fussed a little that she wanted to see Grams and Grandpa but finally agreed. We sat in silence for ten minutes before I worked up the courage to speak. When I finally told her that her daddy had been hurt while he was away and wouldn’t be coming back, she cried. At first she wouldn’t let me hug her and instead ran to the corner of the porch with such anger in her eyes. When she finally sunk to her knees shaking, I went over and engulfed her into a hug, and she wouldn’t let go for hours. It wasn’t until she finally fell asleep, still hugging my neck, that I was able to put her down.

With a reluctant sigh I opened the footlocker. It now carried mostly sentimental items and memorabilia of Stefan, most of which I was saving for Hayden Grace. I had long ago given away his clothes and many personal effects to his parents and brothers and sisters. He was just as much a part of their lives as he was ours. I rifled through the items when I came across several letters. They were labeled ‘16’, ‘18’, ‘21’, ‘Wedding Day’ and ‘The Big Win’. I had hidden them in the footlocker knowing Hayden Grace never ventured into the attic. She had a very

practical fear of everything that involved the dark, cobwebs, spiders and ‘creepy’ things as she once told me. I set the envelope labeled ‘The Big Win’ to the side and put the rest of the envelopes back as they each awaited a specific time in Hayden Grace’s life. Stefan had written letters to Hayden Grace before his first deployment in case something ever happened. He gave them to me to keep safe and made me promise to wait for each occasion. After his second tour I thought I would be able to throw them all away as he would be around to tell her in person, but then he got called for a third tour and he never came home.

Next, I came across a letter I knew all too familiarly. It was all creased from being unfolded and refolded a million times. I recalled finally having to put the letter up in storage because I was reading it every night, and instead of trying to live in the present, I was reliving the past. Slowly unfolding the letter I hesitated a moment but then realized it didn’t matter because I had long memorized each line; thankfully it no longer evoked the same torrent of emotion that it once had on me.

Dear Andrea,

If you are reading this letter, I’m so sorry. It was never supposed to end this way but we both understood the sacrifices it might take.

Words cannot express how much my life with you has meant to me. You brought me meaning, hope and love. Then you gave me the greatest gift of all, the gift of being a dad. My life with you and Hayden Grace has been the greatest joy in life.

I can only imagine how hard this will be on both of you. I know you are strong and can live through the pain – I always told you that you were the tougher Parker. But Hayden Grace is so young; I fear this might break her tender spirit. Please let her know that she was and always will be my little girl, and I am and always will be so very proud of her.

There is nothing more I have to say that we haven't already said or vowed to each other. Know that I loved you more than my own life, and you now deserve the love and happiness of someone that truly understands you for you.

Look for me in the stars as always. I will be there looking down on both of you.

*Love,
Stefan*

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I carefully folder the letter back up. Flashes of memories from our wedding flooded my thoughts. The sadness that crept through me was different than the sadness that I felt six years ago; this sadness was bearable. I now knew life would go on and that he was true to his word because I had already felt him among the stars. Next in the trunk was a piece of college ruled paper labeled 'Rules'. This one brought a smile to my face although it often made Hayden Grace very grumpy. It was a list of rules for both of us, but mostly for Hayden Grace in his absence. It hung on the refrigerator

during his last tour and stayed there for nearly two years after his death. It wasn't until Hayden Grace finally asked me to take it down that we moved it.

Again, even though I had this list memorized, I couldn't help but read through it.

Hayden Grace:

Rule 1 – No dating until you're 18.

Rule 2 – No cell phones in your room at night, no passwords we don't know.

Rule 3 – No boys in your room.

Rule 4 – No staying home alone until you're 16.

Rule 5 – When you drive, both hands on the wheel at all times.

Rule 6 – School is important – As and Bs are expected.

Rule 7 – Chores are a must – mow the lawn, clean the house, do the laundry – you get the idea.

Rule 8 – ~~Don't fight with your mother.~~ (She said that is not realistic) Talk to your mother. There is no room for secrets and don't bottle things up inside.

Rule 9 – Remember to say please, thank you and you're welcome. Show respect to those around you.

Rule 10 – Love unconditionally no matter who comes into your life (this one is REALLY important).

Andy:

Rule 1 – Take a deep breath, have patience.

Rule 2 – Don't forget to ask for help, you don't have to do this

alone.

Rule 3 – Find happiness every day.

Rule 3 was much harder than Stefan could believe, but I was slowly working on it, I thought to myself as I put the ‘Rules’ back in the trunk. Scanning the trunk, I finally spotted the corner of the small plastic bag of patches I was looking for and gave it a big tug, causing a small avalanche of items. When the slight cloud of dust settled, I examined the baggie. They were patches that had either been on Stefan’s uniforms or extras waiting to be added. I grabbed two patches and set them to the side with the letter. I took a couple of extra minutes to sort through the rest of the items before finally closing the lid and pushing it back into place. After gathering the few items off of the ground, Molly and I finally made our way back downstairs.

Once downstairs I quietly crept into Hayden Grace’s room in search of her snowboarding jacket. Stopping only momentarily to check on her eye and other minor injuries and assessing that she was fine, I continued my search. Finding the white and black jacket on the ground by her closet door covered by another winter jacket and at least three pairs of various colored jeans, I crept back out of the room, trying not to wake her. Sitting on the sofa while a late night talk show buzzed in the background, I slowly stitched the two patches into the inside lining of her jacket. Finished, I held it up to view my handiwork. The first patch was one that was in the traditional digital camouflage fabric—a rectangle with black stitching that read ‘PARKER’ and the second was the United States flag. Of everything that was on his uniforms, these

were the ones I thought Hayden Grace would remember the most. Proud of both my idea and my handiwork, I finally headed to bed only to find Molly had already beaten me there.