

DESSA'S CROSSING: A NOVEL

CHAPTER ONE

Dessa never wanted Penelope to die—she only wanted to leave her.

Yet here she was—dead.

Dessa searched Penelope's empty eyes.

The hate had vanished from them now, and the love was gone too—yet her last words, “You’ll be mine forever!” still echoed in Dessa’s mind.

She stood up, stared at her bloody hands, and her knees gave way.

But she was a rescuer, a warrior—and on the search-and-rescue battlefield, she’d seen it all. Climbers, nearly frozen—brought back to life. Hikers, vanished without a trace—never found. Children, injured in ravines—saved. Bodies, bloated in rivers and lakes—recovered. Every time, she managed to quell her emotions, focusing on the rescue itself. There was time for feelings once the mission was done.

Now, too, she needed to stay cool, stay calm. Keep it together—like she had at Wallace Falls, on Baring Mountain, in Devil’s Cave. Even Penelope’s death—her ex’s death—shouldn’t throw her off-balance. It mustn’t. It wouldn’t.

She closed her eyes, drawing in a deep breath and holding it for a few heartbeats before exhaling steadily. She focused on the tip of her nose and inhaled again.

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After a dozen breaths, her body softened. She glanced at her hands, now trembling less. She wiped them across her pants and dialed 9-1-1, but the call didn't go through.

Of course. She was in Europe—she needed to dial 1-1-2.

When the call connected, she reported what had happened, and emergency services said they would be there as soon as they could.

Hanging up, she stared at the door. Penelope had locked it and hurled the key out the window. Dessa was trapped here—with Penelope's body—unless someone helped her get out.

She dialed Fred, but her call went straight to voicemail. Fred was sleeping downstairs and might hear her if she shouted—though she didn't want to risk waking Archie next door.

She had no choice but to rappel out of the locked room.

After rummaging through her climbing gear, she pulled out a rope and secured it to the bed frame. With one last tug to test its hold, she climbed over the windowsill, swung outside, and rappelled down the wall to a downstairs window. She knocked on the glass, and Fred stirred, rising from the couch in the dark.

He opened the window and gazed at her. "Dessa!"

The rope bit into her hands.

"The moonlight around your head... You look like a saint."

"I'm no saint."

Fred's eyes widened. "Is that blood?"

"Yes, it is. Now back up."

She swung onto the windowsill, landing in a squat, and jumped into the room.

"I need to clean up."

Fred stood at the window, staring into the night. “Why haven’t the cops arrived yet?”

Dessa stirred in her chair, her throat raw. “Zarena is a tiny village,” she murmured. Deep in the Balkan Mountains, they were far from the services they’d taken for granted in Washington State. “There’s no law enforcement here. The police have to drive all the way up the mountain from the county seat.”

Fred left his post at the window and sat opposite her. “You haven’t had your tea.”

“I tried... I couldn’t swallow.”

She bowed her head.

“Do you want anything else?”

She raised her eyes to meet his, her chin quivering. “I want to reverse time and handle everything differently.” She let out a sob. “I’m a rescuer, not a murderer.”

“No... You’re not a murderer.”

But wasn’t she?

Police sirens wailed in the distance, their shrill tone slicing through the silence. She glanced at Fred, and he offered a reassuring smile.

She swallowed her tears.

Who would have thought, after the way they’d met a year ago—when she’d hoisted him off a cliff face and carried him to safety—that Fred would be her only support in this surreal moment?

CHAPTER TWO

One Year Earlier, Washington State

“You can’t get lost if you don’t plan on going back.” Fred hitched his fingers on the straps of his pack.

He abandoned the trail, threading along the forested ridge, dry twigs crackling under his boots. He paused by a cedar tree, roots clinging to the shallow soil at the cliff’s edge. A gnarled branch jutted out—over the abyss.

This was the spot.

Settling himself on the ground, he took off his backpack and fished out a bottle of Courvoisier and a dark chocolate bar. He unsealed the bottle and took a swig, the cognac warming him with its velvety smoothness.

He bit into the chocolate bar and took another swig.

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Fred smirked at the absurdity of it all: if he got too drunk, he might stumble off the cliff and ruin his plans to hang himself. Talk about wasted effort. He staggered to his feet, deciding to hang the rope on the branch while he was still semi-sober.

From his pack, he pulled out the rope and his phone. He’d had the foresight to download instructions for a hangman’s knot and was reading them now. Uncoiling the rope, he threw one end over the branch and tried to tie the knot, but he kept messing it up.

Tying a noose sure wasn't easy if you'd never hanged yourself before.

When the noose was finally ready, he turned it in his hands, inspected it, and put it around his neck. It fit just right, neither too loose nor too tight.

He raised his phone, took a selfie, and stared at the screen. His nose didn't strike him as too crooked, and his graying goatee wasn't too ugly. In fact, just a couple of days ago, his shrink insisted he was still a looker for his age, slender and wiry as he was. Now, even though no one was watching, he straightened his back and shoulders. He didn't want to die looking unpresentable.

He shoved the phone into his pocket and crouched with the noose still around his neck, reaching for the bottle. "Cheers," he muttered, taking a huge swig. He stared at the now half-empty Courvoisier bottle before kneeling to stash it in his pack, as if he could finish it in the afterlife. Rising again, he donned his pack and peered over the edge.

The rocky crests of the North Cascades stretched to the east, with Glacier Peak's ice-covered slopes rising over the ridges from the distant Pacific Northwest. Fred was glad he had chosen to end his life here, amid the mountains he loved, rather than overdosing on pills in bed.

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Standing at the edge—the wind whispering through the branches, memories flooding his mind—Fred closed his eyes, and his life flashed before him.

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He saw himself as a baby boy, spending evenings snoozing in a vegetable basket at his parents' Paris bistro. As a horrified toddler, certain his father was murdering his mother when in fact they were making love in the quiet kitchen when business was slow. As a confused teenager, unable to see women as anything but mother-like angels or purely sexual objects.

As an apprentice, making the best cassoulet in town. A cash-strapped immigrant, working night shifts in Seattle cafeterias. A popular cook at the Grumpy Chef across from Boeing. A junior menu consultant at Boeing by day and a graduate student by night. Finally, a full-time instructor in culinary arts at Puget College.

And then he saw... Eva.

Eva Joy, the visual art student who, gods know why, had taken his Pastries course. The very Eva Joy who had been his wife for a quarter-century now.

He opened his eyes, glanced once more at the blue horizon, and tightened the noose. It was time. Standing straight, squaring his shoulders, and lifting his chin, he sang.

"Little skylark, lovely little skylark, I will pluck your neck, little lark... O-o-o-oh! And your head, and your beak, and your neck! A-a-a-ah!"

Singing, he leaped into the abyss.

A burning pain cut through his neck, an invisible whip cracking above his head. His derriere slammed into the cliff. He tumbled down the smooth, steep face. The branch, still tethered to the rope, rattled behind him like a rambunctious puppy. Spread-eagled, he slid through a patch of bushes and hit a small ledge, bending his knees. The branch shot by him and pulled the rope taut. He staggered but managed to grab a crack in the rock, keeping his balance.

Standing upright on the ledge and clinging to the cliff with his hands, he looked around. Miraculously, he had come to a stop in the middle of the cliff face, a hundred feet below the edge. Another hundred feet farther down, the cliff base was littered with sharp-edged rocks.

The branch was dangling below him, pulling on the noose—pulling him down.

His stomach churned, and his legs trembled. He could fall and die at any moment now—but he didn’t want to! Not anymore!

Now he wanted to live.

He unclenched his fingers from the crack and snatched his phone from his pocket. His hand shook as he dialed 9-1-1. A woman answered the call right away.

“I fell!” he yelled. “Mount Pilchuck! Send help.”

The connection was poor, and he could only catch part of the reply. “Mountain Search and Rescue... hold on... if necessary... at night... four or five hours, no more...”

“Four or five hours!?” His chin quivered like a child’s as he spoke. “I’m hanging off a cliff with a noose around my neck! A huge branch is pulling me down! If it doesn’t choke me, it’ll pull me into the abyss! Send a helicopter—” But then, his phone battery died.

A disquieting silence fell around him.

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The helicopter roared into view after an hour. Fred’s heart leapt with hope—only to crash as the aircraft rumbled past him, thundering away along the jagged south ridge.

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Oh, No! Why couldn't they spot him, standing on this ledge smack in the middle of the cliff?! Hugging the rock tight, the branch still tugging on his neck!

He waved his arm, screaming. His neck was swollen and throbbing, and he was unsure whether to lament or congratulate himself for making a terrible noose that hadn't choked him to death yet.

He waved and screamed again.

And—voilà!—the helicopter returned, circled, then hovered a hundred feet above him. An orange-clad figure appeared in the open door of the aircraft. The figure swooped down, swirling around in the rotor wash, and landed beside him on the narrow ledge. The rescuer, a petite person with a girlish figure, smiled at him.

He must've died, he thought, and this was a little flame-colored angel coming to take him to heaven.

"I'm Dessa Sinich," shouted the woman through the wind and engine noise. "I'll get you out of here, but we have to hurry because this ledge is rather precarious."

She unzipped her pocket, pulled out a Swiss Army knife, and cut the rope hanging around his neck. The branch tumbled down the cliff and shattered on the rocks below.

"So far, so good," his angel said. "Now let's take off your backpack... carefully, carefully... that's it." She placed the pack on the ledge behind her.

She wound a strap around his chest, under his arms, and clipped it to the rescue hook. "This is to prevent you from sliding out of the chest strap." She attached another strap between his legs. "One last check, and we're ready to be hoisted up!"

"Can we take my backpack?... My car keys are in there!"

“Of course.” She hoisted his pack onto her shoulders. “Now get ready to play pinball—except we’ll be the ball.”

“I’m scared!”

“Scared? What could possibly go wrong?”

“We could fall and die!”

She gave him a quick smile. “I wouldn’t let you die even if you wanted to.”

She spoke into her radio and waved at a man sitting at the helicopter door. The hoist cable grew taut as they reeled them in. In a couple of seconds, Fred hung below her, and she wrapped her legs around his torso. They spun together, hurtling toward the cliff—but she pushed off the rock face with her arms. They swung back toward the cliff, but she pushed them away once more.

He filled his lungs with air. His savior looked tiny, but she was tougher than rock. *Phew!* He exhaled.

The man at the door helped him and his rescuer inside and pointed to a seat. Fred slumped over and closed his eyes. The man pulled the door shut, and the next moment they were flying up and away from the cliff. Farther and farther away.

His last bit of strength vanished, and he drifted off.

Eva appeared before him... sitting at his desk, completely naked.

“Let me have some Courvoisier.” Eva winked at him. “With every sip, I’ll tell you about one of my lovers.”

“No, don’t! You’re making me feel sick.” A surge of bile rose in his throat. “I’m going to throw up!”

“In the bag!”

He opened his eyes. That voice didn’t belong to Eva—it was his rescuer’s. She pushed his head forward, pressed a paper bag to his mouth, and he vomited.

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“Please, hang on. We’ll be landing at the hospital in a couple of minutes.”

He wanted to nod but couldn’t. Instead, he just closed his eyes again.

CHAPTER THREE

As Dessa stepped out of the helicopter onto the rooftop helipad, Fred lunged for the door.

“Wait!” she barked, but he was already stumbling out, landing in a heap at the feet of a startled deputy. Two orderlies rushed forward, hoisting Fred onto a gurney.

The deputy shook his head. “That’s one way to make an entrance.”

“He fell a hundred feet down a cliff. By some miracle, he survived—and without any visible injuries.”

“God must’ve intervened.”

“No. He’s drunk.”

Not just drunk—wasted. He had thrown up all over the helicopter, and she’d have to clean it.

She and the deputy watched the orderlies as they rolled Fred away.

“Drunk people survive because they don’t resist the fall. They roll down cliffs like balls of play dough. The sober ones die.”

Behind her, the helicopter droned louder. It was time to fly back to the search-and-rescue base, wrap up the mission, and go home.

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Dessa strode toward the aircraft, jumped inside, and took her seat by the side door. The helicopter lifted a yard above the roof—then wobbled. The engine roared to full power, and she gripped the edge of

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her seat, her fingers vibrating with the fuselage. The tail rotor wailed like a circular saw, the main blades chopped through the air, and the helicopter rose like a startled bird.

Helicopter pilots don't just fly—they beat the air into submission.

The aircraft turned toward the SAR base.

“Sorry for the rough ride, guys.” The pilot steadied the helicopter with a practiced hand. “I’m hungry.”

The flight helmets muffled the engine noise, and the pilot’s voice resounded in Dessa’s headset.

She nodded in understanding. He was a great pilot—and she knew there was more to it than just an empty stomach. His wife was away visiting her sister in New York, leaving him lonely and anxious, with no one to talk to in his wifeless kitchen.

“Do you want me to order you a pizza?” the copilot asked.

“Thanks, I still have some from the one you bought me yesterday.”

“Then should I play you a song?” the crew chief piped up from the back.

The crew chief was a big man who sat at the side door during hoists, his long legs dangling in the air. His name was Joe—but people called him Big Joe.

“Alexa, play ‘Leftover Chicken, Leftover Ham,’” Big Joe shouted.

The pilot’s phone streamed the song into the crew’s headsets. The three men hummed and traded jokes as Dessa watched the cityscape fade away. The forested hills around the base came into view, peppered with farms and rural homes. She lived in one of those homes with Penelope and Archie—and as they flew over the ridge, Dessa spotted it.

They descended—but in the middle of the helipad stood a donkey, so still it seemed tethered by invisible chains. The helicopter

swooped down with a rumble and hovered thirty feet above it. The donkey looked up with a placid gaze, bent its legs, lay down, and lowered its head. Its ears drooped.

“It must’ve run away from the donkey farm,” Big Joe said.

They waited, still hovering above the animal.

Dessa pursed her lips. “It won’t budge.”

“Looks like it’s lying down for the night.” The pilot ascended and orbited.

There was no one at the base to round up the donkey. Dessa suggested calling the sheriff, but the pilot opposed it.

“If we do, we’ll become the laughingstock of the whole county. Just imagine the headlines... ‘Pilot calls for help, ass needs saving.’”

Big Joe and the copilot agreed.

The pilot turned to her. “I wonder if Penelope could drive down and chase away the animal?”

Dessa called Penelope, laughing as she told her about the donkey. But when she asked if Penelope could come help, Penelope hung up mid-sentence. This left her uncertain whether Penelope was actually going to come—but then she spotted Penelope’s Toyota leaving the garage and heading into the forest.

Ten long minutes later, the Toyota arrived at the helipad.

She watched Penelope slip out and walk to the donkey, toting a paper bag. As Penelope got closer, the donkey bared its teeth, as if to say, “Do you want a kick in the face?” It looked as if Penelope bared her teeth back at the animal.

Penelope stopped three feet from the animal and pulled a carrot from the bag. The donkey rose, approached her, and took a bite. Penelope took a couple of steps back and offered the carrot again while

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pulling out another carrot. The donkey took another bite and followed her, chewing. Bite after bite, Penelope led the donkey away.

The pilot descended to the liberated helipad.

Penelope glanced at the landing helicopter over her shoulder, her cheeks puffed up like a hamster's. Without waiting for Dessa, Penelope got into the Toyota and headed back home. The donkey followed along the road, accompanied by the fading sounds of the helicopter's engine. The rotors stopped turning, and everybody spilled out onto the pad.

The pilot turned to Dessa. "Penelope didn't seem happy about coming down here."

"I interrupted her teleconference." She glanced away. "She's been so busy at work lately, so stressed out."

The pilot nodded. "I wanted to thank her for driving down here and helping us out."

"I'll tell her when I get home. It'll make her happy."

* * *

(Chapter continues.)