

Chapter 1 – A Vacation for the Dogs

July 23

Yellowstone National Park is a paradise of mountain wilderness, studded with dramatic canyons, alpine rivers, and lush forests. David Sowers knew just below the earth's crust seethed an enormous hot spot of magma—a supervolcano. His geologist father had taught him if it were to erupt, as it has at least three times in the distant past, it would be a catastrophic end to life as we know it.

That particular day, however, David was more interested in his new girlfriend Laura Gillice and their dogs than the remote possibility of an impending, life-changing disaster.

After taking their two Australian shepherds for a walk along the Canyon to Norris Road, he started loading them into the back of his Nissan Xterra. He easily led Laura's ten-month-old puppy Laila into her metal crate. Now the problem child. He turned his attention to his black and white fifteen-month-old dog Jade. She regarded him with azure eyes and wagged her stubbed tail resulting in a furious rear end wiggle.

"Shake it don't break it, Jade." He tried to cajole her into her plastic airline carrier. "Come on girl. We're going someplace fun, not the vet. Don't be a..." She resisted, pulling hard on the leash. He tried a stern voice and since he rarely used it, hoped it would have an effect on his dog. After several minutes of a battle of wills, she was finally in her crate.

He hopped into the passenger side and slammed the door shut. "Well that was easy."

Laura laughed. "Lure her with a treat. You'll be more successful training her." It had been her idea to crate the dogs on their first trip together. Jade usually rode in the front seat with David. It was too dangerous, Laura reasoned. She knew firsthand how the unexpected could happen and it didn't hurt to be prepared.

"Jade's the one training *me*," he admitted. No doubt, she had a mind of her own. Recently he'd put up a wooden fence around his property. Jade took one glance and easily jumped it. She returned when she chose to, ignoring his calls. On the drive up from Denver, Jade had barked about every two hours as if she needed to pee. After a few unnecessary stops, he'd realized she'd been playing him.

Laura glanced at her phone, studying the photo David had just taken of her at Yellowstone Falls. She posed where she'd once been photographed as a five-year old.

"Is that what you wanted?" David leaned over, placing a hand on her bare knee.

"It'll be perfect for Throwback Thursday." The image fifty years later was of a tall, fit blonde smiling confidently into the camera. Jade and Laila barked and Laura laughed as she started the engine. "This vacation is for the dogs."

"You're right, darlin.' They're lucky puppies." His endearment always brought out his Amarillo, Texas drawl even though he'd lived in Colorado most of his life.

Inhaling the scent of pine through the open window, Laura steered along the highway as heavy tourist traffic whizzed by. Glancing at the dashboard clock, she noted it read a few minutes after three in the afternoon. The cloudy sky was threatening but so far had only resulted in streaks of evaporating rain covering the mountain peaks like a veil.

"Seen anything yet?" Laura was at the wheel so David could focus on spotting wildlife, especially grizzlies.

"A squirrel maybe..." David squinted at the deep woods outlined by stretches of clearings.

She navigated the section of hilly road about five miles east of Norris Junction to return to their hotel in Cody. They'd had a full day of sightseeing around Yellowstone, including the Old Faithful geyser and dramatic Yellowstone Canyon and falls. A mix of their music played, alternative rock for her and heavy metal for him.

Approaching a blind curve, a small red car in front of her suddenly veered into the left lane. "What the...?" Laura gasped as a prickle of adrenaline shot up her arms.

In a moment, it became clear—a large white pickup loomed in their lane, bearing down on them head on.

She swerved hard left, but too late. The truck smashed into their front passenger side at full speed. With a deafening boom, Laura and David were thrown forward. Their SUV spun 360 degrees as bits of metal shot into the air. The airbags deployed with a punch and then deflated, leaving the acrid odor of explosive charge. Talcum powder drifted through the air like dust motes.

Everything stuttered into slow motion. A geyser of steam erupted from the engine. Laura realized their vehicle was sliding backwards from the force of the collision. She frantically hit the brakes. Nothing. The SUV skidded while the engine hissed. She saw the ravine next to them. With a tremendous jolt, the Nissan slid over a curb and stopped, teetering inches from the edge of the steep drop-off.

Laura turned to David slumped against the passenger window. She shrieked, "David! David!" No response. She had to get out, get help. She desperately pushed at her car door and it refused to budge. They were trapped.

"Help! Help!" Steam poured from the front of the SUV. She scanned the rearview mirror trying to make sense of the chaos in the back. "Puppies, are you hurt?" When the dogs were silent, she was sure they were injured—or worse.

David took a big gulp of air. His chest rose, then stopped. Each few seconds between his irregular breaths seemed to last for minutes.

Panic overtook her. She shoved uselessly on her door, screaming, "*He's dying! He's dying!*"

Like a mirage, someone peered in her window and tapped on it. "Help us," she pleaded. Men yanked on the driver's side door while Laura pushed. Finally, it rasped open. With another glance at David, she took heart that he was breathing.

A man in a bright green shirt arrived. "I'm a medical doctor." He urged caution as the men helped Laura out of the SUV. They carefully laid her on the ground next to the wreck, supporting her back and neck.

Laura heard someone say, "Possible broken neck." She wasn't sure who they were talking about. Things hazed in an almost hallucinogenic way. She wiggled her hands and feet. Other than a deep pain from her seatbelt, she didn't appear to have other major injuries. Whenever she studied the steaming Nissan, a wave of nausea rushed over her. More worrisome, she couldn't see David on the other side of the SUV.

A ranger came up to her and covered her with a blanket. "We're getting help. Hang in there."

Laura realized she'd been shivering. "What about the dogs? How are our puppies?"

The ranger peered into the back of the vehicle. It sounded to Laura like Jade was furiously barking. "They're fine. We'll take care of them."

"Their leashes are in the back. Make sure they're on them. And they both like wet food."

Two women sat by Laura's side and comforted her until the EMTs arrived. Laura continued to hear barking from the SUV. God, let them both be all right, she prayed. She then remembered

the adage to document an accident, and asked one of the women to get the phones from the wreck and take pictures of the scene.

When the woman showed Laura the photos, she gasped. David was splayed on the ground, his leg in an unnatural position. Something else about the scene was odd—then she realized what was different. Their car had spun one hundred eighty degrees from the direction they'd been traveling. The realization of the force of the impact sent a shock wave through her.

An older woman came over, crying. "My son is so sorry. He fell asleep at the wheel. The four of us were tired, and I guess we all nodded off. I thought he was in the best shape to drive."

"Were any of you hurt?" Laura asked.

Shaking her head, she said in a strong Southern accent, "No... Just a little shook up and maybe bruised."

Laura couldn't respond, upset over the obvious injuries David had suffered. She watched the older lady shuffle toward the pickup truck. Veteran Park Ranger Dave Page arrived shortly after the accident. The compact gray-bearded man knelt next to Laura, and patted her hand. "I am so sorry it's taking so long. There were other accidents in the Park today. Ambulances for all of you are coming from the Old Faithful area."

Laura held back tears. She knew that was over an hour from them. An hour that David possibly didn't have.

He paused. "Except for ...your husband?"

"No. David's a ...friend." She didn't know exactly how to describe their new relationship. "What's wrong?"

"He's stable, but we won't wait for an ambulance. He needs to be airlifted to the nearest hospital."

"Oh my God. Where's that?" Laura asked groggily.

"Idaho Falls."

"So far away."

The ranger then asked for contact information, and Laura gave him David's phone with the numbers for his daughter Angie and son Scott.

"And who can I notify for you?"

Laura hesitated. She had no children, her parents had passed. Her brother was traveling on a cruise with his wife and couldn't be easily reached. The one person who should be her emergency contact wouldn't be able to take a phone call, let alone process the information.

She shook her head. "There's no one."

Minutes dragged like hours, and then she heard the *whup-whup-whup* of the helicopter nearing.

"Thank God, he's getting help," Laura said to the two women with her.

She heard thunder rumbling and the echoes off the surrounding mountains. The sky darkened to a steel gray. A downdraft of cold air blasted from the threatening clouds, sending a chill down her arms followed by a sense of dread.

Then the sound of the helicopter grew fainter.

A ranger spoke into a radio. Kneeling next to her, he said, "The copter can't land in this weather. We're going to ambulance him to the West Yellowstone airstrip and airlift him after the storms pass."

A wave of fear and disappointment washed over Laura. David would lose precious time.

“You’ll go by ground and meet him at Idaho Falls Hospital.” The first ambulance arrived, red lights strobing across the scene. Her throat tightened as she watched them load David and drive off. Panic overtook her as she realized she might never see him again.

Twenty minutes later, Laura was loaded into a Park emergency vehicle as the sky opened up with rain. Once outside Yellowstone, she transferred to a commercial ambulance.

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The rangers watched the last of the emergency vehicles drive off, and directed traffic around the crash site. People who’d been patiently sitting in their cars started their engines. The tow trucks arrived and the rangers decided it was time to get the dogs.

“I’ll take them home,” a woman ranger volunteered.

One of them opened the back hatch and pulled Laila out of her twisted, metal cage. Another ranger reached in and touched Jade’s plastic airline carrier. It cracked open like an egg. In a moment, something black and white flashed out the back of the SUV. Like a streak of lightning zigzagging across the open meadow, and despite the calls of the rangers, Jade disappeared into the dark forest.