

CHAPTER ONE

“You’re crazy. He’s nothing like Daniel.” I shook my head for emphasis.

On one level, Nina was wrong to say the two men were similar. Conroy’s charm was studied, whereas Daniel’s had been genuine, even a little vulnerable.

But she was focused on a different level. “He’s another loser, Nathan.”

There’s nobody like a big sister to tell you what she thinks, whether you want to hear it or not.

Nina was only one year older than I was, but—I hated that this was true—she had proven herself to be considerably more mature.

Of course, she’d inherited her position as the oldest sibling in the family when our older brother Neil had died. That didn’t necessarily mean that I followed her advice.

Neil. Our big brother.

Neil had been born five years before me. He and his best friend, Jeremy Ford, started claiming mountain peaks together when they were in their mid-teens. I lost track of how many mountains they climbed together. And when I was eighteen, just over two years ago, they had died. They’d been hiking in the Priest Wilderness in Virginia, an extremely remote area.

I’d never heard of a fire tornado before, but that summer I learned it was a thing. Neil and Jeremy were unable to get out of the path of one of these hell-spawned monsters. Neil called me from the satellite phone he’d brought for the trip, as he and Jeremy huddled inside the portable fire shelter that might have saved their lives if the fire had been smaller, or less ferocious. Neil had told me the same thing I think anyone would say when facing certain death: Tell everyone I love them.

I heard my brother die. I can still hear the screams.

I met Conroy, the man Nina and I were arguing about, the summer before my senior year at UNH. It was on Cannon Mountain: four thousand one hundred feet above sea level, a qualifier for the Four Thousand Foot Club. Before he'd died, Neil had been aiming for the honor of membership in this club, whose members have climbed all of New Hampshire's forty-eight peaks with summits four thousand feet or higher, at least once each. His goal, cruelly interrupted, was now mine.

I parked my grandmother's Subaru along the side of the highway; even though I'd left the house in Concord where I lived with Gram at O-dawn-thirty, there were enough people already at the Lafayette Place campground that there was no more parking available there. I assured myself that most of the people from these cars were here to ride the aerial tram up the mountain. I didn't expect to see a lot of hikers on the tough trails I planned for the day. I liked rugged trails. The more rugged the better. The fewer other hikers the better.

Toward the beginning of the trail, about half a mile from the Lonesome Lake trailhead, I turned onto the Hi-Cannon Trail, and by that time there was no one else in sight. It was a gorgeous day in late August, with the warmth of summer in the process of giving way to fall.

About a mile up the trail, when it had grown steep, I came to something that a lot of people who consider climbing this mountain will hike a different trail to avoid. It's a ladder, or a couple of them: wooden slats nailed to paired two-by-fours climbing at a moderately steep angle for about twenty feet. Mind you, I wouldn't want to fall off the thing; for the ascent, the right side is attached rather precariously to a vertical granite face, and the left is open to a steep fall into the forest below. It's a true ladder; there are no handrails. I'm pleased to say I had no problem on it.

Past the ladder, the Hi-Cannon climbs up a lot, and down a bit, and up a lot more, around huge boulders and over granite faces that forced me to use hands as well as feet. It's not technical rock climbing by any means, but it's not an easy trail.

At one point I came out onto a massive granite ledge, the lower Cannon outlook. Facing east, I could see for miles as my eyes followed the massive ridge connecting Mount Liberty in the south to Mount Lafayette, pretty much due east of where I stood. The sky was so bright and clear I could almost pick out Gram's car, parked way down along Route 93. There's nothing like this kind of view to validate the work it takes to climb this high.

The freckled granite of the ledge, heated by the sun, was almost too hot to sit on. The backs of my legs below my hiking shorts settled onto the gritty surface, and gradually my skin grew accustomed to the temperature. I filled my lungs with mountain air that was scented with pine and with that earthy decay from fallen leaves. Legs dangling over the sloping ledge, I pulled out a hunk of cheese, tore a handful of bread from my large sandwich roll, and settled in for a snack, relishing the solitude.

I'd barely swallowed a couple of mouthfuls when I heard the scuff of someone's boots on the granite behind me to my left.

Shit.

I decided to pretend there was no one there. At least it sounded like just one person, not a group of people who would completely spoil the spot for me.

"What a sight."

It was a man. A man whose voice started somewhere near his feet, gaining resonance and dimension as it rose through his body.

Former intentions aside, I turned enough to see a pair of brown hiking boots with dark red laces, the legs above the green tweed hiking socks decorated with light brown hairs catching sunlight. My eyes moved up the tanned skin on his calves, over his knees to the hem of dark olive shorts. From the edge of my vision I could tell he was gazing into the distance, so I allowed my gaze to linger on his crotch, even though the thick material and heavy zipper prevented me from getting much of a sense of what lay beneath.

A motion of his head warned me to move my eyes up, past the sleekly muscled arms, over the broad shoulders to the face. Sunglasses hid his eyes,

but there was no hiding the jawline that made me think of the granite ledges I'd crawled over on my way up the trail. Fashionably tousled light brown hair polished off the look, with a few longish curls teasing his forehead.

In so many ways, he was the opposite of me. This guy was practically Aryan, while anyone looking at me would almost certainly guess at my somewhat-diluted Chinese heritage. If my slight build wasn't a clue, my board-straight, nearly-black hair would give it away.

His face toward me, he asked, "Mind if I join you?"

He waited until I extended my left arm toward the granite beside me before dropping his pack between us and settling onto the warm rock. I guessed his age at mid-twenties. Once he was sitting, I could tell he wasn't especially tall—just a little taller than me, probably. He positioned himself so he could extend his right hand in my direction.

"Conroy Finnegan."

"Nathan Bartlett," I responded. His grip was firm, the handshake just one downward plunge and a definite release.

He busied himself pulling out a water bottle and a small ziplock bag that held gorp.

"You hiked Cannon before, Nathan?"

"Not Cannon, no. First time on this one. I'm working my way through." I waited to see if he'd know what that meant.

He did. "Notched my boots for Owl's Head a couple of weeks ago. You got that one yet?"

Owl's Head was one of the peaks I would have to climb to join the four-thousand-foot club. He hadn't actually notched his boots, of course; that was just an expression some hikers use.

"Not yet," I admitted. "Good climb?"

He chuckled. "It's one of those peaks you do just because you have to. I decided to get it out of the way."

"Tell me more."

“Summit’s not above tree line, for one thing, so that’s not much fun. The lower part of the trail is kind of flat, and some folks bike it. Mountain bikes, of course. But then they have to lock their bikes someplace, because once you hit the rock slide part of the trail, it’s painfully slow going. Dangerous, actually. Not a fun climb, unless you like that kind of thing. I don’t mind the danger, but I don’t like a slow pace.”

“But—biking? That doesn’t count.”

He finished a swig of water and shook his head. “Not toward the patch, no.”

I knew he meant the patch awarded hikers who’ve proven their qualification for the club. Biking any part of a trail, or traveling it by any means other than on foot, would not qualify you for claiming that peak.

“How many peaks do you have so far?” I had to know.

“This today is number nineteen. And, of course, twenty and twenty-one, because I’ll do the ridge loop over the Kinsmans.”

I nodded, trying to look knowing. On the drive up, I’d decided to see what Cannon was like before setting my sights on North and South Kinsman, just south of Cannon, each of which is over four thousand feet. It’s one of those perfect loops that gets you more than one qualifying peak in a day’s climb, if you’re up to it; I just hadn’t been sure how tough Cannon would be.

Cannon was only number eight for me. I was hoping he wouldn’t ask what my total was. Neil had started claiming peaks in his mid-teens and had been well on his way before he’d died. I reminded myself I had gotten a late start.

So instead of volunteering my score, I took a side trail in the conversation.

“Had a crazy experience last fall. Climbed Lafayette twice. By accident.”

I took a swig from my own water bottle, going for a dramatic pause.

“Thereon on hangs a tale,” Conroy said, his voice implying that he wanted to hear it.

“My college roommate and I decided to do an overnight. We parked near the head for Falling Waters Trail—”

“Love that trail. You went up and over Little Haystack and on to Lincoln, then.”

Was he showing off? This was *my* story.

“Anyway,” I continued, “yes, so I claimed Lincoln for the club, too. El Speed isn’t going for the patch, but—”

“El Speed?”

Okay, so that interruption might reasonably be warranted. “Yeah. Larry Speed. Taking the initial ‘L’—”

He laughed, and his laugh had the same character as his voice: deep, resonant, compelling. “I get it! Fun.”

I sighed inwardly. Was he going to let me finish? I gazed east toward the mountain in question. “After the Lafayette summit, we headed a little way down the Greenleaf Trail to make camp. In the morning, when he went to put on his frame pack, one of the straps broke.”

“Man!”

“We tried a few ways to fix it, but nothing worked. So we put as much as we could into my pack, hid his, and finished the loop down, taking turns wearing the pack. At the car, we emptied my pack and hiked with it back up to get what we’d left hidden. We were so far back up the mountain we said, fuck it, let’s just do the summits again.”

Conroy laughed again, and again the richness of it pulled at me. “That’s not how you’re supposed to do a loop!” He pushed the bridge of his sunglasses down his nose a little, revealing clear blue eyes and very long lashes, and gave me a teasing glare from under his eyebrows. “You do realize that doesn’t mean you can claim four peaks.”

“Yeah. Tempting, though.”

We had finished our snacks, but neither of us made a move to leave. I lifted my legs, one at a time, off the pocked surface of the granite, feeling with my fingers where the skin was temporarily dented. I could reasonably have gotten up, wished Conroy a great hike, and headed off. I’m not sure why I didn’t. Sure,

the guy was attractive and friendly, but he didn't know I was gay, and it was unlikely he was. It was also unlikely I'd ever see him again. Still, neither of us made a move to leave.

After about a minute of silence, in which we both gazed into the gorgeous distance, he said, "Did you see anyone on the ladder?"

"You're the first person I've seen since I left the lower part of the Lonesome Lake Trail."

He paused, no doubt for effect. "I had to wait for this couple who were part-way up the ladder when I got there. Man and a woman. They had a mixed-breed dog with them, maybe the size of a pit bull. The woman was about five feet up from the bottom, following close behind the guy and—well, the dog."

"The dog. On the ladder."

"Not exactly. So, the guy is going up the ladder backward, one arm around the dog, which is kind of hanging onto whatever portion of lap the guy can keep available. The guy hitches himself up slat by slat, very slowly, very carefully, while the woman stays a couple of slats below him on the ladder so she can break the fall of the dog if the guy can't hang onto it."

He lifted his pack, set it to his left so it was no longer between us, and pulled a phone out of one of the pockets. He shifted himself close to me as he swiped through his photos.

"You gotta see this."

He'd shot a short video of the trio. Their progress was slow and looked painful.

Conroy leaned closer. "Watch the expression on the dog's face."

I could smell Conroy's sun-warmed skin. It was hard to concentrate on the phone. But as I watched, the guy lost his grip on the ladder for a second and nearly dropped the dog, and the dog's eyes—already unnaturally wide open and glaringly white against the dog's dark grey coat—grew even bigger. Conroy and I both laughed, and he settled back onto his own spot on the rock.

"I take it they all survived?"

“They did. Though it was a bit of a pain waiting for them to get all the way up. I passed them on the trail as soon as I was up the ladder.”

“Wonder how they’ll make it down again.”

“That will be a challenge. Don’t think I want to watch.”

As if on cue, a man’s voice behind us called, “Here, boy!” I heard something crashing through the trees behind us, and then panting noises grew louder.

“Uh oh. Well, that’s it for me.” Conroy closed his pack and started to stand up.

“Wait!” I was almost too late, but Conroy sat down again just as the dog skidded out onto the rock and plowed into him. If he’d been partially standing, or all the way up, the dog might have sent him careening over the ledge.

A woman’s voice called, “Sorry!”

I grabbed the dog’s collar and held on as Conroy rolled away from the edge of the granite ledge and got to his feet. Pack gripped in one hand, he turned toward the two people approaching us.

I couldn’t see Conroy’s face, but I knew he was not happy. The dog’s people were grinning, their apparent good humor obviously covering up nervousness. Conroy said nothing to them, just pulled out his phone again.

“Nathan, is there a tag on the collar?”

I twisted the collar to see. “Yeah.”

“Would you hold it still?” And Conroy took a close shot of the tag. He turned to the couple. “I’ve already got photos of the two of you.” He let that hang in the air, possibly so the people would wonder what that was going to mean for them.

Conroy hefted his pack and shrugged into it. “Do you have a leash for the dog?”

The man said, “Um, well, yeah, but—”

“Put it on him.” The man started to protest. Conroy moved over to him, stopping mere inches from his face. “Put. It. On. Him.” His voice was not loud, but it was heavy with threat. “Now.”

“Teddy,” the woman said, obviously frightened, “go ahead. It’s probably better, anyway.”

Teddy said nothing, didn’t move a muscle. So the woman dug into a pocket in his pack and came up with a leash. She held it out to Teddy, but he didn’t take it.

Conroy did. He tossed it to me and told Teddy, “I was in the process of getting up when your dog crashed into me. If my friend hadn’t warned me to sit down, both your dog and I would have gone over the edge. Do you know what’s down there? Do you think either of us would have survived?”

Teddy shrugged and backed a few inches away from Conroy. I fastened the leash to the dog’s collar, but I was close enough to the edge that I didn’t want to try and stand up while controlling the dog, who was not exactly settled. I held the other end of the leash out to the woman behind me, who came and took it.

As I got to my feet I heard Conroy tell Teddy, “If I see you on this trail, or any other trail, and you have an off-leash dog, I will report you.”

He moved away, back toward the trail, and I followed, shrugging into my pack. I was barely past Teddy when I heard him grumble, “Asshole.”

I froze, turned toward him, and glared. The woman said, “Never mind, Teddy. Let’s have a water break.” She coaxed him toward the ledge where Conroy and I had been sitting, and I turned back toward the trail.

Conroy was waiting for me. “Sorry if that seemed harsh. And, by the way, thanks for saving my ass.”

“No problem.”

“I hate dogs.

“Really? How come?”

“Don’t know, actually. Just always have. You, uh, you wanna join up for a bit here?”

I did, even though I wasn’t altogether sure what to make of Conroy; I mean, how could anyone hate dogs and not know why? Was it like “I was mauled by

my neighbor's dog when I was a kid," or something like that? Plus, he'd been a little—harsh was his word, and I guess it fit. But he was still intriguing, and I could pump him for information about trails I'd need to consider if I was ever going to earn that patch.

As we hiked we talked trails, in New Hampshire and elsewhere, and I got the impression that either he was showing me how well he could maintain breath control by talking non-stop while climbing up steep sections, or he was testing me, or both. It didn't matter; we were well matched in terms of ability and physical conditioning.

He'd hiked in the Rockies. He'd hiked in Austria. He'd hiked in Alaska, and Canada, and Norway.

At one point I asked, "What, not in New Zealand?"

He grinned at me. "Maybe that'll be next. I've been working my way in that direction. Ever hiked the Kalalau Trail?"

"Never heard of it." There was no point in being coy, in trying to seem more experienced than I was. I knew that whatever I'd done, Conroy had done so much more.

"Kaua'i. Absolute paradise. And in some ways, absolute hell. That island is the whole ball of wax."

As we continued toward the summit, my favorite bits were when the trail was too narrow to walk side by side. Either I was in front, and I wondered if he was watching my ass, or he was in front, and I was definitely watching his.

By the time we were approaching the observation tower at the summit, it was obvious we would not be there alone. Far from it, in fact. There was an easier trail to the summit than the one Conroy and I had taken—one without a ladder—and there was that aerial tramway that brought people up from the base as well.

Conroy had set us a very fast pace, and it wasn't quite noon yet. As we stood near the base of the tower, he didn't say much to me. He avoided the tower and

just did his best to position himself so that he could see as much of the distant mountains as possible while maximizing the distance between himself and other people. It wasn't clear to me whether he was also maximizing the distance between the two of us. Was this his opportunity to be off on his own again? Should I take a hint and go back to my own plan of a solitary hike?

The answer became moot when I realized that Conroy was nowhere in sight.

To hell with Conroy, I decided. I wanted to get a view from as great a height as I could. I climbed the steps up the observation tower to the viewing platform.

On one hand, it was worth every step of the climb up the tower. On another—maybe it shouldn't have surprised me to see so many people up here, but I wasn't quite prepared for the masses of them. There was an older couple with a small, fluffy dog in a carryall. There was a young couple so androgynous-looking in their black leather clothing and boots, and silver piercings, and colorfully-dyed hair, that I couldn't tell whether either of them was male, female, or neither. A short, plump woman wearing an orange sari nearly bumped into me as she stared at the screen on her phone, experiencing the vista on that tiny window so she could watch it again, hours later, on that same tiny screen. There were also people whose hiking gear identified them as having arrived at the summit, like me, under their own steam.

I managed to find an opening on the platform that afforded me a great view to the south. I leaned my arms on the railing and let my gaze blur into the distance, past Lake Winnepesaukee toward Concord, where Gram was either working in the small vegetable garden behind our house, or taking a nap, or putting a dinner together for the two of us. Nina was in New York City, making friends with her two new roommates, about to start an internship at a fashion magazine.

Every time I left for a hike, usually in Gram's car, leaving Gram at home alone, I felt a wrench. She'd been our mother and father and everything else a good parent can be ever since my folks and Gram's husband had died in a

traffic accident, when I was all of one year old. If Neil had been alive, he'd already be married to Cotton, the girl he'd met at grad school, and he'd be living someplace other than Concord. Nina had finished her undergrad years and might be headed for more school in New York. I was the only one left, and I know Gram felt lonely, even when I was home with her.

I stared into the hazy distance and wondered whether every youngest child with only one parent felt like this. Did I owe Gram anything? I owed her everything. And yet it was her job to prepare me to leave her behind, and she'd done it well.

That didn't mean it wasn't supposed to hurt.

Almost unconsciously I became aware that someone had taken a position close beside me. Conroy was back.

"Penny for your thoughts."

I wasn't sure how that made me feel. The closest I could come was slightly annoyed; he disappears without a word, and he just pops in again as though he hadn't left? Who does that?

Without looking at him I said, "They're worth more than that."

He laughed. "I like that. Think I'll save it for when I might need it."

"You may quote me."

He leaned on the railing beside me, both of us staring into the same distance but thinking our own thoughts, until Conroy said, "Let's blow this scene, eh? You up for the Kinsmans?"

He pointed toward the two closest summits to the south. They looked green and welcoming. Plus, I knew that the hardest part of the hike was behind me; although we'd need to go back down the Hi-Cannon for a little way, claiming the two Kinsman peaks would be a relatively small matter of some ups and downs as we walked the ridge. We wouldn't need to start at the highway.

I turned my wrist so I could see the face of the Garmin Forerunner hiker's watch that Gram had given me for my birthday last year. It was just past noon. Before I could reply, Conroy whistled.

“Nice watch. Does it have GPS?”

“It has about everything. Um, sure. Let’s do the loop.”

As we descended the tower stairs, he said, “I figure we can put some distance behind us, find a spot on North Kinsman for a lunch break.”

“Sounds good.”

Back on the trail again, he asked where I lived, I told him, and I mentioned I was about to start my senior year at college. I asked where he lived and learned he was house-sitting in Wolfboro, on Lake Winnepesaukee, for the summer. Before I could ask why the owners wouldn’t want to be in their own lake house for the summer, he went on to say that he had another house-sitting job lined up for the winter. I didn’t ask about his work or question his apparent peripatetic lifestyle; each to his own, I figured.

We didn’t talk much after leaving Cannon, but that was fine by me. And anyway, having a hiking companion who didn’t chatter meant I could pay attention to the trees, to the feel of the occasional breeze on my face and arms, to the solid feel of my boots on the granite. The quiet also gave me the space to relish the slight burn in my thigh muscles as the trail climbed, and when the trail descended I could take pride in the work I’d done to condition the muscles above my knees and alongside my shin bones. If those muscles aren’t in good shape, the work of constantly lowering your entire weight onto surfaces below you will wreck them to a point where walking downhill the next day will be a real struggle.

There was one distant view that appeared suddenly between the trees on the way to North Kinsman that made me freeze in my tracks. We were going along at a good pace, and I was in front at the moment (for once). Vistas were appearing between the trees or above open ledges, too many of them to count, and certainly too many to stop for each one, or we’d never get where we were going. But this one spot....

It felt as though someone had put it there just for me, someone who knew I would be right where I was on a day like today. There was some color on distant hills, slopes that rolled downward one behind the other, all pointing more or less toward the pristine, level plane of a pure blue lake.

Where had I seen this before? Why did it have such a powerful effect on me? Why did it feel so painfully bittersweet?

Conroy nearly bumped into me from behind. He stopped short and moved to stand beside me, and we both stared into the distance. I couldn't speak.

He could. "Another gorgeous vista." He heaved a sigh, part leftover exertion and part appreciation, and then he headed off along the trail, leaving me standing there.

My heart felt swollen. Tears welled up in my eyes. I heard myself whisper, "What *is* it?" I'd never been on this trail before, and yet that scene felt so familiar, so agonizingly familiar. Finally I had to move on, but the image—and the mystery—stayed in my head.

The rest of the hike to North Kinsman was rugged, and when we reached the summit I feared that it wasn't going to be lunch-with-a-view; there was a lot of open granite, but the trees grew up along the sides of the trail, blocking a good bit of the vista. However, after Conroy planted his boot on the summit marker, he headed away from the trail as though he knew right where he wanted to be. I followed. He stopped on an open granite expanse from which the view was fairly open. We sat on the warm, prickly granite and gazed silently for a minute or two. I looked for my vista, the one that had moved me so much, but it was gone. At least, I couldn't see it from here.

I'd packed my usual hiking lunch: peanut butter on whole wheat with honey; an apple; a chocolate bar; and lots of water.

Conroy had cheese and bread, an orange, and more gorp. He watched with amusement as I had to lick my fingers where honey dripped out of the sandwich.

"You're enjoying that, aren't you?"

“I love honey.”

He tilted his head in a way that might be teasing, or it might be insinuating, or it might be both. “I was referring to the licking.”

Something about his voice made me look harder at his face. Did that tone carry some meaning? His eyes on mine, he used his teeth to tear a hunk of bread off the large piece in his hand, exaggerating the action as though making a point. But what point?

Before I could figure anything out he turned his head to gaze into the distance, at the limited view that was open to us from this spot.