

### CHAPTER 3

It was midnight by the time River pulled her truck back onto the road, the full moon illuminating the pavement in front of her. River felt giddy with victory, but also slightly embarrassed at how easy it was to answer most of the questions. Lucky for her, she remembered her high school book report about daylight savings time being abolished. The reunification of the two Koreas had been big news; you almost didn't have to be a trivia nerd to remember that day in 2023. The question about the only state to not legalize marijuana stumped her, never having been that interested in the stuff, but someone on her team remembered it was Alabama. It was fun to win trivia night, but it was more fun being in a room with other people who liked to use their brains. She missed that part of her life. It was rare to find avid readers inside the Territory. Even the clerk at the Post Office seemed mystified by her habits

“You sure do get a lot of mail,” the woman had said earlier in the day when River had gone to pick up a few packages. “What’s inside all the boxes?”

When River said they were books, the postmaster replied, “Books! What do you need those for?”

That conversation was followed later in the day by a tense exchange with her mother. “River, it’s time to stop this nonsense and come back home,” Ingrid Petersen scolded. “We have enough money to get by now. Marc’s debt is paid off.”

“Just a few more weeks and then I’ll come home,” River pleaded, hoping to get her off the phone. But the thought did nag at her.

*What are you still doing here?*

Before River could answer her own question, a man appeared in the road several feet in front of her. She blinked a few times to clear her sight, worried the two rum and Cokes had caught up with

her. But then the specter raised his arms over his head in surrender. River's brain reverted to combat mode as she slammed on the brakes, forcing her truck to the side of the road. She pulled her Glock from beneath the driver's seat, her internal voice doing an assessment. *I have seventeen bullets in a new magazine, and he is one man with no weapon showing.* She watched the reaction of the man as she climbed out of her truck. He was definitely surprised to see a woman. As the seconds whirled past, River scrutinized the figure in front of her, trying to get a sense of what she was dealing with. The stranger stood stock still, except for his chest which rose and fell rapidly like a dog panting. In the light of the full moon she noted a hint of red hair under a navy ski cap and a pale face marked by some nasty scrapes. His hands were also a mess, chewed up and bloody like he'd slid down a mountain on his fingers.

"Keep your hands up where I can see them," she said, her gun trained on him. "We don't get a lot of hitchhikers in this part of the world. Tell me what you're doing here."

"I had an accident," the man said.

"An accident?" River repeated.

"I was kayaking on the Missouri, collided with a boulder and got tossed out," he said. "I must have hit my head. When I woke up, I was miles downstream and pretty beat up."

River remained silent, her sixth sense telling her she was missing something.

"Can I put my hands down?" the man asked. "I'm exhausted."

"Not yet," she said. "Tell me again how you got here."

"I told you, I had an accident."

"Kayaking at night? Near the Territory?" River asked. "You're either stupid, crazy, or worse, you're one of those protesters looking for trouble. I'll tell you right now, trouble is not something I want any part of." She fished a small Maglite out of her coat pocket and ran the beam across the stranger's frame. She went back and forth twice, finally stopping when she caught something she'd

missed before. “Did you also shoot yourself while you were kayaking?” River asked, eyeing what was clearly a bullet hole through the sleeve of his dry suit.

“I know it looks bad,” the man said. “But I can explain.”

“I doubt that very much,” she said.

“Please, I need your help,” he said. “One night, and then I’ll be on my way. If you’ll just let me sleep in your truck and get me a first aid kit, I’ll patch myself up and be out at dawn. If anyone asks, you can tell them you had no idea I was there.”

“You do know where you are?” she asked. “They’ll shoot us both if they find out I’ve been harboring a fugitive, and it would be totally legal.”

“I know it,” the man said, looking River straight in the eye. “I’m wounded and freezing. I have no weapon, few supplies and no idea where I am. The truth is, you are my only chance for survival.”

River knew she had seconds to decide. At the moment, they were alone. It was possible a car or another tanker truck would appear on the highway, or maybe a patrol drone would pass overhead. If they were discovered, she would have no choice but to turn him in. She knew that what she was contemplating was against the rules. She’d just told him she didn’t want trouble, but, really, a tiny part of her did. Maybe she was overconfident from a night of winning, of being in her element, but she wanted to know more about the stranger standing before her. How did this man with ginger hair manage to trespass into the Territory? She’d driven this stretch of road countless times and encountered nothing and gone home to more of the same. Maybe she could steal away a little time to learn his story, to take a break from the monotony of her existence. One night, and then the mystery man would be gone. And if he tried anything, she reasoned, she would kill him without a second thought.

“OK,” she said. “One night, and then you are dust in the wind. Got it?”

“Got it. I promise, I won’t be any trouble,” the man said, lowering his arms just seconds before he passed out.