

**THE
DEVIL
ORDERS
TAKEOUT**

CHAPTER 1

The sun sat low in the sky by the time Grayson Bolt finally stored the last of the luggage in the back of the Mercedes. His black suitcase looked stodgy next to Sandra's playful leopard print, complete with pink nametag. As usual, hers was stuffed near to bursting, while his held the bare essentials: underwear, toothbrush, and socks.

Their luggage habits reflected their personalities. Sandra had always been spontaneous and energetic, while Grayson had been cool, practical, and driven. Even now, minutes before departing on their first real anniversary celebration in years—a last-minute trip to Olive Garden didn't count—his mind was already running over everything he'd need to do when he got back to the office: finish the Henderson tax file, look into the Colbenson case. Tax season was almost upon him and—

Shut up, he commanded himself. *This weekend isn't about work. This weekend is about Sandra.*

Hard to believe someone as gorgeous and amazing as Sandra had agreed to marry him—and had actually stuck with him for all these years despite his long office hours.

"Is everything there?" Sandra called from the doorway.

"Yep!" Grayson hollered back, watching as she dashed to the car all bundled up in a puffy white coat at least two sizes too big. Even though she hadn't bothered to put on any makeup for the drive and had thrown her dark hair up into a messy bun, Grayson still felt his temperature rise the longer he watched her. She was stunning, with endless brown eyes that sucked him in and a crooked smile that made his heart slug faster.

She opened the passenger door and gasped in delight, pulling out a bouquet of twelve perfect red roses. "Grayson! They're beautiful!"

"I just hope they survive the ride," he replied. "Maybe you should tuck them in the back, next to the gun."

Sandra buried her nose in the bouquet, breathing in its scent. "They're so romantic," she said, planting a kiss on his lips. "You've earned a surprise for later."

Grayson grinned and started the engine. *My God, she's something.*

Sandra reached behind her and laid down the bouquet before turning back to him and batting her sparkling eyes. "I saw champagne but no bearskin rug. Will I have to send you out in the snow to wrestle a grizzly?"

"Grrr."

As Grayson headed north on Interstate 87, Sandra applied lip gloss, snapped the visor mirror shut, and dropped the gloss into her purse. "Darn," she said, rummaging inside. "I left my driving glasses in my car."

"You could always wear your prescription ski goggles."

"Wouldn't I look cute?" Sandra flipped the mirror open again and peered in. She tugged the skin at the corner of one eye. "Look at this," she said, turning to him. "Crow's feet, and I'm not even forty. Should I get my eyes done?"

He glanced at her. "Forget it. You're beautiful."

"Men are lucky. Look at you, years older and—"

"Don't remind me. I hate thinking of the big five-o."

She closed the visor. "That's okay. I like your gray." She stroked the hair above his ear. "It matches your sexy gray eyes."

"Careful or I'll start hunting for that bearskin."

Sandra smiled. "We've got the whole weekend without the kids. And please, let's agree, no golf talk. I hear it every day from Troy."

He raised two fingers. "Scout's honor. He can pester grandma and his little brother for two days."

An hour later they turned west onto Route 28, a peaceful mountain road recently plowed. A blue sky replaced earlier

clouds, and the sun reflected off the snow. Grayson rubbed his temples as a dull throb began to build behind his eyes. "Sweetheart, I'm getting a migraine. We've got to stop."

"I have Tylenol," Sandra offered, reaching for her purse.

"That won't help. I need to close my eyes. Maybe we should find a hotel for the night."

"Oh, honey, we're only an hour from the lodge. I'll drive."

"You don't have your glasses."

"I'll be fine. Pull over."

With the seat and mirrors adjusted, Sandra swung the car onto the road while Grayson leaned back and closed his eyes. He pictured the thickly wooded route of aspen and poplar as she maneuvered the car through the turns, and imagined the stream rising and falling on the left where the road dropped off sharply. The car thumped-thumped-thumped, and his eyes shot open. Sandra had drifted onto the shoulder.

"Sorry, honey. I was turning up the heater," she explained with a guilty smile.

They rounded a bend and Sandra screamed. A pale horse lay in the narrow road, legs kicking. Sandra slammed on the brakes.

Grayson gasped and braced his hands on the dash.

She turned the wheel, and the car veered sideways in the slush.

My God! It's either the horse or the cliff.

They skidded toward the cliff, he grabbed the wheel, yanked it the other way.

The car's rear-end whipped around, just missing the horse's thrashing hooves.

Sandra pulled over and stopped the car. "Oh, my God!" She put a hand to her chest. "I didn't see it until—"

"That's okay, you didn't hit it." Of all times to have a headache.

He glanced out the rear window. The horse wore a saddle and was struggling on an icy patch where trees arched over the pavement. "I've got to help that animal off the road and search for the rider." He took her hands. "Everything will be okay." He climbed out of the car and leaned against it for a moment. A sharp pain stabbed behind one eye.

The horse had wriggled up onto a knee at the edge of the ice. The poor thing panted heavily, its eyes wild as it swung its head back and forth. Grayson worried that it might regain its footing only to run off and get hit by a car or tumble over the cliff.

He ran the short distance to the animal. "Easy, boy. Easy." The horse was struggling to get to its feet, head bobbing. It got up onto both knees. Grayson took the reins and stepped back. The horse tottered to its feet with a loud nicker. Grayson stroked the animal. "Good fella. Good fella."

"Help! Is somebody up there?" A child's frightened cry came from the steep ravine below.

Grayson swung around. "Yes, yes! Down here!" He moved to the cliff's edge and looked over the side. About ten feet down and maybe sixty feet above a rocky stream, a young girl wearing a blue riding helmet was caught in a thicket of hemlock, their roots protruding from the cliff like shaggy paws.

Icy panic squeezed at Grayson's throat, but he forced it down, calling out, "Everything will be all right. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"My horse fell on the ice!"

"I know, honey. He's fine, I have him right here. What's your name?"

"Kim," she answered.

Grayson looked at the horse. He wished he could use its reins to secure the girl and pull her up, but they were too short. "Don't worry, Kim, we'll get you out of there."

He could remove the horse's reins, hold one end, and toss the other to Kim. That would ensure she didn't slip from her fragile perch and plunge into the stream, and it would also give him time to use his cell phone to call for help.

"What's your horse's name?" he asked.

"Dakota."

"Okay, Kim. I'm going to toss you Dakota's reins."

"No!" she yelled. "Use his lead rope, that's better."

"I've got it," Sandra said.

Grayson turned to see her removing the rope from the saddle. He took it and peered back down at Kim. She was on her stomach, her hands clinging to the thicket.

“Tie the rope to Dakota’s saddle and throw me the other end,” she called. “He’ll pull me up.”

Grayson tossed her the rope, and she managed to hitch the loop under her arms. Then he swiftly tied the other end to the saddle horn.

“Let’s go, Dakota,” Grayson coaxed.

He stood by the gelding, tugging the reins, his temples pounding. Dakota’s feet danced in place, but he refused to move. Grayson grabbed the bridle and yanked hard. The horse took two steps back, the rope snapped taut, and then he stopped.

Sandra, lying on her stomach at the edge of the cliff, looked over. “No, keep going!”

Grayson gave a hard jerk on the bridle, and the horse backed up a little more. “Good boy, easy...easy.”

“Hold on, you’re doing fine,” Sandra shouted down to Kim. Grayson heard an engine rev and looked over Dakota’s back to see a battered green pickup round the bend and barrel toward him in the small turnout. The horse’s ears twitched as he pranced nervously. The driver hit the brakes, and the pickup’s rear end swept near the horse, stirring slush and spit-ting gravel.

Grayson gripped the bridle firmly to keep the panicked horse from bolting. The pickup’s dented door swung open and a leather-faced man in a crumpled cowboy hat jumped out.

“What the hell ya doing with my granddaughter’s horse?” Grayson detected a drunken slur.

The man charged at him, clawing for the reins like a manic, his glassy eyes raging. “Where’s my—”

The horse jerked its head up, snorted, and swung its hind-quarters around, hitting Grayson’s side and almost knocking him to the ground. The man staggered, and Grayson shouted, “Hey! Get the hell—there’s a girl down there. Back off!”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” The man lurched for the reins. The two struggled, each trying to control Dakota.

“Goddamnit, you’re scaring the horse,” Grayson yelled.

“We’re rescuing a—”

“Aaahhhh!” Kim cried.

“Stop the horse!” Sandra shouted. “The rope slipped off one arm.”

“That’s my granddaughter!” the man hollered as Dakota neighed and pranced. “Gimme those reins!”

Grayson, almost blinded by his migraine, saw in horror the steel-shod hooves flash above him and chop downward like sledgehammers. One hoof caught him in a glancing and pain-ful blow on the shoulder, knocking him into the slush, as the reins slipped from his hands.

The man lunged for them, missed, slipped, and fell.

The horse reared onto its hind legs, and the rope’s empty loop sailed up from below and into the air.

“Oh my God!” Sandra shrieked. “She’s gone!”

CHAPTER 2

Grayson and Sandra watched the ambulance maneuver up the snow-covered gravel road from the creek below them. It carried the body of young Kim, who an hour before had plunged into the frigid rock-filled waters to her death.

The police told Grayson and Sandra to wait by the squad car while they took the grandfather's statement.

The two hardly spoke, still numb over the girl's death. Ten minutes later, one of the officers climbed up from the stream, paused a moment, and put a hand on one knee to catch his breath. He was a good thirty pounds heavier than Grayson, who, at six-one, tipped in at a solid one-ninety.

Grayson watched nervously as the officer approached his Mercedes. After peering inside, he bent down to inspect the front end. He stood, arched his back, and started toward Grayson and Sandra with a stern, no nonsense face. Grayson's mouth twisted, and he said under his breath, "I'll do the talking. I don't want you getting cited for not wearing your glasses."

The policeman took their driver's licenses, his dark eyes checking each closely. "Long Island," he said. "You folks are a ways from home. By the looks of your gear, you plan on doing some skiin' and shootin'."

"Not at the same time," Grayson said, then immediately wished he hadn't tried being humorous.

The cop gave him a cold stare. "I didn't think so." He tossed his head toward the car. "That Perazzi in the back seat. Factory choke?"

Grayson nodded. "Nothing fancy. I only shoot skeet. We were on our way to Miller's lodge. It's not far—"

"I know where it is."

Grayson spotted the crazy grandfather talking with another officer. The man pointed up the hillside, then to Grayson's car.

"That poor girl," Sandra said. It's awful, it's just—" She shuddered. "Is that man her grandfather? That's what he yelled."

The officer nodded. "Gus Stockard. He's a local. I'd like to hear from you two what happened." He put their licenses in his shirt pocket and took out a notebook and pen.

Sandra peered at the ground. Grayson started, "I drove around a bend and saw the horse on its back, struggling on the road. I stopped and—"

"You say the horse was lying on the road?"

"That's right. I had to swerve to avoid hitting it."

"I see." The officer clicked his pen and began writing. "Go on."

"I pulled over and ran to the horse." Grayson told him all that followed.

The officer stopped writing and turned to Sandra. "You've been awfully quiet, Mrs. Bolt. I saw a bottle of champagne in your car."

"It's our anniversary."

"So you decided to celebrate up here in the Catskills, drink some bubbly, get in a little skiin', some skeet shootin'?"

"That's right," Grayson said.

The officer turned to him with a scowl. "I wasn't asking you, Mr. Bolt."

"Yes," Sandra said. "We come here often. They know us up at the lodge."

"Your husband said that you came upon the horse lying in the road."

"That's right. He was trying to get up from an ice patch that he must have slipped on."

"Then what happened?"

Sandra cleared her throat. "My husband slammed on the brakes, and we skidded past the horse."

“Your car didn’t hit the horse?”

“It certainly did not.”

He squinted at her. “You sure?”

She held his stare. “Positive.”

He peered at his notes and paged back. “That’s right, your husband stated, ‘I had to swerve to avoid hitting it.’ That’s what you said, isn’t it, Mr. Bolt?”

Heat rose to Grayson’s face. “That’s correct.”

The officer put away his notebook and pen. “That’s interesting, because Mr. Stockard has a different version of events. He said that you—” He pointed to Sandra. “—were driving and struck the horse with your car.”

Sandra’s eyes flicked wide. Grayson shook his head, protesting. “He wasn’t even here. How would he know? And did you happen to notice he’s been drinking?”

“He lives right up there and saw everything.” The officer pointed up the hill. “Sorry to spoil your anniversary, ma’am, but I’m going to have to take you both down to the station.” He whistled and hailed his partner over.

“Wait a minute,” Grayson burst. “He’s lying. You looked at my car. Did you see any sign of—”

The officer opened the rear door of his police car. “Get in.”

Grayson and Sandra looked at each other but climbed inside. Stockard appeared and pressed his face, twisted and hateful, against Grayson’s window. “Bastard murderers,” he yelled. “Don’t think you’re rid of me. She was all I had left and ya took her away. I’ll get even. I’ll get good and even.”

A cold knot gripped Grayson’s heart. He turned to Sandra, her mouth agape, threw his arms around her, and the car took off.