

Chapter One

LONDON

DUBAI

This place was surreal, a tiny slice of winter inside an eternal summer. Lights shone down, making the man-made snow inside Ski Dubai glitter, and giving me a twinge of longing for the crisp, clear skies over the Colorado Rockies. Aspen would be opening later this month, but we were half a world away in the Middle East and weren't even due back stateside until Christmas.

I caught sight of the cameraman coming down the slope behind me and increased my speed. Most days I had no problem with cameras in my face 24-7, but today it was pissing me off. Maybe it was because we'd just finished our live show a couple of days ago, or maybe it was everything that happened—the incident that had nearly killed one of my best friends and put another one into police custody. Hell, maybe it was the inability to so much as piss without the

cameras following me into the bathroom, but I just wanted a few moments to myself.

Shifting my weight, I took the curve along the run, careful to watch the bite against my snowboard as I hit the icy patch just off the edge of the lift track. The entire run took me a matter of seconds, and it sure as hell wasn't going to help me prep for Nepal, but it was better than nothing, especially considering it was ninety degrees outside.

"I almost forgot how fast you are," Paxton said as he skidded to a stop next to me.

"I've practiced a few times this week. I'm not as rusty as I feared." I shrugged. We'd been docked in Dubai with our Study at Sea program for the last five days, and I'd been here almost every day. It had been my only opportunity to use my snowboard since we left Miami three months ago, and there was no chance in hell that I was passing it up.

"Want to go again?" Pax nodded toward the lift as the cameraman finally made it to the bottom of the run. Good thing we'd be doing most of the Nepal filming from the helicopter and GoPros, because this guy was never going to be able to keep up with me.

"How much time do we have?"

He lifted his jacket sleeve and checked his watch. "About an hour. Enough time to get in another run. Leah starts to freak if we're not on board two hours before departure, so this has to be my last one."

"Yeah, well, that's what happens when you're busy making out with your girlfriend in Istanbul and miss the ship."

A slow smile spread across my best friend's face. "Yeah, well, it was more than worth it. What do you say? One more?"

I looked up the hill at the separate runs Ski Dubai offered and nodded. "Yeah, may as well, right? I'm not getting this chance again for a few weeks."

We headed over to the short lift line and waited our turn,

sticking out like sore thumbs in our custom gear against the rented navy and red suits everyone else wore.

I was more than aware of the camera behind us but did my best to ignore it. This whole documentary—*International Waters*—was for Nick, and nine months of having a camera in my face was nothing compared to the rest of his life in that wheelchair. The movie would carry his name with equal billing as the rest of us Originals—those who had started the Renegades—and would put him on the map with his phenomenal ramp designs and stunt setups. So cameras it was.

“Hey, Nova,” a girl ahead of us said with a soft sigh in my direction.

“Hey, princess,” I answered with a wink. “You having fun?” I ran her face through my mental black book, wondering if I’d ever hooked up with her.

I felt the strength of Paxton’s eye roll next to me. He hated my habit—and had no problem voicing that opinion.

“Oh yeah! It’s nice to have a little something cold to bundle up for. It’s been so hot everywhere else we’ve been, right?” The blue-eyed girl batted her overly made-up eyes at me.

“It has,” I said. *She’s on the ship with us.*

“Well, it’s good snuggling weather,” she said with a bite of her lower lip, then waved as she got on the lift ahead of us.

“Don’t start,” I warned Paxton when I saw his mouth open.

He shook his head, and we walked forward for our turn.

“I got the confirmations on the Nepal trip,” he told me as we sat on the lift chair.

“Yeah? It actually worked out with the school stuff?” We’d been trying to set up a ski trip to get some snow time in preparation, but since we’d been everywhere around the Mediterranean and Africa the last three months, there hadn’t been a lot of opportunities for the white, fluffy stuff.

Our trip to Nepal—the one ride I was focused on for the documentary—all hinged on our school schedule, just like everything else this year.

The chair jolted forward, and we were on our way up the man-made incline.

“It comes during the week of the optional shore excursion. So it’ll cost us a week in India, but we’ll swing it. We have ten days total, and we’ll have to write papers on it to make up for the lost cultural excursions.”

I shot him some skeptical side eye. “And Leah was okay with this? Your woman is notoriously anal about school stuff.”

That lovesick grin appeared on his face again, and I swallowed the irrational flare of jealousy that erupted in my stomach. Pax deserved happiness, love, the whole damn fairy tale. I was just a little bitter that shit wasn’t in the cards for me.

I’d fucked up my only shot at love a long time ago.

“She was until I promised we’d stop for a day at the Taj Mahal. Plus, I booked a heli flight up to the Everest base camp.”

“So romantic.”

“Hey, Leah sure as hell isn’t complaining.” He stared ahead for a second and then cocked his head to the side. “But yeah...if you have any suggestions for the girls while we’re up there, I’m all ears. I don’t exactly see Leah heading to the slopes.”

“True. We’ll find something they’ll enjoy. It’s going to kill Penna that she can’t ski this time.”

“Yeah,” Paxton said quietly, and we descended into thoughtful silence.

The air was cold on my face, the joyful sounds of those skiing beneath us echoing off the steel walls of the facility. Leave it to Dubai to build a badass indoor ski resort as part of a mall. Penna should be here with us, not hiding away on board the ship. Pax was right—she was going to wither over

the next couple months until that cast came off. “I’m worried about her. She’s been damn near silent since she got out of the hospital, which is anything but normal.”

“She blames herself,” he said.

“She shouldn’t,” I replied without pause. “Her sister lost it. I love Brooke just as much as you do, but you know it’s true. None of what happened the last three months—not the accidents, the sabotage, the fucked-up head games—was Penna’s fault.”

“How are we going to get her to believe that?”

“By making sure she knows she’s part of this team,” I answered. “It’s always been the four of us—you, me, Nick, and Penna. That wheelchair Nick is in might be permanent, but the one Penna’s riding in sure as hell is not. She’ll be back raising hell in a few months.”

“Physically, maybe. But she’s going dark, man. I don’t know if we’ll get her back in the right head space to compete, and you can bet the X Games are off the table for her. She’ll barely be out of a cast in time, let alone in competition shape.”

I blew my breath out slowly, watching it steam. “Yeah, well, if anyone is going to get there, it will be Penna. She’ll be out of that cast in no time and back on her bike before the docs tell her it’s a good idea.”

“That’s our Rebel,” Pax said with a grin, giving a little nod to her stage name.

Wilder, Rebel, Nova, and Nitro...the Original Renegades. We might have started in Paxton’s backyard and the local skate park, but we were bigger now, with at least twenty Renegades on the ship and more than a few fledglings. No matter how big we got, it would always come back to the four of us. After a decade of risking our lives together, we were a closer family than my biological one. I would give up anything for them.

You already have.

The lift came to an end, and we jumped onto the luscious snow beneath us. God, I missed the crunch, the flow, the way my body was pushed to its limits with only a board beneath my feet. Not that I didn't love skateboarding, but snowboarding was always going to be my number-one love.

"Did you smooth everything out for Gabe and Alex?" I asked as we studied the options beneath us.

"Yeah. The program wasn't too happy about taking them on at second term, but I leaned pretty heavily on the issue."

I snorted. "Since you own the ship and all."

"That may have helped," he admitted. "I know you need them, so it had to be done. They actually flew in this morning, so they'll be ready to start class with us."

"They're the best big-mountain riders of our generation."

"*You're* the best big-mountain rider of our generation," he corrected.

I shrugged. Maybe I was. Maybe I wasn't. But I knew that there was a difference between cocky and confident, and I needed those guys with me in the Himalayas. I needed their judgment and experience to temper my own.

"Hey, let's hit this run," Pax suggested as the cameras caught up to us, nodding toward the black-labeled slope. "It goes right by the place where Leah's watching."

I laughed. "Sure, we'll go show off for your girlfriend." We traversed to where the black run started while I mentally cursed the camera crew. *Try to keep up on this one.* "Speaking of Leah, did her roommate get here? We probably need to include her on the Nepal shit, right?" There were a ton of moving pieces to get that trip perfect, and now I'd need to add one more.

Paxton stiffened next to me. "Yeah, she's here."

"What's wrong?" I asked, slapping his back. "Her friend cramping your solo time with the missus?"

He shook his head. "Nothing like that."

“Hey, Nova,” the same sweetly feminine voice called as she skied over to us. The blonde was back. “We have a little time before the ship leaves port. Want to grab a drink at the bottom of the hill?”

Want to fuck me so I have a story to take home? That was what she was really asking. Usually I wouldn’t mind, but something about watching Pax and Leah lately was getting to me.

Which really sucked.

“I think we’re pretty tight on time here, but maybe if you grab me back at the ship?” I suggested with a smile and hoped I didn’t hurt her feelings.

“I’ll be on the pool deck.” She grinned. “Oh, and I’m Erin,” she offered.

“Nice to meet you,” I replied. “I’m—”

“Nova,” she answered for me, her girlfriend behind her twittering.

Landon. “Right.” She wasn’t interested in who I really was, just the persona, which was fine. *But it’s not.* Besides, it was better than the girls who thought they’d be more than a one-night stand, be the one to reawaken my iced-over heart.

None of them stood a chance.

None of them were *her*.

I shoved the thought back as far as I could get it in my head—and slammed the door shut. The minute I opened it I was useless, barely functional, and I wasn’t going back there anytime soon.

“Well, we’ll see you on board,” Erin said, giving me a pretty obvious once-over before heading back to the easier slope with her friend.

“You didn’t seem too interested,” Pax said as he pulled down his goggles.

I did the same, the world taking on the sharpened hue that my specialized lenses gave it. “It’s because I’m not.”

“Ah.” He nodded slowly, like he understood.

He didn’t understand shit.

“Ah, what?” I asked, briefly checking around us to make sure the camera crew was out of mic range.

“Maybe you’re ready to stop fucking around?”

“Hardly,” I snapped.

He shrugged. “She was pretty.”

Blond hair. Blue eyes. Yeah, she’d been an eight.

Problem was I wanted an eleven, and I only knew of one in the entire fucking world. One with hair blacker than night, a tight, toned body that had fit mine to a T, and almond-shaped chocolate eyes that made me forget my name, but never hers.

“Yeah, well, she isn’t what I want.” *Let it go.*

He nodded. “Okay.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I said, okay.”

“That’s not what you meant.”

“Stop reading into shit. If you don’t want the girl, I really don’t care. I wish you’d stop self-medicating, because it’s eating you up. But that’s none of my business, right?”

My jaw locked. “Let’s just go.”

“You’re a pain in my ass,” he said, then rocketed down the hill.

I took a deep breath and tried to calm my mind, but once she was in it there was no going back.

I tried to think of the blonde, to fill my head with her face, her offer, the same way I could use her body later to fill the hole in my soul for a good hour or so, but it was no good.

My head swam with *her* face, *her* eyes, *her* incredibly smart mouth. She would have tossed me a kiss and headed down the hill with Pax. She would keep up with me move for move, pushing me farther, faster.

Two and a half years and my chest still felt like it was caving in whenever I thought about her.

Rachel. I let her name roll through me, allowing her in for just a moment. *Just this ride*, I promised myself as I launched down the run. If I gave myself these thirty seconds with her memory, I could shut off the tap once we hit the bottom.

I moved with the run, wondering where she was, what she was doing. Did she still hate me? I hoped so. I deserved it.

Lord knew I hated myself enough for the both of us.

The problem with love was that once it was gone, there was no filling that hole, no substitute for that euphoria. Losing love came with withdrawal symptoms for which there was no known relief.

At least none that I'd found, anyway.

I crouched on the board, gaining speed.

At least sex dulled the pain momentarily, but maybe...

Damn, maybe Paxton was right. I was no closer to moving past her than the day I stupidly walked away from her.

Maybe it was time to man up and deal with the shit hand I'd dealt myself.

Just ahead of me, Paxton waved up at the glass, and I looked up, doing the same as I neared where Leah stood watching. She waved to him and then to me as someone came to stand next to her.

Holy shit. It can't be.

Her hair brushed her delicate shoulders, the streaks of purple evident from down here. My head swiveled, trying to keep her in view as I passed.

That pixie face, those angled cheeks, that pert nose, those perfectly curved lips—I'd know them anywhere.

Her hands pressed against the glass—

Wham! My legs were jarred a millisecond before I slammed into the wall. I bounced back, landing on my ass.

"Watch out!" someone yelled in English right before they hit me with their pole.

I'd seriously fallen in the middle of the surface lift—the

only ski lift in the park that pulled the riders up the slope by rope and pommel.

I pushed back, getting the hell out of the way, and looked over to where Leah stood at the window. Alone.

“Are you okay?” she mouthed, her eyes wide with worry.

For fuck’s sake, was I hallucinating now? The moment I let my memories rule me for a few seconds, she started appearing?

I nodded to Leah and got to my feet. Was I so far gone that my brain was seeing what it wanted?

“You okay?” a girl asked as she slid by me on the pommel, her skis coming within a foot of my board.

“Yep, thank you,” I said, tipping my head. *That’s right, ladies, I have four X Games medals, three of which are in snowboarding, and I ran into a goddamned wall.*

Get a grip. I headed down the slope and met up with Pax at the bottom of the slope.

“You take a detour?” he asked.

“Yeah, something like that,” I replied, knowing he hadn’t seen me make an utter ass out of myself. No doubt he’d see it later when Bobby—the director of our documentary—got his hands on the footage.

Pax didn’t question me, just gave me a what-the-hell look. “Time to get back. You game? You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine,” I said.

They were the only words I spoke while we got out of our gear.

“Landon, are you okay?” Leah asked, racing over to me as we walked out of the frigid air into the dry desert heat.

“What happened?” Pax asked as he wrapped his arm around her.

“Nothing. I’m fine,” I answered, giving her a smile. At least, I think I did. I wasn’t sure, since I felt numb just about everywhere.

That numbness didn't go away as we were driven back to where our ship was docked. It didn't go away while Pax told me all about our new numbers since he'd just pulled off the first-ever triple front flip on a motocross bike a few days ago during our live exhibition. Our YouTube subscribers were way up and so were Instagram and Snapchat, but our video views were through the roof.

It didn't go away when they scanned my ID card as I boarded the huge cruise ship we'd called home since August. All I saw as I walked into our massive, three-bedroom suite at the back of the ship was the replay my brain wouldn't shut off: the glimpse of the woman I'd seen next to Leah.

"Landon!" Pax shouted, breaking through my brain fog.

My head jerked toward him. "What? Damn, you don't have to yell."

"Apparently I do, since I called your name about three times first."

"I said, I'm fine."

His eyes narrowed. "Right, but I asked if you wanted to go to the pool?"

I blinked. "I need to work out."

"You just finished boarding. Skip the gym for one day and come hang out. I know you're prepping for Nepal, but one day isn't going to kill you."

He was right. I could skip one day. Besides, I was so distracted that I was liable to go flying off the treadmill or some stupid shit that was on par with running into a wall.

"Okay. Pool. The pool is good."

"Hey, maybe you'll find the snow bunny," he teased as he headed up the stairs to his room.

"No snow bunny," I said quietly to myself as I went into my room. Another girl wasn't going to help me in this situation—not when *she* was all I could think about. I'd been through it before; I just needed to clear my head. I stripped

out of my clothes and changed into trunks before I met Pax in our living room. Bobby had the camera crew in a meeting at the dining room table. If we hurried we could get some undocumented time.

“Seriously, you’re being weird,” Pax said while we took the elevator to the pool deck. “Leah said she saw you hit a wall while we were boarding. Do you think we need to get your head checked out? She’s already up at the pool saving us some lounges, but we can meet her later.”

“I’m fine,” I repeated.

“So you keep saying.”

Music was blaring on the pool deck as we stepped into the ninety-degree heat. The sun beat down onto my skin, but it did nothing to warm the numbness that I couldn’t kick.

Maybe Pax was right and I’d hit my head.

The crowd was thick, and the music was loud—it usually was as we were leaving port—and Pax disappeared to find Leah. I surveyed the gyrating masses and wished I could feel a little of their excitement.

First term was over, there were two more to go, and we were headed toward the Indian Ocean. It was all pretty overwhelming if I stopped to really think about it. Then again, stopping to think about anything was what had gotten me into this situation.

“There you are!” The blonde from the slope bounced over, her tits hanging out of her triangle top.

“Hey.” I forced a smile as she looped an arm around my waist.

“Want to get a drink with me?”

Not really.

“You know, I think I’m going to—”

“Oh, come on. The bar is right over here!” she said, turning us around.

Ice hit my bare chest and slid down my abs to my trunks

as I sucked in a lungful of air. Holy shit, that was cold.

“I’m so sorry!”

Her voice hit me with the force of the hurricane that she was, and as she looked up, I lost what breath I’d managed to take in.

Her eyes widened, panic running across her beautiful, so-familiar face.

“Oh God,” she whispered.

The purple streaks in her hair rested against the smooth line of her chin, and her lips were parted in a look of shock that I was sure mirrored mine.

My entire world narrowed to the woman standing in front of me. Even my heartbeat stilled in reverence to the moment. How was she here? After all this time, she was close enough to touch, and all I could do was stare at her, like if I blinked she would disappear.

A thousand emotions crashed through me, fast enough to give me whiplash, long enough to sting me with the force of a billion needles, and none were able to steady me. Unadulterated joy and wonder at seeing her after all this time, fear that she was going to toss what was left of those margaritas in my face, and the most overpowering urge to kiss her, to beg her to forgive the mistakes I’d made as a stupid kid and forget the last two years we’d been apart.

But the biggest was sheer and utter relief that I could breathe again, that the numbness I’d felt since the slopes was gone, my skin tingling everywhere as if the blood had finally rushed back into the starving capillaries.

It all came down to one word.

“Rachel?”