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A Black Falls Novel

COLD RIVER

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CARLA NEGGERS

COLD RIVER



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COLD RIVER

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For Aunt Evelyn

One



March 26—nine months ago—Black Falls, Vermont

The Cameron brothers were in town that night. Hannah Shay watched them enter O'Rourke's from her perch on a high stool at the rough-wood bar. She couldn't remember when she'd last seen them together. A.J., the eldest, was down from the mountain lodge the family owned and he ran with his wife. Elijah was home briefly from war. Sean had flown in from Southern California between fighting wildfires and making his fortune.

As they gathered at a table on the far wall, under old black-and-white photographs of their small Vermont town, Hannah doubted they noticed her with the glass of chardonnay she'd been nursing for the past thirty minutes. She had no concerns about being at the bar alone. The owner, Liam O'Rourke, a longtime Cameron friend, had little tolerance for troublemakers—including ones who were blood-related. Everyone in Black Falls knew stepping out of line at O'Rourke's meant a boot out the door or a trip in the back of a police cruiser.

Even Bowie O'Rourke, Liam's cousin, had to know.

Bowie followed the Cameron men into the bar, shutting

the door with a hard thud. He didn't take a table but instead stood two stools down from Hannah and ordered a beer. He was a stonemason and, at thirty-four, the same age as Elijah, three years younger than A.J. and a year older than Sean, but Bowie and the Cameron brothers had never gotten along. He was combative and often in trouble. They were rigid and often unforgiving. He'd finally moved away from Black Falls in his early twenties, but he was back now.

Built like an ox, Bowie wore a down vest over an orange hooded sweatshirt, jeans and scuffed work boots. He and Hannah had grown up in a hollow up on the river. Isolated and poor, it was a different Vermont from the one the Camerons and most people in Black Falls had experienced.

Without acknowledging anyone else, Bowie looked up at the basketball game on TV while he waited for his beer.

The Camerons tensed visibly at their table but didn't move to leave.

Hannah considered quietly easing off her stool, paying for her wine and getting out of there. Her younger brothers needed her help with homework, and she had studying of her own to do. She'd turn thirty this year. Time to finish law school and get on with her legal career. She was also part-owner of a breakfast-lunch café just down Main Street from O'Rourke's. The café closed at three o'clock—hours ago—but she kept the books and managed the staff as well as cooked and cleaned, and work could go well into the night. It probably would tonight.

Two more sips, she thought, lifting her glass and trying to stifle a rush of self-consciousness. It was a stubborn demon she thought she'd finally conquered, but with Bowie just down the bar and A.J., Elijah and Sean Cameron at their table in their canvas jackets and hiking boots, with their very blue eyes and square jaws and scars from hard work, fighting fires and fighting wars, she found herself wishing

she'd stayed away and hadn't taken this time for herself. She hadn't bothered with makeup, and she'd pulled on a long wool skirt, sweater and boots more for comfort and warmth than style. Her blond hair, which she'd hastily tied back at dawn, had to be stringy by now.

But how would she know? She hadn't taken a half second to check herself in the mirror before she'd set out for her hour on her own.

Her sudden self-consciousness had nothing to do with A.J., a happily married father of two young children, or Elijah, a Special Forces soldier who'd left Vermont at nineteen—all but kicked out of town by his own father. No, Hannah thought. Sean was the Cameron who could have her forget she was a top law student and a successful businesswoman.

Nothing new there.

All three were competent, good-looking men anyone would want to have as allies and rescuers and dread to have as enemies. Their sister, Rose, the youngest, one of Hannah's closest friends, was likewise competent and attractive, but she was out of town with Ranger, her search-and-rescue dog.

Sean was considered the charmer of the three brothers, but only in contrast to A.J. and Elijah. Hannah had never been intimidated by any of them, but that didn't mean she didn't wish they hadn't come to town tonight.

As she sipped the last of her wine, Sean seemed just now to see her. He smiled that devastating smile she'd first noticed back in high school Latin class, when she'd been an eager freshman—at thirteen, a year younger than most other freshmen—and he'd been a bored senior, a star athlete who'd had no interest in Latin. He'd just needed a class that fit his schedule and provided the needed credits for him to graduate. She remembered a rainy afternoon when she was

the sole student who'd known that *Dido and Aeneas* was a Henry Purcell opera based on the tragic love affair between the queen of Carthage and a Trojan refugee. Proud of her answer, Hannah had heard laughter behind her. No idea what it was about, she'd turned around and seen Sean Cameron's smile, those blue eyes, and realized he was laughing at *her*.

She hadn't let him see how mortified she was and had redoubled her efforts to maintain an A in class—not that it was much of a victory when Sean was happy to squeak by with a D. What did he care about an A in Latin? He was on to bigger and better things.

She tipped her glass to him now and gave him a warm but reserved smile. She wasn't thirteen anymore, and as sexy and appealing as all the Cameron men were, she'd never had any serious romantic interest in Sean or his brothers. She had plans of her own, ones that wouldn't fit into the life of a driven, blue-eyed Cameron.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Bowie O'Rourke raise his beer with a callused, scarred hand. He'd first learned his trade working after school and summers with Hannah's father, Tobias Shay, who'd led his own troubled life before ramming his car into a tree sixteen years ago. She had learned not to speak of her father in Black Falls. Who remembered him now? Who even wanted to?

"I do," Hannah whispered.

She stared at her chardonnay, wondering where the words had come from. Why was Bowie even back in Black Falls? Short-fused and on the verge of doing time, he had finally figured out that he and his hometown weren't a good mix and moved up to Burlington ten years ago. Last October, he'd purchased his family's old place out on the river. He'd spent the rest of the fall and the winter fixing it up and had moved in a few weeks ago.

Hannah could see her father leading her and Bowie through the woods above the river as they searched for old cellar holes—the foundations of long-abandoned homes. He'd imagine where those early Vermont settlers had ended up. Ohio? Wisconsin? San Francisco? He'd turn to them with a grin and ask why *his* ancestors hadn't cleared out of northern New England.

He and Bowie both had always been at their happiest, their most controlled, in the woods.

Hannah wasn't yet fourteen when her father died. Her younger brothers didn't remember him at all. Devin was two, Toby just one. Nine years later, they lost their mother to an infection from a tick bite. Hannah had navigated the legal battles to become her brothers' legal guardian. They were eighteen and seventeen now. They'd be out on their own before long.

A loud male voice shouting insults from a table toward the back of the bar drew Hannah's attention. She didn't think the insults were directed at anyone in particular, but she didn't intend to stick around to find out. She eased off the stool and reached for her jacket on the floor. She slipped a ten-dollar bill out of a pocket, tucked it under her glass and turned to leave.

The voice grew louder.

Derek Cutshaw.

Although she couldn't make out what he was saying, Hannah tensed as she started for the door. Derek and his friends Robert Feehan and Brett Griffin had been in O'Rourke's when she'd arrived. They were private ski instructors who didn't live in Black Falls but would sometimes stop at the café on their way to Killington, Okemo or Stratton. They'd struck her as arrogant, but she'd never had serious trouble with them.

She'd never seen them drunk, either.

“I see you took off your apron to sit at the bar and booze it up.” Derek chortled, obviously pleased with himself. “Good for you, Hannah. You wouldn’t want people to think you were your mother’s daughter.”

She laid her jacket over one arm. So. His insults *were* directed at her. Her mother had worked at O’Rourke’s, making a living for her and her three children. Had she endured comments—however rare—from people who had their own prejudices and fantasies about an attractive young widow of limited means?

Derek didn’t relent. “A secondhand jacket for a secondhand girl.”

Robert laughed at his friend’s awkward insult and gave him a better gibe to try on her, but Derek shifted to bragging about his recent female conquests. Hannah felt her face grow hot. *Do they mean me?* Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the Camerons look over from their table. Would they hear the insults and innuendos and *believe* them?

Embarrassed and angry, she headed for the door. She didn’t care how cold it was outside, she had no intention of spending another second listening to drunken insults.

“Hold on, there,” Derek yelled. “You can’t leave. Who the hell do you think you are?”

Hannah could see him coming toward her from the back of the bar and jumped back, dropping her jacket. She stepped on the sleeve and slipped just as Derek got to her, swearing, drunkenly slurring the taunts he aimed at her. She tried to find her footing but couldn’t. She went down hard, putting out her hands to brace her fall. Pain radiated up both arms, but she immediately got up onto her knees.

Derek and his friend Robert both stood over her now, laughing. Derek bent down and got in her face. He was as fair as she was and very fit, clad in ski clothes, but his face was

contorted with anger, entitlement and alcohol. "That's a good position for you," he spat at her. "You can tell your—"

"That's enough."

Bowie. Hannah recognized his voice. "No, don't," she said, grabbing the edge of a table and pulling herself back onto her feet.

Derek and Robert both spun around at Bowie. Brett Griffin was up now, too. One of the men shoved a table into Hannah, pinning her against the wall. Frantic, angry enough now to throw a chair at someone, she pushed the table away from her, striking Derek in the upper legs. He started to leap over the table to her, but Bowie got one of Derek's arms and twisted it behind him. Robert came at him, and Bowie stomped him on the instep. He went down in pain.

Hannah came to her senses. "Bowie, stop." She didn't know if he could hear her. "These bastards aren't worth a jail sentence."

He loosened his grip on Derek, who repaid the favor by lunging for Hannah. She reached for a chair to defend herself, but before he could get to her, a strong male arm clamped her around her waist. She didn't see who it belonged to and jabbed a sharp elbow into an iron abdomen. The man who had her didn't break his stride as he lifted her off her feet and carried her out the door.

Kicking and clawing, Hannah was down the steps and into the March cold before she'd caught her next breath. The man released her, but she was so off balance from fighting him, she almost landed butt-first in a puddle. She managed to stay on her feet and spun around, ready to pound whoever had just hauled her out of O'Rourke's.

"Hold on. I'm on your side." Sean Cameron licked a split knuckle, the steady, cold drizzle already collecting on his dark hair and obviously expensive long black coat. He must have brought it from California with him. He certainly

hadn't bought it in Black Falls. He grinned at her. "I never thought I'd be carting Hannah Shay out of a bar brawl."

Anyone else, and Hannah would have pulled herself together and marched home. But Sean? She didn't know whether she was mortified or just really irritated that he'd been the one to get her out of O'Rourke's. She could hear grunts and thuds, breaking glass and swearing, as the fight went on inside.

Police sirens sounded down the street.

She was breathing hard, the insults fresh in her mind. *It wasn't me*, she wanted to scream. *That bastard didn't mean me.*

Hannah adjusted her twisted skirt. "I didn't ask for your help."

"You're welcome," Sean said with a mock bow.

She shivered, wondering how many of the insults he'd heard in the dark, noisy bar. She swallowed, tasting blood. She realized she'd cut the inside of her lip. She managed a smile. "Sorry. Thank you for your help."

A.J. and Elijah came out of the bar. Elijah handed Hannah her jacket without comment. She slipped it on, the cold rain already soaking into her hair. The three Camerons stood in front of her, controlled, steady—she'd been the one out of control.

Of course. She was a Shay.

"Go home, Hannah," A.J. said.

His wife, Lauren, was one of the nicest people in Black Falls. She hadn't grown up there, but she was respected and well-liked for her kindness and her love for A.J. and their two young children. Her husband, however, wasn't known for his patience, especially with Hannah.

The sirens were louder now. She could feel where the table had hit her in the hip. "If the police want to talk to me—"

Elijah stopped her midsentence. "They won't," he said.