

## **Chapter 1 - September 23 (23 weeks until the Iditarod)**

Ash knows there isn't one path through grief. There is no simple cure, no one-size-fits-all solution. And even when you take the long way to "better," you're traveling a dark road by the light of a matchstick.

But Ash thinks best in lists and lines, points on a map. Here, then there. Point A to point B. Willow to Nome. Lists make things simple. Lists don't leave much room for over-thinking. There's only so much damage you can do to a linear thought process once you've started to set it down in pen.

Ash has always gotten by organizing her life from list to list, and now more than ever she's surviving by keeping so busy that there's barely time left for anything that can't be tackled step by step. This morning: serve breakfast to 28 sled dogs, and refresh bedding for each. Make sure to rinse out the breakfast bucket before it starts to draw flies and stink in the early-September heat. Speaking of flies, the kennel needs to be poop-scooped. Speaking of heat, Ash needs to re-fill the dogs' water and brush however many of them she can before she's called away to give a tour.

All of it, each item on her morning to-do list, sounds better to Ash than what the rest of the day has in store: carting around a group of tourists who knew her brother.

"I just have to tell them he died," Ash says, to no one in particular. She pretends not to feel the undertow of what she's saying, ignores the sour feeling that expands deep in her gut. "No big deal, right?"

For weeks she has practiced talking points in her head in the shower, or while she feeds the dogs, testing them out loud on long runs because the dogs and the woods and the wind don't care if she can't always say what she needs to without getting choked up.

People mind, though. It's why Ash has to remind herself that "How are you holding up?" is just something a neighbor or some loose acquaintance asks so you'll tell them what they want to hear. Then they can tell you that time heals all wounds, like you even have enough days in a lifetime. Or like you knew what it would look like, who you'd be, if you healed from this.

Ash doesn't have time. She has goals. She has plans. She has her lists. She has ways of hiding how she feels from the people who don't get it. Still: Ash, who could at least count the friends she'd made in school on one hand before, would now have to give more of a thumbs-up. People mind if you're not grieving on their timeline, even when they've lost a concept – "the nicest guy," "someone our age," "wish I'd gotten to know him better" – and you've lost your brother. And if you can't grieve around friends, it stands to reason you can't grieve on the job. It has been Ash's chief concern this summer, since she's working solo running most of the dog-sled tours at her father's lodge.

It was the only activity the tiny hotel had on site, though it was situated between all manner of big-name Alaskan sights to see, hikes to take, lakes to paddle. The last gasp of the tourism season brought with it the promise of a visit by some of the lodge's regular guests, a family from the lower 48. The Mercers stop by for a dog tour every time they're in town to see Mrs. Mercer's family, roughly every other year. Ash recognized their name the moment their reservation showed up on her calendar, though she'd never led any of their previous tours. When they were little, the Mercer boys had idolized Ash's older brother — of course they had — and requested that Dawson give all their subsequent tours. They'll inevitably ask for him today, and Ash is going to be ready.

She places the feed bucket down, turns on the hose, and launches into the talking points for the umpteenth time. *Dawson died a little over a year ago. There was an accident. A drunk driver hit him head-on.*

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Not five minutes into the tour, the youngest Mercer boy asks, “Where’s your brother?” Ash can see all five tourists watching her face, waiting to see if they’ve said the exact wrong thing. In her mind, she conjures that list of talking points.

“Uh,” she goes. That wasn’t part of the script.

The moment feels to her like proof that the constant, thudding pressure to *be okay, be okay, be okay* isn’t just a function of small-town social dynamics. College, a career, a life somewhere else, will all be pierced by the same double-edged sword: people will look at Ash and see more than just “Dawson’s little sister,” but without the family context there’ll be questions to answer. At freshman orientation, on first dates, at new jobs—for the rest of her life—people will want to know if Ash has any siblings, not knowing the question will take the conversation far out of the realm of small talk.

Ash does her best work when she’s prepared. And she knows without having to test her theory: lying —*I’m an only child*— would hurt more than the truth. So she has to be able to tell the truth without scaring people away.

Now’s the time to practice.

Ash swallows, and tries to ignore the feeling as her feet and hands erupt in pins and needles. “Dawson passed away last year, actually.”

“Oh, no,” Mrs. Mercer says, instinctively bringing a hand to rest over her heart. “I’m so sorry, we had no idea.”

“Sorry.” Ash winces. “My dad and I tried to think of a better way to let people know.”

“What happened?” the youngest Mercer asks.

“Danny,” his dad says, low and stern.

“It’s fine,” Ash tells him. Mr. Mercer looks away, face red above his beard.

Ash makes sure to look at Danny this time. “He was in a car accident.”

Danny nods, getting the concept but perhaps not the meaning—not just “not here right now,” but gone. Still, it’s easier for Ash to look at him than it would be to look at his parents, to risk catching surprise or pity or regret—*so much for our family fun!*—on their faces.

Maybe it could really be this easy, and maybe no one would ever press for more, just as Ash’s father has promised. But there was something that has gnawed at Ash as she’s puzzled out how to tell strangers the truth if they asked about Dawson, something that still bothers her now, curls her toes inside her work boots: people always assume the most dramatic thing.

Dawson had known how to run a dog team since before he could tie his own shoes, took the sport more seriously than he did anything else. He took courses on wilderness survival and first-aid, knew how to treat wind-burn and frostbite, could tell you how to find a sheet of ice that would hold—and what to do if it didn’t. He learned what he needed to, did all the things that should’ve guaranteed him decades on the back of the sled, as many stories and memories as there were stars in a clear night sky. It wasn’t enough.

Dawson would’ve thought it was funny if someone heard “car accident” and immediately assumed he’d been ice-road trucking, or if they took the more vague “passed away” to mean he was eaten by a grizzly bear or froze to death or died in an avalanche. But Ash couldn’t find the

funny in a tourist's misunderstanding, in anything that would characterize her home state as inherently dangerous and her brother as some reckless adventurer who fucked around and found out.

Still, when the words are on the tip of her tongue, Ash thinks better of telling the Mercers that a drunk driver is the reason her brother is dead. The Mercer boys are at just the right ages that Mr. Mercer might say something naive and unhelpful like, "Boys, that's why you never drink and drive."

Ash can't give Mr. Mercer – or anyone else – the opportunity to turn Dawson's death into a cautionary tale, to remind her that her larger-than-life brother died a needless, random, pedestrian death. A death that will be compiled as a statistic. A death that strangers look at as a lesson. A death that can happen when you're doing something as safe and as standard as going to the grocery store.

It is so incredibly stupid that it makes Ash's chest ache.

So now, she does the thing that always works. She looks to the Mercers and forces a smile. "Are you ready to see the dogs?"

The Mercers are either as grateful as Ash to shift their attention from death to dogs, or are at least pretending to be enthusiastic. Ash leads the Mercers over to the kennel and through the fence. At the strangers' approach, the dogs bark in greeting, a couple of them running in excited circles. With the dogs in the mix, the only questions Ash has to answer are the ones the kids don't recall from prior tours' spiels.

Ash never worked tours with kids when Dawson was around. She hadn't had much luck relating to kids when she was a kid, but her brother had been the exact opposite. They'd both been outgoing, sarcastic, and drawn to lead; things that made Ash "too much" for most people