

The Cliff House, early evening...

Luke leaned forward, resting his left hand on the wall and let the steaming hot water run over his back. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the throbbing in his shoulder and chest. After a few more minutes, he shut the water off and stepped out. He wrapped a towel around his waist and stepping over Rommel, walked into the bedroom. He shook his hair out of his eyes and glared up at his bangs. I really need a haircut.

He paused in front of the mirror, his eyes going to the myriad of surgical scars on his chest. Sighing, he toweled dry and pulled on a faded Rockies t-shirt and a pair of cut-offs. He sat down on the bed and pulled a bottle out of the nightstand drawer. He shook two pills out in his hand and wandered back into the kitchen for water.

Luke opened the freezer and pulled out a package of frozen peas, then waited a moment before pulling out a similar bag of carrots. He grinned ruefully down at Rommel. "Bet Mrs. Tracy thought I would be eating these instead of using them for ice packs."

He went into the living room and settled down on the couch. He placed the bag of peas on his right shoulder, then put the carrots on his chest. He leaned back and closed his eyes. He felt Rom nudge his muzzle under his hand and smiled. "Good job today, Mutt." The dog's tail thumped happily.

He was just dozing off when he heard a tap on the French doors. He opened his eyes and saw Elise standing in the doorway. "Hey, come on in."

Rommel trotted over to her as she walked inside. "Hi, Rommel!" She bent to scratch his head, keeping the container in her other hand, well out of reach. She looked over at Luke. "I made you some tortilla soup. Want some now or should I put it away?"

Luke eased himself into a sitting position, wincing as he sat up. "I'll take some now, thanks. I just took some pain meds and they do a number on me if I take them on an empty stomach."

She smiled. "Be right back." She went into the kitchen, returning a moment later with a bowl of steaming soup and a spoon. She placed it on the coffee table and sat down next to him. She eyed the packages of frozen vegetables dubiously. "How are you feeling?"

Luke shrugged as he reached for the spoon. "Not too bad I guess. Achy mostly. Dr. Carmichael doesn't think I did any more damage. Just aggravated everything." He took a sip of soup. "This is great, thanks."

"You're welcome." She glanced over at him. "You know, you scared us today. We got the call that Alex had fallen and you were going down after him." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I still can't believe you did that." She turned to face him. "You did good work out there, but did it ever occur to you to wait for us?"

"Wait for you? I didn't know when you'd get there! What if Alex..." Luke's voice shook. "What if he was dead? It was my fault he ended up on that ledge!" He got up and paced the room, his movements stiff and agitated.

"Dammit, Luke, it wasn't your fault! It was an accident."

He shook his head. "No, it wasn't. I shouldn't have let him out of my sight. This never should have happened." He leaned heavily on the table. "It won't happen again."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Elise walked over to him shaking her head and huffing. She put a hand on his shoulder. "Look at you. Mr. and Dr. Tracy won't have to beat you up over this; you're doing a fine job all by yourself." She paused. "Alex needed you and you were there."

"He wouldn't have needed me if I hadn't sent him and Tyler into the jungle."

"Oh, and I suppose you told him to walk over and fall off the edge of the cliff, right?"

Luke glared at her, his grey eyes flashing angrily. "It wasn't his fault."

"And it wasn't yours either! Why can't you get it through that thick skull of yours! It. Was. An. Accident!!"

Rommel whimpered and lay down under the coffee table, his eyes on his master.

"Don't you yell at me," he snarled at the same time throwing a sharp look at his dog.

"I'll yell at you whenever I please," she snapped back. "Especially when you're acting like a moron!"

"Oh, so now I'm a moron?"

"If the shoe fits!" She stood glaring a moment, then her expression softened. "Luke, I'm only telling you this because I care about you."

He whirled on her, his temper exploding. "I don't need taking care of! If that was the case I would have never left Montana! I wish everyone would just leave me the hell alone!"

Elise's own temper flared. "You want to be left alone? Fine! I'm leaving!"

"Good!!"

"You can take care of yourself!"

"I will!!"

Elise turned on her heel and stormed out the door, muttering under her breath.

Luke stood where he was for a moment, then went and picked up his empty bowl. He clenched it

tightly for a moment, then turned and hurled it at the nearest wall. The ceramic broke with a resounding crash causing Rommel to leap up with a sharp bark. "Rommel! Go lay down!" Luke snapped. The dog's tail dropped between his legs and he slunk into the bedroom.

Luke stood with his eyes closed, his whole body quivering with emotion. I'm useless here, he thought to himself. I never should have come back.

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