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**Alpacas are members of the camelid family, along with dromedary camels, Bactrian camels, llamas, vicuñas, and guanacos.**

**W**ith feet dangling and a vast amount of open air beneath me, a thought carved its way through my panic: *Is this really living your best life, Amelia Jean?*

“Stay calm, sweetie, and don’t wiggle around too much.” Mom’s voice sounded deliberately steady as it bounced off the canyon walls. I carefully tipped forward and peered down at the base of the cliff, where she and my two older brothers were waiting for me to descend.

*Big mistake.*

The height, the nothingness surrounding me—my head started spinning like I’d just stepped off an amusement ride rather than being strapped into some sort of carabiner pulley system. On second thought, the two had a lot in common. Both

made my heart pound uncontrollably. And both were activities favored by the rest of my family.

I'd been assigning fear ratings (on a scale of one to ten) for years. My ranking system started when I'd nearly been swept away by an undercurrent in the Pacific Ocean on the day the Amundsen family decided to learn how to surf. Since then, among other things, we'd gone glacier climbing in Alaska (fear rating seven); paragliding on the Oregon coast (fear rating six—which would've been a nine, but I'd ridden tandem with a pilot); backcountry camping in Yellowstone (fear rating four—which would've been lower, except bears); and white-water rafting in Wyoming, New Mexico, and Wisconsin (varying fear ratings from three to eight, depending on the classification of the rapids).

My family bounced around. *A lot*. The common thread was always adventure. And don't get me wrong, adventure could be fun, but it also presented ample opportunity for me and my stupid fears to mess things up. Like when my family bought tickets for the Skywalk in Arizona but had to skip it because I was too scared to go out on the glass bridge extending over the rim of the Grand Canyon. Or, worse, a year ago when a team of mountain rescuers was called in because I'd frozen halfway up a via ferrata. They had to use ropes to pull me out from above because I was too terrified to continue climbing the iron rungs bolted into the side of the mountain.

Even then, I'd only given the via ferrata a fear rating of nine. This latest expedition warranted a solid nine and a half. And, as hard as I was fighting to keep it together, I was losing the battle. The air whooshed out of my lungs. I inhaled rapidly, but everything I brought in was pushed out twice as fast by the alarm coursing through my body.

"Your mom is right," Dad's voice rang out from up above. "Just stay calm. You're perfectly safe as long as you don't somehow manage to slip upside down and out of the harness."

*Terrific.* Now I had images in my head of me, I don't know, sneeze-rolling myself into a hundred-foot tumble and splatting on the already-red rocks below. Calm was no longer an option—if it ever had been.

I'd somehow mustered enough courage to complete two shorter rappels earlier today. But on those, all I had to do was slowly feed rope through the rappel device hooked to my harness as I walked down a rock wall, backward and in a seated position.

This was my first free rappel, where the cliff wall curved inward, and I was left hanging midair to complete the descent. Nothing to brace my feet against. Nothing but air.

"C'mon, Amelia," yelled Neil, my oldest brother. "YOLO, right? You've got this." The words were encouraging, but the huff of annoyance that followed was not.

“I was scared, too,” David chimed in. It was nice of him to say so, but I knew it wasn’t true. “Keep threading the rope through the belay device,” he continued, “and try not to look down.”

But I already had—looked down, that is. And because of it, I couldn’t control my breathing and my heart wouldn’t stop drumming in my ears.

After the embarrassing evac on the via ferrata, my parents gradually reexposed me to hair-raising situations. They took me on amusement park rides with increasingly larger drops. Next, a trip to the top of the Empire State Building. Then the glass Skydeck Ledge of the Willis Tower in Chicago. Somehow, they managed to shuffle these experiences in between other Amundsen Family Adventure Challenges. Like I wouldn’t notice what they were up to.

Then this adventure challenge was picked—completing a free rappel—and, well, I’d seen the looks exchanged behind my back. They weren’t sure I could do it, and I hated ruining everyone else’s fun. I hated being a disappointment.

So, I’d acted excited, even though I wasn’t. I pretended it was no big deal, even though the thought of being back in a harness ran ice through my veins. And now, here I was, scared out of my mind again, and with nothing remotely close to an iron rung to cling to this time.

My hands were clammy. I felt cold all over despite the scorching Utah sun.

“Amelia?” Mom called again.

I couldn’t answer, not with the tremor that started in my lower jaw and extended to my toes.

“Honey, it’s all right,” Mom shouted. “Take all the time you need.”

Not meaning to, I glanced down again, and that’s when my sweaty hands slipped off the rope. For a terrifying second, the rope ran freely through the rappel device and I fell. I thought I was going to *die*. Seriously, I did. My heart skipped a beat and a scream exploded from my lungs. Then the safety cord tightened abruptly, and I jerked to a stop.

“Whoa!” David called up from below. “Always keep at least one hand on the rope.”

*I knew that.* But when something scared me, all bets were off. And, just like when I’d frozen up on the via ferrata, I was petrified.

“It’s okay,” Dad called down with forced cheerfulness. “You’re not in any danger, but you’re going to need to release friction on the autoblock before you can start moving again.”

I heard what Dad was saying, but my head was buzzing. He might as well have been speaking a foreign language, considering the way my mind refused to make sense of anything. The

concentration required to adjust my equipment was 100 percent out of the question.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Neil groaned. He wasn’t talking to me, but his voice wafted up. “How long is she going to be stuck this time?”

Air escaped my mouth and lungs in rapid little spurts.

Mom’s voice broke through the noise inside my head. “Amelia Jean, take deep breaths and listen to your father. He’ll talk you through this.”

“Right.” Dad’s voice came from above. “You’ll need to slide the safety cord down the rope to loosen the autoblock, and then you’ll be able to feed rope through your rappel device again.”

I’d practiced this with him countless times before ever swinging over the side of a ledge, but it all seemed like gibberish now. Instead of sliding the safety cord, I relocked both hands in a death grip around the rope. There was no way I was removing either of them to release tension on the autoblock. Right then, the autoblock was my best friend. Why on earth would I want to mess with it?

I held myself perfectly still, doing everything I could to reduce the sway in the rope and harness. For a moment that dragged on forever, no one said anything. And then my family started to have a conversation, an argument really, about me. Their voices spanned the height of a canyon wall as they

ignored the fact that I was stuck halfway between them.

“I told you it was too soon,” Mom grumbled at Dad. “Now what?”

“This is ridiculous,” Neil said. “It’s not like she’s rappelling off Mount Thor.”

“I could go for help,” David offered.

“You’re not going anywhere.” Mom’s voice was scathing. But I knew her irritation was with me, not my brother.

“Yeah, if anyone’s going for help, it should be me,” Neil said. “I’m older.”

“Both of you stay where you’re at,” Dad called down. “Just give me a minute while I rig up another anchor.”

I tuned out their voices and passed the time with my eyes firmly closed. I wasn’t going to take any chances. When I opened them again, Dad was dangling in the air beside me. “Hey there, kiddo,” he said.

He sounded happy, but there was regret in his eyes. I knew he was worried he’d pushed me into this, even though I’d said it would be fine. A part of him must’ve known all along that when the rest of the family had been pumped for this adventure, I’d been pretending.

“I’m going to help you finish the descent, okay?”

I breathed in sharply through my nose, then shook my head.

“It’s our best option, Amelia Jean. Unless you want to

release the autoblock and continue on by yourself?” he asked hopefully.

I clamped my eyes shut again. The air I’d sucked in drained through my quivering lips.

Dad sighed. “I didn’t think so. We’ll do it the hard way, then.” He finagled the ropes and carabiners, unlocking and locking, tying and untying . . . I couldn’t watch. Next thing I knew, he had me off my rappel system and hooked onto his. I buried my head in his shoulder while he lowered us both to the canyon floor.

Mom folded me into her arms as Dad unclipped us both.

Half-hearted cheers rang out among my family members. “Congratulations, Amundsens. Free rappel challenge unlocked,” Dad said, like I hadn’t just wimped out and failed them all. He held out his hands. “Give me some!” He high-fived with my brothers, and then my mom. When he came to me, I barely lifted my head.

“Gonna keep me hanging, are you?”

When I shrugged and kept my arms planted at my sides, he drummed his fingers playfully on my helmet. “You’ll finish on your own next time,” he whispered in my ear.

I smiled weakly and nodded my head. “Yeah, next time,” I said. Then I choked down a small amount of bile rising in my throat.