

A romantic couple embracing in a forest setting. The man has a beard and is wearing a white shirt. The woman has long brown hair and is wearing a light-colored top. They are both smiling and looking down. The background shows a lake with trees reflected in the water.

# The Crush

*The Lake Bittersweet Series*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**JENNIFER BERNARD**

*the crush*

LAKE BITTERSWEET

BOOK 6

JENNIFER BERNARD

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## *one*

Galen Cooper knew perfectly well that his appearance could be terrifying to the unsuspecting. If he was a fairytale character, he'd be an ogre, or possibly a black-bearded pirate, pre-hook. If he was a tree, he'd be one of those gnarled oaks with thick bark and lichen dripping from its branches.

That lichen would be his hair and beard, both of which were dark and bushy and occasionally untended.

For the most part, he didn't actually mind coming across as the Beast. His wild appearance made his guiding clients take him seriously. No one doubted that he knew his way around the wilderness. If he told someone not to keep their goddamn toothpaste in their tent because bears could smell that shit, they listened. In a way, his appearance saved lives. Not once had one of his clients so much as sustained an injury.

"Best wilderness guide in Minnesota," the reviews said. "One of a kind." "Don't be scared off by his scowl. I'd trust my life to him." "I nearly slid down a ravine but that dude hauled me up with one hand." "Gnarly AF." "I think even the bears are scared of him."

There was only one thing that made Galen regret his mountain man looks. One person, actually.

Brenda McMurray Bogosian.

And there she was, at this very moment, walking her dog down Main Street, wearing joggers and clean white running shoes, along with bright pink socks. He'd noticed that she

always had some flash of pink in her outfits, and wondered if that was to appeal to her fourth grade students.

Her hair, the glorious rust color of oak leaves in autumn, swung back and forth in a thick ponytail. Tendrils clung to her forehead. Sweat. She'd been sweating. The thought made him sweat slightly as well. She was usually so immaculate, so tidy. Even her sweat clung sweetly to her skin instead of dripping the way his did on a hot day on the trail.

From his location inside the office of Lake Bittersweet Wilderness Adventures, where he was checking in after the end of a long day, he tried not to stare at her longingly. But he knew it was hopeless. His crush on Brenda was probably written all over his face; good thing that face was covered up with so much beard. Yet one more advantage.

“That couple from Belgium left you a massive tip,” said Redbull, his business partner. Many people thought “Red Bull” was his tribal name, but in fact it was his nickname, based on his favorite energy drink addiction. He sat on the stool behind the computer, his black hair in a top knot, a Red Bull can by his elbow, squinting at the screen. The two of them had recently teamed up to open their own wilderness tour company and so far, so good. “They said you were the highlight of their entire trip. All fifty states, and you're the standout.”

“Huh.” Galen grunted his response. He would have had more to say, but Brenda had stopped to chat with someone outside the SweetBitter Café. He craned his neck to see who it was. He lived in fear that another man would scoop her up before he'd even screwed up the nerve to ask her out.

“Just fucking ask her out.” The weary irritation in Redbull's voice was all too familiar to Galen. All his friends used that tone sooner or later. They all knew about his hopeless crush. It was possible the entire town did, except for Brenda herself.

Hell, she might know too, and was simply too kind-hearted to show it.

As he entered information about the trip he'd just completed—bear sign spotted at the ten-mile point of Grace Ridge Trail, not surprising for September—he kept an eye on the flame-haired goddess across the street. Her dog was getting impatient and tugging on the leash. Since the pup was basically a cotton ball with paws, Brenda was unfazed. She ignored the tugging and kept chitchatting.

Why was it so easy for everyone else to talk to Brenda? He always clammed up and got sweaty and awkward. Other women didn't have that effect on him. Only Brenda. And other people didn't react to her that way. Only him.

In mid-conversation, Brenda lifted one hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. In the process, she transferred the leash from one hand to the other, and Cotton Ball pounced on the opportunity. He lunged forward and yanked the leash from Brenda's grasp. She tried to grab it, but it was too late. Her little dog raced across the street, barely missing a Ford truck going one way and a Prius going the other, and darted right through the front door of Lake Bittersweet Wilderness Adventures.

Galen dropped the clipboard onto the counter and stuck the pen behind his ear. Or really, just into his hair, so disheveled from the hike that it could have been an actual shrub.

Cotton Ball darted toward the cooler Galen had plopped onto the office floor. He and his clients had caught three rainbow trout in Muskee Stream. He'd offered to clean and filet them, which was his next task.

If they survived this attack.

The dog knocked over the cooler—one of those lightweight Styrofoam jobbers—and dug his little teeth into the foam, trying to rip off the lid. He was a lot more fierce than Galen had expected. Or she, judging by the little pink ribbon on its collar.

Galen came around the counter and lunged for the dog, only to stop in his tracks when it turned on him with a sharp bark.

“Let it alone,” said Redbull. “He’s a fish dog.”

“What’s a fish dog?”

“Dog that likes fish.”

Was that a real thing? Wouldn’t the fish bones hurt his little throat?

Snarling, the dog returned to the lid and worried at it until it popped off. Bloody water spilled onto the floor and the three trout slid out.

Galen had to try something.

“Hey Cotton Ball!” he shouted. “Stay away from the fish.”

The dog ignored him and pounced on one of the trout. The biggest one, Galen noticed with regret. Should he grab the dog by the collar? Drag him away? Sacrifice one trout? In the wild, he would know exactly what to do. He’d throw a stick or something, distract the dog, or scare it away.

But this was civilization, and Cotton Ball was a pet. *Brenda’s* pet.

A pretty, throaty voice called out, “Olaf! Come here! Stop that!”

The dog paused and lifted his head, looking guilty. Then went right back to his task of ripping into that dead fish. But Galen wasn’t paying attention to that anymore. All he could see was Brenda’s gorgeous form crouching down to snatch up the leash.

“Olaf! No!” She took a firm hold of the leash, and the dog finally obeyed her. He sniffed at the fish one more time, then turned and trotted through the puddle of bloody water toward Brenda. She scooped him into her arms, not seeming to mind that her zip-up hoodie was getting soiled by that fish water. “Very bad boy,” she crooned to the top of his fluffy head.

Galen thought it was an odd kind of punishment, all that cuddling and cooing. Seemed more like a reward to him.

She turned to face him, her cheeks pink and glowing from her race across the street. “I’m so sorry. He’s got this thing



about fish.”

“Fish dog,” said Redbull wisely.

She wrinkled her forehead at Galen’s partner, gave him a perfunctory smile, then turned back to Galen. “Are those your fish?”

“My...no...I mean, yes...” he stammered. They weren’t really *his* fish, but he was responsible for them. His clients were expecting some nice, un-mauled filets this evening.

“He’s got custody of ‘em,” Redbull explained.

“Client catch.” Finally, Galen got some words out. “It’s fine.”

“No, of course it’s not fine. I’ll buy you some replacement fish. What are those?” She peered at them. “Tuna?”

Galen couldn’t help it. He snorted out a laugh. Tuna lived in the ocean, not in any streams in Minnesota. Clearly Brenda had no experience with the fishing around here. She’d only moved here less than two years ago, after all. “Rainbow trout,” he told her. “Freshwater.”

“Of course. I know that.” Her cheeks flushed even pinker. “I was just rattled. Olaf knows better.”

“He’s a dog,” Galen pointed out.

“Yes. What’s your point?”

“Even domesticated animals like dogs still have primitive instincts.” He’d noticed that some people treated their dogs as if they understood things on a human level. But they didn’t. As dogs, they experienced the world in their own way. They knew things humans didn’t, and they couldn’t know some things humans took for granted.

“So do people,” said Redbull in that deadpan voice he used to convince people of his deep wisdom. Most of the time he was making fun; maybe one third of the time he actually had some wisdom to impart.

Brenda clutched her dog closer to her chest.

“Cotton Ball, I mean, Olaf, can only control himself for so long around a fish,” Galen explained earnestly. “But he stopped when you told him to. Overall, he did good.”

“Well.”

It took him a second to realize she was fixing his grammar. He nodded, accepting the correction.

“And his name isn’t Cotton Ball.”

“It should be,” said Redbull wisely. “Just look at him.”

Galen wished he could wave a wizard’s staff and send Redbull out back to the storage shed. “Yeah. I mean Olaf. I’m Galen,” he added, as if introducing himself to her damn dog.

His heart sank to the soles of his favorite leather hiking boots. This was his first real conversation with Brenda, and he was making an epic mess of it. A bloody, fishy mess.

But Brenda didn’t seem to mind. She smiled and picked up Olaf’s front paw.

“I know. I’ve seen you around. Nice to officially meet you.” She waved the dog’s paw at him. “This is Olaf, and I’m Brenda McMurray. Technically, Brenda Bogosian, but around here I’m a McMurray because of my grandmother.”

That explained why he’d heard two different last names for her. He’d been terrified that one of them was a married name.

“And we’re really really sorry for this mess,” she continued. “If you can wait a minute while I put him in my car, I’ll come right back and clean it up.”

“No no.” Galen shook his head fiercely. “We got it.”

“*He’s* got it,” Redbull corrected. “I’ve got paperwork.”

Galen ignored him. “Don’t you worry about it. You probably have important things to do. School things.”

Brenda squinted at him curiously. She wore a visor to keep the sun out of her eyes. Sea-green, those eyes, like a mermaid’s. She was so beautiful it took his breath away. His breath, his lungs, all the oxygenation in his blood. He might as

well be a puddle of fish water on the floor. “How did you know I’m a teacher?” she asked.

Galen froze. How to answer that question? *I’ve had an enormous crush on you ever since I picked my nephew up from school and saw you walking out the door with your overstuffed book bag.*

Or how about, *I’ve never forgotten one single bit of detail anyone has dropped about you within my earshot. I even know your birthday. It was six weeks ago.*

Or maybe, *I also know that you drink tea, not coffee, and would you be so kind as to accompany me to the SweetBitter Café for a tea latte with oat milk, your favorite?*

Before he could answer, she laughed. “What am I thinking? Small town. Of course you know I’m a teacher. Everyone knows everyone around here. Except me. I’m still learning.”

He exhaled, his heart still racing from that close call.

“I’m Redbull,” said Redbull. “That’s my nickname and you can use it. Galen and I own this outfit. Best wilderness tours in Minnesota. We do everything from short hikes to canoe trips to week-long guided adventures to drop-offs and pickups.”

Why had Redbull suddenly decided to become all chatty?

Olaf squirmed in Brenda’s arms. “I’d better get this little troublemaker out of here. Are you sure I can’t help—”

“Sure.” Galen cut her off, more brusquely than he’d intended. She took a step back in surprise, and nearly skidded because of the puddle. He grabbed her arm. The contact sent such a jolt through him that he froze.

“Thanks,” she murmured as she regained her footing. “Bye now. Nice to see you both.”

She hurried out the door, the leash trailing behind her. Galen wondered if he should pick it up and follow her, as if it was a train and she was a princess. Or a bride.

He didn't. All the willpower had left his body and all he could do was stand and watch her go.

"That went well," Redbull said drily.

"She knows my name. She already knew it." And all of a sudden the world shone brighter. Brenda McMurray knew his name, and she'd looked him right in the eye and hadn't blinked at his twig-strewn beard and disheveled hair.

Speaking of hair...he felt something on the side of his head and put his hand to it. His pen. Sticking out at a ridiculous angle. That whole time.

And sweet Brenda hadn't said a thing.

He sighed. *She knows who I am. She knows where I work, what I do, who my business partner is.*

And that he occasionally stuck pens in his hair and forgot about them.

"You going to clean that mess up?" Redbull asked as he took a swig of his drink.

"Of course." Whistling, he went into the office bathroom where they kept cleaning supplies.

*Brenda knows me.*

## *two*

“If you ever do that again, I’m changing your name to Cotton Ball,” Brenda muttered to Olaf as she plopped him into the pet carrier she kept on the back seat of her old Volvo.

Olaf completed his traditional three rotations before curling up in a tight ball, his tail covering his eyes. He was all worn out from his latest catastrophe. In a moment, he was asleep, his little ribcage rising and falling with his quick breaths. A tiny Maltese, Olaf was kind of the hummingbird of dogs. He was a rescue pup who’d nearly been put to sleep. But the vet tech had called Brenda and she’d come running to adopt him.

His training was sorely lacking, and he was old enough to be virtually untrainable. Or at least that was the excuse she used for him.

She rearranged the grocery bags on the backseat to make room for the carrier, then strapped it in. She was a bit of a helicopter doggie mama, she could admit that. But Olaf had come into her life when she desperately needed an unconditionally loving fellow being, and she’d love him forever for that.

After strapping herself in, she texted her grandmother. *Running a bit behind.*

Granny lived at a retirement home where all her meals were provided. But she still liked to keep her own favorite snacks on hand, so Brenda did a weekly shopping trip for her.

Granny was still quite active, and perfectly capable of living on her own, but she'd chosen to move out of the house they used to share, insisting that Brenda needed more space.

"I'll have a better social life with people my own age, and so will you."

Which was the heart of the matter, Brenda knew. Granny would do anything to help Brenda find a man.

Speaking of men...Brenda smiled as she thought of the very unusual one she'd just encountered. Galen with the fish cooler. She'd noticed him before, but never spoken to him at any length. She'd never seen so much wild black hair on one human being before. He looked like a child's drawing of a pirate, minus the eye patch.

She was glad for the lack of eye patch because he had unexpectedly lovely eyes behind those bushy brows. They were a liquid brown—like strongly brewed oolong tea—and filled with light. She loved oolong tea for its unique and intense flavor. Meeting his eyes had given her a pleasant shiver of appreciation for their beauty.

Strange to find those eyes hidden behind all that facial hair. She had nothing against beards. A lot of men around here wore some kind of beard, especially in the winter. Sometimes they shaved them off come summertime, but not Galen, apparently. She'd be surprised if a razor had come anywhere near that beard in years.

She parked in front of the Lake Bittersweet Home for Seniors and cracked the window open for Olaf. Careful not to wake him, she collected her grocery bags. If Granny was up for it, they'd take the dog for a walk on the trail that meandered alongside a creek behind the home. That walking trail was one of the things that had convinced Granny to move here, and Brenda couldn't deny this spot had a lot to offer.

But still, losing her company at home had been...well, bittersweet. It was so lonely without Granny's cheerful and unpredictable presence.

She hurried inside with the groceries, exchanging smiles and hellos with the staff members and residents she passed. When she found her grandmother's room, she tapped on the door and stepped inside.

Then came to an abrupt halt.

Her grandmother had a visitor. A man. He was sitting on the edge of her bed, very close to her. After a moment of shock, she recognized him as a fellow resident of the home. Brock? Book? Block? Something like that.

"Hi," she said as she put the grocery bag down on a chair. "I'm Brenda."

"Bryce."

Close enough.

"I'm here to flirt with your grandmother," he told her.

Okay then. Nothing like being direct. Her grandmother caught her eye and winked at her. Brenda could tell she liked him, and Granny was hard to please. With her green eyes and snowy hair, trim figure and knack for fashion, she was still a striking woman.

It figured that her grandmother would find a man before she did.

"Don't let me interrupt. I can just put these snacks away and—"

"No no. I'll let you be. Cecilia, I'll see you tonight for dinner." He rose to his feet, only a bit creaky, and kissed her grandmother's hand.

"Wow," Brenda said as soon as he'd left. "He's a catch. Is that his actual hair?"

"Yes, but I do believe you have that backwards," Granny said tartly. "We all know who the catch is."

"Right. I stand corrected." Brenda stacked the boxes of water crackers and butterscotch pudding in her grandmother's cabinet.

“Well, sit instead. Do you have time for a visit or do you have to rush off for...anything?”

That hopeful tone meant only one thing...optimism regarding Brenda’s nonexistent manhunt. “No, I don’t have a date,” she told her granny dryly. Then, deciding it was time she teased her back, added, “Though I did just meet a very intriguing man.”

“Oooh, I like the sound of that. Make me some tea and tell me all about him.”

Brenda suppressed a smile at the thought of bushy, bristly Galen sipping tea with her grandmother. “Well, where do I start? He’s a...” she cast about for something specific about him. “He catches fish.”

“Every man in Lake Bittersweet does that. Even Bryce throws a line in the creek out back now and then.”

Right. Sometimes she forgot she was living in the country now. Her upbringing had been suburban all the way, spacious houses and immaculate lawns and automatic sprinklers and noisy leaf blowers.

“He has a beard.”

“Just like eighty percent—”

“No, no. This one is a *beard*.” Brenda stashed a twelve-pack of grape soda in the mini-fridge, then, hands free, demonstrated the full bushiness of Galen’s facial hair.

Granny was unfazed. She’d grown up here, after all. “What color?”

“Dark brown, black, something in that range. Very thick. I do believe he had a pen stashed in it. That must be convenient for filling out paperwork, which means he’s inventive and iconoclastic.”

“Tall?”

“Mmmm...tall enough. But not too tall. I suppose if he was much taller he’d be intimidating.”

“Then he isn’t intimidating?”



Brenda considered, tilting her head in remembrance. “No. I didn’t find him intimidating. He spoke very gently, except when he was yelling at Cotton Ball...I mean, Olaf.” She laughed at that absurd nickname, once again.

“Where did you meet him?” Granny’s avid expression rang an alarm bell. She didn’t want her grandmother getting her hopes up.

“It was Olaf’s fault. He got off his leash and went after a cooler of fish. Maybe I need to stop buying him those salmon treats. He’s like a junkie now. Oh, one more thing. He has a friend named Redbull. They’re partners, I think.”

Granny sat bolt upright and snapped her fingers. “I know who you’re talking about. You met Galen Cooper!”

No need to be surprised, Brenda realized. Everyone probably knew Galen. He was hard to forget. “I did. I mean, I’ve seen him before, but never talked to him.”

“Well, lucky you. He’s a real character.”

Brenda couldn’t resist. “What do you know about him?”

“Well, where do I start? He’s Thomas Cooper’s brother. The former fire chief, the one who just got married to Carly Gault? Steven Gault’s daughter?”

Ugh, why did so many conversations in this little town involve family tree type discussions? But at least Brenda knew about Steven Gault. Everyone in the country did. He was a rock legend, a member of the Freaks, the most famous resident of Lake Bittersweet until his death a couple of years ago.

Of course she knew Carly too, or knew about her, anyway. As for Thomas Cooper, he’d helped her save Olaf from a coyote during a hike in the woods.

But still, it was hard to believe that someone so wild could be related to the stern-faced fire chief.

“Second of the three,” Granny went on. “The youngest brother, Billy, plays for the Twins.”

Even more surprising. Who knew that a bushy-bearded mountain man was related to a semi-famous baseball player?

She wished she could go back and redo their entire conversation. If she could, she'd be less focused on her Maltese and more so on Galen.

“Haven't you heard the story of how they came here, the Cooper brothers?” her grandmother was asking.

In answer, Brenda clicked the button on the electric tea kettle. Clearly she was going to be here for a bit. “Tell me.”

“People say they were more or less abandoned, taking care of themselves, running wild in the streets. Not here, somewhere else, maybe St. Paul. I don't remember that detail. My memory...” She shook her head sadly. Which was ridiculous, thought Brenda. She might forget certain details, but when it came to stories, she was a goldmine. “Anyway, when he was a little kid, Thomas was sent here to that Fresh Air Fund camp one summer. He loved it here. Years later, when he was a teenager, he answered an ad for a summer job at the Blue Drake. While he worked here, he saved up money and bought bus fare for his two brothers to join him.”

“How old were they?” Brenda knew her eyes were wide as she took in this story. Her childhood had been one of rules and etiquette. She'd never even ridden a bus except for school field trips.

“Oh, I couldn't say. Thomas was probably seventeen at the most. Galen's...maybe two years younger? At any rate, Gault let them stay in one of the Blue Drake cabins over the winter. The community more or less adopted them. A Minnesota winter in an unheated cabin is no joke. All they had was a wood stove. I remember that the Mosedales gave Galen a chainsaw—he and Jason are good friends—and I'd see him nearly every day heading into the woods with that saw and a sled to bring back firewood.”

“He didn't go to school?” As a teacher, Brenda felt strongly about school attendance. She found two mugs and dropped chamomile tea bags into them.

Her grandmother laughed. “Oh, he probably did, but I doubt he took it very seriously. I never had him in a class

when I used to substitute at the high school. He went to the school of survival, and he wouldn't be the first around here."

The school of survival. Okay, Brenda could accept that. Textbooks didn't contain everything a person needed to know about the world. She poured boiling water over the tea bags, and brought a mug to her grandmother. "So they just stayed on in Lake Bittersweet?"

"That's right. They never went back to Minneapolis, except for Billy, when he got signed to the Twins' farm team. Thomas became a fireman, and a dad. And Galen...well, he took to the woods like a duck to water. He became a wilderness guide, one of the best in the state. I'd even say he knows more about the flora and fauna of these woods than any naturalist with a PhD."

Pained, Brenda said, "Please don't denigrate higher education. I'm still paying off my loans."

"Only because you won't let me guilt trip your parents into it."

"Don't start," Brenda warned. Her parents had refused to pay for anything related to Brenda becoming a teacher. They considered that profession beneath someone whose stepfather was in the Social Register, or at least her mother did. Her stepfather left that sort of policing to Mom. Her usual method was to use money as a way to corral people where she wanted them to go. Thank God for student loans, and for Granny, who'd told her about the job in Lake Bittersweet, and invited Brenda to live with her to save money.

Then moved herself into the senior home. Cecilia McMurray was a force of nature.

"Oh, I don't want to pick a fight with you," Granny said. "Especially now."

"Why especially now?"

"You finally met someone! I'm thrilled for you, darling girl."

"*Met* someone? You mean Galen?" Brenda laughed. "If you call apologizing for my dog mangling his fish and spilling

gross water all over his floor meeting someone, I guess I did.”

“Dogs know best, honey.”

“Oh, now you’re saying my ditzzy Maltese did it on purpose? It was all a plot to catch Galen’s attention?” Brenda shook her head in bemusement. “You watch too many romcoms, it’s not healthy. Drink your tea. I have to go soon.”

“Where do you have to go? It’s the weekend.”

“I have work to do.”

“Chapter ten?”

“Chapter ten.” Only Granny knew about her secret hobby of writing books that would never be published.

“You’re such a disappointment,” grumbled her grandmother, but in that way that meant she loved and adored Brenda. It was entirely mutual. “You should be doing exciting things with attractive men and telling me all about it. Instead it’s chapter ten.”

“My heroine’s about to get kidnapped,” Brenda offered.

“I guess that’ll have to do.” Then she added, “I just heard from your mother this morning. She’s coming for a visit and wanted to run some dates by me.”

Brenda groaned as she dumped her tea bag in the waste basket. “Why did you wait until the very end to drop that bombshell?” Visits from her mother were so disruptive, it sometimes took her weeks to recover.

“Because it’s a much less entertaining topic than Galen.” A wicked grin spread across her grandmother’s face. “Now, if you were to throw a dinner party for Laney, I have an idea for the guest list.”

It took a moment, but then Brenda saw where she was going with that, and burst out laughing. “Oh my God, can you imagine? What would Mom say about that beard?”

“There’s only one real way to know.” Was that an actual cackle? How could her rebellious grandmother have given birth to her buttoned-up mother? And where did Brenda fit in?

“I’m not going to subject a poor innocent mountain guide to Mom’s white-glove inspection routine. You’re bad, Granny.”

“Bad to the bone,” she agreed cheerfully. “Now go say ‘hi’ to Rosalind. She’s been asking about you.”

After a quick kiss goodbye, Brenda hurried down the hall to Rosalind Stanley’s room. Rosalind had to be over ninety, but she refused to tell anyone exactly how old she was. Lately, she’d become more quiet and inclined to nap a lot. When Brenda poked her head into her room, she saw that Rosalind was indeed asleep, a lacy Afghan spread across her knees, her mouth ajar, *Judge Judy* playing on her TV.

Brenda waited a moment, in case the presence of another person jarred her awake. She admired the framed landscapes mounted on the walls, lush watercolors of forests and seascapes. Rosalind had been an artist until dementia had set in. When Rosalind kept quietly snoring, she tiptoed away, then headed outside to her car. As much as she enjoyed time with her grandmother and the other seniors she’d gotten to know, she was always happy to step back into the sunlight.

Behind the wheel of her Volvo, she checked off the day’s tasks. Shopping, done. Dog-walk, done. Granny-visit, done. Eccentric local character encounter, done.

Crap, that meant procrastination time was over. Her work-in-progress was tired of waiting for her.

“I’m coming,” she muttered to her half-finished book, which wasn’t even here, but lurking back at home in her computer. “Get off my back.”

Then she remembered that it was a gory crime thriller, and decided she’d better not piss it off.

“Please.”

## *three*

Galen was down by the lake scrubbing algae off a canoe that he'd set up on sawhorses when he got an emergency call from his older brother. He ripped off one of his work gloves and put the call on speaker.

"There's a fire at the nursing home," Thomas said, skipping any "hello." "We need extra hands to ferry displaced seniors around. Where's your truck right now?"

Galen stashed his bristle-brush in a bucket and threw a tarp over his project. The day was calm, the sky a gentle blue, no wind in the forecast. That boded well for the firefighters too. "It's behind the office. Do you need a driver for it too?"

"Do you have time?"

He was already heading up the beach toward his truck. In Lake Bittersweet, when disaster hit, everyone did what they could. "Things always slow down in September. Just tell me where to go. Is anyone hurt?"

"Don't know yet. Jason's in charge now, but it's all hands on deck. I told him I'd line up some extra vehicles."

Jason Mosedale was one of Galen's closest friends, and now the current fire chief. Galen thought it was odd that both his brother and his best friend ended up being fire chiefs.

"Count me in. It'll just take me a minute to clean out my truck."

"No need..." Thomas paused, no doubt picturing Galen's Chevy. "Yeah, good idea. You know where the nursing home

is, right?”

“Yup, be there in ten.”

Galen tucked his phone into one of the many pockets of his work pants and dove into his truck to execute a whirlwind cleanup. Two-by-fours that he'd picked up at the dump, out. Big cooler, out. Little cooler filled with snacks, same. No, the seniors might be hungry. Back in came the little cooler. Case of maple syrup that he'd scored on sale at the farmer's market, out. Hip waders, out.

Luckily, he didn't use the crew cab for much besides stashes of dry clothing. He hauled everything into the storage shed behind the office, then hopped behind the wheel of his truck. Peering at himself in the rearview mirror, he decided he didn't want to give any frightened elders a shock. There was a comb somewhere in this truck—the cupholder, maybe, in among the pens and interesting feathers and chopsticks and other random items he'd stuck in a plastic cup that was now permanently adhered to the cupholder.

Bingo!

He gave his hair and beard a quick tidy-up as he started the engine. Sadly, the comb broke halfway through. He tossed it in the side pocket of the door where all the trash went.

Maybe he should buy a metal comb, like the ones they used for lice, he mused as he put his truck in gear. Maybe he should *get* lice, then he'd have to shave his head for sure. He wouldn't have a choice.

For months now, he'd tried to get a haircut. He'd booked a total of sixty-five appointments at various barber shops and salons, in Lake Bittersweet and beyond. He even showed up to most of those appointments. But he couldn't bring himself to go through with any of them. He always paid for the time of the stylist, and left a hefty tip. But so far, not a single hair on his head had gotten snipped.

What was his problem? Recently, he'd been talking to a therapist about it. It didn't seem normal to have that much trouble getting a simple haircut. The therapy sessions were

interesting but hadn't solved his problem. He'd learned that he wasn't done being angry at his addict mother and his disappearing father. But how that connected to being unable to cut his damn hair, who the hell knew?

As he drew closer to the Lake Bittersweet Home for Seniors, he spotted the column of smoke rising into the bright blue September sky, and put his foot on the accelerator. He wasn't the only one heading that way. A steady stream of traffic flowed toward the home. Lake Bittersweet, doing its thing. Coming together in a crisis, no matter what controversy or scandal was currently going on.

The scene outside the home was chaotic but somehow orderly at the same time. As the firefighters dealt with the flames and smoke, paramedics tended to the elders in a triage area on the lawn. Galen spotted wheelchairs, gurneys, oxygen tanks. For the most part, the residents were stoic, but a few were in tears as they watched the rear section of the home disintegrate.

"It's just the kitchen," he heard one of the firefighters say. "Could have been so much worse."

That was a relief. But maybe not much comfort to the seniors who were going to be temporarily homeless. Galen spotted his brother and waved at him with a "where do you want me" gesture.

Thomas hurried over to him. Galen had always idolized his big brother, but they weren't much alike, aside from their dark hair. Thomas cut an imposing, almost stern figure. He commanded respect. A natural leader. The only place Galen was a leader was on a mountain trail, when followed by clueless city folk.

"Thanks for coming, man," said Thomas.

Galen gave a rude-ish gesture in response, as if to say, no need for thanks. "What do you want me to do?"

"Kendra's coordinating places to stay and rides for all these good folks." Thomas gestured at the elders in the triage



area. “If you could just hang out here, we’ll wait for specific direction from her.”

From behind the orange cones, a slender white-haired woman waved a hand. “I could use a ride!” she called cheerfully.

“Sorry, ma’am, we don’t have all the accommodations set up yet,” Thomas told her politely.

“I have my own accommodations.” Her tart tone made Galen do a double-take. Old people could really surprise you sometimes. He’d never had a grandparent...or at least, he’d never known his grandparents. But he’d spent some time with Redbull’s extended tribal relations, and loved hearing their stories.

This elderly woman had prepared for this evacuation. A carpetbag sat on the grass next to her, and she’d remembered to grab a coat, an elegant wool cape with a broach pinned to the collar. On her feet, she also wore a pair of very practical thick-soled boots with a fur lining dyed purple. Galen liked her style.

“You have a place to go?” Thomas was asking her.

“That I do. My granddaughter’s house. Which used to be my house too, so it’s the logical place for me to go. She’d be very disappointed if I didn’t, even though I never like to cramp her style.” She pointed at Galen. “Can you give me a ride there?”

Galen glanced at Thomas, who shrugged his assent. “I can,” he told her.

Was that too abrupt? Should he add a “ma’am”?

Might as well. “Ma’am.”

“Don’t be absurd, I’m hardly the Queen of England. After all, I’m still kicking.” She shot him a cheeky grin, and bent to pick up her bag. He rushed toward her to take it from her. She didn’t object to that, and no wonder. That thing was heavy, and seemed to hold mostly books. He led her to his truck, hoping she wasn’t too shocked by the mud on the tires and the dent in the bed left by a fallen tree.

“Sorry it’s a mess,” he muttered as he swung her bag into the bed.

“At least it’s not on fire.”

“Yet,” he joked. Then blanched. “Sorry. Bad joke.”

“No worse than mine.”

Unfazed, she waited for him to open the passenger door for her. He suspected that was because the door was heavy; she seemed like an intrepid type who liked to do things for herself, in general.

He opened it and helped her onto the step so she could slide onto the seat. Not sure if he should help—maybe give her a push? Let her use his hand as leverage?—he lingered.

“Give me a wee shove, would you?” she finally asked.

He obliged, as matter-of-fact as possible. There were many occasions when he had to manhandle his guiding clients. Sometimes they got stuck climbing a rock face, sometimes they couldn’t get out of the canoe, all kinds of things could happen out in the wild.

“Thank you, you’re very kind, despite that barbarian appearance of yours.”

Was that a wink? He grinned at her. “You’re a little wicked, aren’t you?”

“I hope much more than a little. Now get a move on, if you would be so kind. I’m sure my granddaughter is starting to worry.”

He hopped into the driver’s seat and put his truck in gear.

“I’m Cecilia,” she announced once they were underway. “But I go by CeCe. And you’re Galen Cooper.”

He wasn’t sure how or why she knew who he was, but it wasn’t surprising. He’d lived here twenty years now, and he looked like a black-haired ogre.

“Yup. Where am I going?”

She gave him directions to a house in a pretty neighborhood built around a circular road near the west side of the lake. He never went that way because it had the worst fishing in the lake.

“So Galen,” she said after an extended period of quiet. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

The question startled him so much he jammed his foot on the accelerator and the truck lurched forward. He quickly adjusted. “Sorry. Uh, no.”

“Why not?”

Her directness was disarming. He appreciated that in a person. Kids were direct, which might be why he got along so well with them. Also because they seemed to see him as some kind of fairytale cartoon character.

“I’m not the eligible bachelor type,” he growled.

“How so? You own a thriving business. You’re fit, you have strong community spirit, you’re clearly a kind person.”

He gritted his teeth, then went for the embarrassing truth. “Women either think I’m too uncivilized to bother with, or they see me as a challenge and want to tame me themselves.”

“And you don’t want to be tamed?”

“I am what I am.”

“Is that why you don’t shave that beard of yours?”

“No.” This was getting weirdly personal. “I try to shave it. But I can’t go through with it. Are we almost there?” He slowed down and scanned the houses in the subdivision they’d just entered. They were all tidy and well-tended. He noticed hydrangea borders and a swing dangling from an oak tree.

“That is fascinating.” Her tone of voice told him she really meant that. She wasn’t just being polite.

He shot her an incredulous look. “Fascinating?”

“You are fascinating. I’d love to put you in my book.”

“Book?”

“I’d like to write a memoir. My memory is still quite good. I’ve been inspired by my granddaughter, who writes books. She doesn’t like anyone knowing that, not even publishers, which is a real problem when it comes to getting a book published.” From her tartness, he could imagine she’d had many conversations with her poor granddaughter about this topic.

“Maybe she just needs time.”

“Like you and your beard.”

But he wasn’t listening anymore, because he’d just spotted the most miraculous sight. *Brenda*.

He slammed on the brakes and the truck jolted to a stop. Brenda, who’d been talking into her phone with an intense expression, looked up at the sound of tires squealing. As soon as she spotted them, she ran towards the truck. CeCe rolled down the window and stuck out her hand for Brenda to grab onto.

“*Granny!* Are you okay? I’ve been trying to call you!”

“Silly me, I left my phone behind! You’ll have to go get it for me as soon as they let people back into that raging inferno.”

Brenda gasped and turned pale. “That sounds terrifying. Are you all right?” Her gaze shifted to Galen, and she frowned in confusion. “Galen?”

“I...I’m just...I...” he stammered. What the hell was wrong with him? It could have been the fact that Brenda was wearing a sleeveless top that left her shoulders bare and showed off the sprinkling of golden freckles that adorned her skin. Or it could have been her shorts. They were...short. He didn’t know how short because he was afraid to look that direction for fear he’d never be able to look away.

“He’s my knight in shining armor.” CeCe came to his rescue. “He came to give us refugees rides to whatever kind soul would take us in. Should it be retire-fugees? I assumed that I could stay with you for the time being.”

“Of course you can, that’s not even a question. I would have come to pick you up! I was about to hop in the car and head over.” She looked almost disgruntled that Galen had beaten her to the punch of chauffeuring her grandmother.

“I’m sure you would have, but when I see the opportunity to get driven around by a handsome man, I take it.” CeCe granted Galen a smile, while he gazed back at her blankly. *Handsome man?* That wasn’t the way people normally referred to him. Did she actually mean him?

“You’re the worst flirt in the world, Granny.” Brenda rolled her eyes, then opened the passenger door. “What would Bryce think?”

“Bryce’s my new boo,” explained CeCe to Galen. “We used to say ‘beau,’ but now we can just say ‘boo’, it’s much easier. Will you come around and help me get out?”

Galen got out of the truck, even though Brenda made eye contact with him in a way that told him his help wasn’t needed.

Was she pissed that he’d turned up at her house like this? Unnerved by the appearance of a wild barbarian in her neighborhood?

Brenda stepped aside and allowed Galen to help her grandmother out of the truck. CeCe made a show of needing his support, though he wasn’t entirely sure that she did. What was her agenda here? He couldn’t tell, and Brenda’s presence made him so rattled that he couldn’t think straight.

But at the least, he could help this entertaining older woman descend from his truck. After she was out, he reached for her bag as well.

“Where should I take this?”

“Inside,” she said firmly, while Brenda said, “I’ve got it.”

Great. Did he really have to choose between them? Paralyzed, he froze in his tracks, the bag halfway out of the truck. He shot a panicked glance behind him at Brenda, who softened immediately.

“Inside would be wonderful, thank you,” she said. “I’ll help Granny in. It must have been such a shock, seeing a fire break out in your own home.”

“Oh, poo. They evacuated us at the first hint of smoke. No one was ever in any danger except stubborn old Petey Blake, who didn’t have his hearing aids in.”

Nevertheless, CeCe allowed Brenda to hold onto her elbow as they made their way up the brickwork front pathway to the house. Painted white, with forest green trim, it could be more accurately described as a cottage, Galen thought. It was the kind of house that made him sweat as soon as he walked in. He felt trapped in that kind of environment. What if he made a wrong move and knocked over a ceramic milkmaid or something? Or left dirt on a needlepoint pillow?

But to his relief, the interior of Brenda’s house was nothing like that. It had an open floor plan and minimal furniture, with a light breeze wafting through French doors that opened onto a back yard terrace. The lawn back there was more of a wildflower meadow, and beyond that, a grove of quaking aspens and balsam fir stood guard.

As soon as he saw those aspens, he relaxed. He loved those trees and considered them to be very underestimated. They had so many uses, both medicinally and in terms of woodworking. You could make Balm of Gilead from the buds, eat the sap when it was running, even use the bark as sunscreen. Quaking aspens grew profusely all over Minnesota, but that didn’t make them any less special.

“I have more furniture than this,” Brenda said nervously. “But it kept getting in the way so I moved it to the garage after Granny moved out.”

“I like it.” He meant that sincerely, although he didn’t know why his opinion would matter. But she looked relieved.

“Too much furniture always makes me feel hemmed in. But my mother liked to buy things so our house was always filled with china cabinets and buffets and armoires and chiffoniers.”

She'd lost him there. "Chi-what?"

CeCe burst out laughing. "Oh my, he really is perfect, isn't he?"

Galen cast a puzzled look at Brenda, whose face was slowly turning a bright pink.

"Stop that, Granny. Galen isn't a prop." She bent down to pick up the little white dog at her feet.

"Prop?"

CeCe lowered herself onto the couch, which was upholstered in sage velvet. "Her mother, my daughter, is an uptight B-word with a stick up her ass. In my day we would have called her a shrew, but today the kids would call her a bee-yotch. And they'd be right."

He still didn't understand. "How am I a prop?"

"Simple. Laney is coming to visit soon and we've been trying to cook up the perfect way to have a little fun at her expense."

He looked at Brenda again.

"She always wants me to have a boyfriend, and I never do. So my evil genius grandmother thought it would be hilarious to invite someone who's very much not what my mother would...I mean, she has a certain image that she would picture...and she's very image-conscious and..." She trailed off, looking flustered. "This is just sounding worse and worse."

Oh. So that's what they were talking about. He fit the bill of a completely unacceptable boyfriend. His crush considered him so unsuitable that she could prank her mother with him.

He nodded at them both, not because he agreed but because he couldn't think what else to do. Then turned and headed for the door. Thank God for his beard, because his face was burning with humiliation.

## *four*

Brenda shot one angry look at her incorrigible grandmother. “How could you? You hurt his feelings.”

“Well, go after him then.” Prepping for a nap, Granny sank deeper into the low daybed that Brenda used as a couch. “He’s a kind person. He doesn’t deserve that.”

“But...you...ugh. If you hadn’t just been through a harrowing ordeal, I’d be really angry with you.”

Her grandmother shooed her away with a brushing gesture of her fingers. “Better hurry. He’ll be gone in a minute.”

“Did you do that on purpose, you evil mastermind?”

“Go!”

Brenda ran outside and down the path, catching Galen just as he was about to swing into the driver’s seat of his truck. “Wait,” she said panting. “Give me a chance to apologize. And to thank you.”

“No need,” he said brusquely, one hand on the door handle.

“Yes, there is a need. My mother and my grandmother have an ongoing...feud, I guess. Granny’s always trying to get Mom to lighten up, and sometimes she draws other people into her silly schemes and that’s not fair. I want to apologize for her, and also say that none of that was my idea or coming from me in any way. I would never do that to another person, especially you.”



He leaned against his truck and folded his arms across his chest as he frowned down at her, and once again she noticed how lovely his eyes were. Also, he was spectacularly fit. His arm muscles bulged against the ribbed fabric of his black thermal shirt. Sure, it was ripped at the collar, and had a smudge of green slime on the elbow. But it still looked insanely hot on him.

“Why especially me?”

“You rescued my grandmother,” she said simply. “She’s a handful, but she’s also the only person who really paid attention to me when I was growing up. I’d do anything for her.”

“I didn’t rescue her.” Galen sounded irritated, as if he liked to be accurate instead of overblown. She could appreciate that. “I gave her a ride.”

“Well, that was very kind of you, and not as simple as you might think. She has very strong instincts about people. She wouldn’t get into a vehicle with just anyone. So the fact that she allowed you to drive her actually means a lot.”

“Allowed?” Galen cocked his head. “Demanded, more like.” Behind his beard, a smile quirked at his lips. She found herself extremely curious about the shape of his lips. It was hard to tell, but they seemed to be full and generous.

“Yeah, that sounds about right. My grandmother usually gets what she wants. Honestly, sometimes I can’t wait to be her age so I can get away with all the things she does.”

He was watching her curiously. “Like what sort of things?”

“Like what?” She shrugged. “Like demanding a ride from a handsome stranger.”

She saw him react to that, and realized that she’d effectively called him handsome. Well, it wasn’t totally untrue. His eyes were magnetic, so gentle and bright. His body would make any woman take note. And he smelled so nice, very woody and outdoorsy. When the wind blew a certain direction, that same lovely balsam fragrance wafted through her French doors.

Was she inhaling his scent? Oops. She covered quickly with a cough.

“What do you write?”

The abrupt question caught her by surprise. “Excuse me?”

“Your grandmother said you write books.”

Embarrassment flooded through her. Granny was going to pay for that one. So few people knew about her secret hobby. Why on earth had Granny shared it with this man? “Oh no, I’m not a writer, I’m a teacher at the elementary school.”

“I know. I, uh, saw you there a couple times. Picking up my nephew. Once when I was dropping him off.”

She frowned, sorting through all the students she knew. “Zack Cooper.”

“That’s him. One of my brother Billy’s kids. He’s gone a lot so I help Jenna out with rides and so forth. I’m a good chauffeur, seems like.” He grinned in sudden delight. The sight sent a surprise rush of pleasure through her. His smile was something else—like a dose of spring sunshine on a rainy day.

“Sure, I know both Zack and Jenna. There’s another little boy, too.”

“Bean. That’s what he likes to be called, Bean. And now I have another nephew. All boys. It runs in my family. There’s three of us brothers, now I have three nephews.” He seemed so wistful about it that she wanted to make him feel better, bring that smile back.

“Maybe you’ll be the one to break the curse.”

Instead, his smile vanished. “I don’t think so.” His tone was almost gloomy. “But Thomas and Carly will probably have more kids. I hope they do. They’re having fun now that Teddy knows what nighttime is. It was rough for a couple of months. The only thing that would get him to sleep was riding in a trail backpack. I took him on a hike one night and he didn’t fall asleep until mile six. After that I was afraid to stop and I hiked six more miles.”

Fascinated, she realized that he'd just uttered the most words she'd heard from him at one time. Amazing—the mountain man liked talking about kids. “You don't have any kids yourself?”

“I have a goldfish. An ex-girlfriend gave it to me. Actually that goldfish is long gone. Every time one dies, I think that's it, no more damn goldfish. Stupidest pet ever. But every time, I trek into Braddock and buy myself a new one. They keep telling me I need to get a goldfish subscription.”

She laughed. Galen was funny. She liked his gruff but gentle manner, the surprise flashes of humor. Whatever she'd thought of him at first sight—wild, rough, strange—she had a different vision of him now.

He'd make a great character in her book, she realized. She could model the demented serial killer after him, or, better yet, make him the red herring bad guy, the one who's actually a good guy.

“I write mysteries,” she said, answering the question from earlier. “But no one knows, so please don't tell anyone.”

“Who would I tell?” He looked genuinely confused. “But your grandmother told me, so you might want to warn her off.”

“She knows. I guess she just decided you needed to know my personal business.” She chewed on the inside of her mouth for a moment. For so long, she'd wondered what it would feel like to tell someone new about her absurd dream. The only other person who knew was her childhood friend Maura, and that loss was too painful to think about. After Maura had died, she'd told her mother about her secret writing in a rash moment of approval-seeking. Her reaction had been an astonished frown, followed by a nervous laugh, then a cautionary tale about a neighbor who wrote erotic stories and had been banned from the country club.

Now Galen knew, and he'd given neither a frown nor a laugh, but simply a curious steady gaze.

“They’re actually more like crime thrillers. They get kind of gory.”

He looked even more fascinated. “Bloody murder?”

“Very bloody.”

“What’s the bloodiest murder you’ve come up with? There’s a ghost story I like to tell my clients that involves a chainsaw.” He gave her a bloodthirsty grin. “Kids love it.”

There he went, talking about kids again.

“Do you jump out and scare them with a real chainsaw at the end?”

“How did you know?” They both laughed. “Nah, I wouldn’t want to scare someone for real. Out in the woods in the dark, things seem a lot more threatening than they do in town. Statistically, most murders happen in populated areas, not in the wilderness. If you want to stay safe from serial killers, go camping.”

“Is that the motto of your business?”

He chuckled, a rich sound that brought a smile to her own lips. “Wouldn’t want to jinx it.”

They smiled at each other for a moment that seemed to stretch longer than the actual time that passed.

“I can do it,” he finally said, breaking the silence.

“Hm?”

“You can shock your mother with my ugly mug.”

Warmth flooded through her, though she wasn’t sure if it was from embarrassment or gratitude that he’d apparently forgiven her. “You’re not ugly.”

“She’ll probably think I am. Isn’t that the point?”

So it was. “I’m not going to use you as a prop. It’s out of the question.”

He gave that some thought. “I don’t see it that way.”

“How do you see it?”

“Using my looks for good.” He gave her another of those smiles, and her heart melted a little.

“But it’s a prank. How is that good?”

“If the point is to make your mother lighten up, that sounds like a good thing. There’s nothing wrong with a prank if no one gets hurt, right?”

“Is that how it works?”

“If you go by us Cooper brothers, even if someone gets hurt it’s okay, so long as it’s funny. But we’re bad examples,” he added quickly. “We had no adult supervision growing up.”

“That sounds pretty nice.” Brenda sighed. She’d always compared her childhood to growing up in a dollhouse. Everything had to be perfect at all times in case a neighbor dropped by. As for pranks? Once she and Maura had drawn a hopscotch game on the sidewalk and told her mother that it was permanent instead of chalk that would wash off.

Mom had not been amused.

“My mother is much too pretentious, so maybe she deserves it.” Brenda rubbed her forehead. Was she actually going to go through with this silly plan? “Look, I don’t even know exactly when she’s coming, so let’s talk about this another time.”

For some reason, that suggestion made him light up. “I’ll give you my number. If I don’t answer, it’s because I forgot that I have a cell phone and left it somewhere. They never work out on the trail anyway. But you can always leave me a message at the office. They’re pretty good at getting hold of me if you tell them it’s an emergency. I sometimes carry a sat phone with me if I think there’s a potential for danger.”

That seemed like overkill. Her mother’s arrival might be an emergency for her and Granny, but it certainly didn’t require contacting anyone by sat phone. Whatever that was.

“The only danger would be too many cocktails. My mother travels with her own liquor cabinet and Granny and I usually need lots of drinks to get through her visits.” She glanced at her phone and realized it was almost five. She still had work to

do. Unnamed Victim number three wasn't going to murder himself. "Thanks again for bringing Granny home. I'd better go now."

He seemed to shake himself out of some kind of trance. "Yeah, yeah. Sorry. Bye." He swung himself into the drivers seat of his truck.

"Are you going to give me your number?" she asked gently, since he seemed so rattled.

"I have a card here somewhere." He rummaged around on his dashboard and came up with a business card that had seen better days. He blew dirt off it and rubbed it on his sleeve. Sheepishly, he handed it to her. She couldn't remember the last time someone had given her a business card instead of just inputting their number into her phone.

*Galen Cooper*, the card read. *Lake Bittersweet Wilderness Adventures. Owner/operator.*

Along with two phone numbers, office and cell, there was a tagline at the bottom. *Epic adventures you'll never forget.*

Somehow, looking back up at him, she didn't doubt it.

## *five*

“How have things been since we last met?”  
For once, Galen didn't mind that question.

Every two weeks since the start of summer, he'd been driving to Braddock for a session with Theresa Billingsley, licensed counselor. It wasn't just his haircut phobia that had propelled him into therapy. He'd also been having bad dreams, nightmares that woke him up in a sweat. His father was in those dreams, but when he tried to bring them into focus, they got blurry. Much of his childhood was also fuzzy, especially everything having to do with his father. It was weird.

There was also the fact that some of the people closest to him were falling in love and starting families, and he still... wasn't.

And he wanted to.

For years he'd never thought about things like that. “Survival mode,” his therapist called it. She was right. She was starting to help him see things about himself that he'd never realized, like maybe he felt more comfortable in the wilderness because it seemed more truthful to him—life is precarious and dangerous and your only mission is to survive.

But Thomas was doing more than surviving. He had a wife and a new baby. So was Jason. Galen had been watching him fall in love with Kendra Carter. It was real between those two. Any day now, he'd have to attend another damn wedding.

“Interesting,” he answered his therapist's question.

Theresa waited patiently for him to say more.

“There’s a woman. I’ve...I haven’t talked about her, but... well, I have a...” He couldn’t come up with a better word, so he shrugged and spat it out. Patient confidentiality and all. “I have a crush on her.”

“A crush. Tell me about her.”

“She’s perfect. She’s kind. Beautiful. She has this red hair and these eyes that are like...that color when you’re cruising across the lake on a calm day and you look down and the water’s so clear you can see the bottom fish.”

Good God, that was a terrible fucking description.

“I’m not a poet. I can’t say what her eyes are like,” he said grumpily.

“Let’s agree that you find her eyes beautiful. What else do you know about her? Have you ever talked to her before?”

“I knew she was a teacher, so I never bothered. Why would a teacher want to talk to me? I hated school. The only reason I graduated was because I chopped a winter’s worth of wood for the principal, and he felt sorry for me and let my F in English slide. She’s a writer too. So that’s two reasons why she’d never want anything to do with me.”

Theresa tapped her pencil on the arm of her cushioned chair. The one Galen sat in was just as cushy, and sometimes he was tempted to take a nap in this relaxing office, with its quiet beige carpet and slight hum of air conditioning.

“I’ve noticed that you have a habit of dismissing yourself.”

“I like to be accurate.”

“Okay then. You also said that you talked to this woman for the first time. Did she seem to want nothing to do with you?”

“No,” he admitted. “That’s not how she seemed. She smiled. We talked. But that might be because I drove her grandmother home from a fire.”

“So your actions endeared you to her.”



“I guess so. She took my number. I gave her a business card. But she hasn’t called, so she probably took one look at how grubby it was and decided not to.”

Theresa smiled. She was in her sixties, and he happened to know she was married with one grown son, and that she ran marathons. Other than that, all they did was talk about him.

“Maybe you should give it time,” she suggested gently. “In the meantime, there’s something you can do.”

“What?”

“You’re doing it. You’re trying to prepare yourself to be in a real relationship. You’re looking at yourself and some of your old habits and patterns. A crush can be useful because it can tell you something about yourself.”

He scratched at his jaw where the beard grew in especially thick. “How ya figure?”

“Crushes can sometimes—not always—be more about projecting certain values or characteristics onto someone else, especially if it’s a crush on someone you don’t know very well. That person could symbolize something to you, something you long for, maybe even something within yourself that you haven’t allowed to flourish. Something you’d like to be associated with.”

Okay, now she’d totally lost him. He frowned, trying to follow her words. Was she saying that he’d basically imagined that Brenda was the unattainable woman of his dreams?

She could have a point. But this was Brenda McMurray, and he’d been crushing on her from a distance for months now. He didn’t have that good of an imagination.

“Sounds like bullshit,” he muttered. “You don’t even know her. She’s extremely crush-able. And I know that’s not a word, or at least a good one.”

The therapist took no offense. “Let’s try this. What words come to mind when you think of this woman?”

“Some might be X-rated,” he warned.

“I’m a big girl.”

Okay, she'd asked for it. But when he opened his mouth, the words that came out weren't the lustful ones he'd expected. "Harmony," he said. "Calm. Like everything's going to be okay."

"That's good. That's good. From what you've said, those are qualities that were lacking in your earlier years."

He grunted. Until he'd gone on his first hike into the backcountry, he hadn't understood what "calm" meant.

"Is it possible that what you see in her is something you long for in your own life? That kind of feeling, that everything's going to be okay?"

"But it isn't. Hasn't so far, why would it start?"

"Galen," she said gently. "We all grow up with our own particular survival strategies that help us navigate circumstances that are beyond our control. Those strategies serve a purpose, but sometimes they linger long past the time that they're needed. This idea that nothing is okay, would you say that's still true about your life?"

He thought about it, looked at it from all angles. He liked his life. He had the best job in the world. He got to spend lots of time in the place where he felt the most himself. He got to live in a town that mostly accepted him. His brothers were nearby. Same with his friends. He planned to never leave Lake Bittersweet. He had so much to be grateful for. So why did he still have that fear that everything would get snatched away while he wasn't looking?

"Maybe it's not true right now," he muttered. "But it could be. Anything can happen."

"Like what?"

"Like what?" Sometimes his mind moved so slowly in these sessions. It was like navigating loose scree on an unfamiliar trail.

"When you think that anything can happen, what sort of thing do you picture?"

He fell quiet. The sort of thing he pictured wasn't something he liked to think about. In fact, he avoided it at all costs.

Except sometimes, he couldn't.

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*It sucked being the middle child. Thomas was his father's favorite, Billy their mother's. That left Galen scrambling for the leftovers. That was why he'd stayed up late four nights in a row working on something he knew his father would love. Marshall Cooper was a charmer, a talker, a partier. The one thing that always made him happy was beer. So Galen was making him a beer cozy.*

*Knitting one for him, in fact. Their neighbor had taught him how to do it. Galen and Billy usually went to her apartment when they came home from school because most of the time, Mom stayed out late. Since they'd gotten divorced, Dad only came around now and then, and Galen wanted to be ready for when he did.*

*The cozy was yellow with a black border, since those were his dad's favorite colors. He was trying to figure out a way to put lettering on top of it. M.C., his father's initials. What he really wanted was to write "World's Best Dad," but that was too many letters, and also a lie. His father didn't spend enough time with them to be the world's best, Galen knew that. But he loved him anyway. Maybe if he told him he was the best, he'd want to come home more.*

*Galen was the only one in the apartment who was awake that night. Thomas was staying at a friend's, Mom was out cold, Billy fast asleep like the little kid he was. The sound of tapping on the window nearly scared Galen out of his skin. They lived on the ground floor, with a scraggly-grass strip of lawn alongside their three-room apartment.*

*At first Galen was happy when he realized it was his father out there. Then he noticed Dad was coughing, hacking, his*

*entire chest heaving. Was he sick? He motioned for Galen to let him in the front door.*

*Once his father was inside the apartment, Galen saw that he was bleeding. Blood came from between his fingers, and Galen thought his hand had been cut. But then he knew it was his stomach, and that was much worse.*

*“What...what happened?”*

*His father shushed him, whispering, “Shut up and get the first-aid kit from the bathroom. You know where it is, right?”*

*When Galen didn't move, still in shock, his father hissed at him. “Go. I'm fucking dying here. You trying to kill your own father?”*

*Galen ran to the bathroom. But when he came back, the most shocking thing he'd ever seen was happening. A strange man was dragging his father out the door, a knife held to his throat. He left a trail of blood across the floor.*

*He started after them, but the man brandished the knife at him. He froze.*

*“Stay where you are and don't fucking tell anyone,” ordered the man. “Clean this up and don't say a word, ever.”*

*“Do what he says.” Dad squeezed the words out through his constricted throat muscles. “I love you.”*

*And they were gone, his father and the other man.*

*He was in so much shock that he moved like a zombie after that. He cleaned up the blood with paper towels, then took them all to the dumpster behind the apartment building, even though it was dangerous and scary back there. He even threw away the beer coozy he'd been working on.*

*He never told anyone what had happened.*

*His brothers never noticed that he clammed up every time someone mentioned Dad. He couldn't help it; it was as if a steel vise would go around his throat and even if he'd wanted to, he couldn't say a word.*

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“That’s quite a traumatic event,” the therapist said softly. “Did you ever learn more about what happened that night? Who the man was, or who had hurt your father?”

“No. About a month later, we heard he went to prison. My mom would never let us go see him. I know he’s out now, but I don’t know where he is.”

“So that’s the last time you saw him?”

Galen nodded. His heart was racing, and he felt sweat on his forehead. He’d kept that secret for so long. “You won’t tell anyone, will you? Patient confidentiality, right?”

“I won’t, but I’m curious what you’re afraid would happen if I did.”

“I don’t know. Something bad. After he went away, things went downhill for me. I got into fights. I used to go after my mom’s boyfriends, and the man she got married to. Things never felt right again until I got off the bus in Lake Bittersweet.”

“I can see how you could feel that anything can happen after witnessing a shocking and unexplained event like that.”

Galen shifted his position and dropped his gaze to the floor. “But that’s just the way the world is. Anything *can* happen.”

“Do you include good things? Things like your crush taking your number?”

“That’s different. It’s just a card. And it’s not like she’s called it.”

“I’m curious. Do you want her to call you?”

It was such a perceptive question that he went blank at first. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s better if I just worship her from a distance. Then nothing can go wrong.”

She smiled gently, letting his own words speak for themselves. “That’s all the time we have today. But this is good work, Galen. I know it’s not easy bringing up these memories.”

No, it sure wasn’t. It left him in a fog, almost like a hangover, for the rest of the day.

Now that he thought about it, it sucked that no one had ever bothered to tell them what had happened to their father. Why had he gone to prison? What happened after that? Why hadn’t he ever contacted them?

And it was very fucked up that Dad had forbidden him to say anything about that night to anyone. It was like carrying a grenade in your chest pocket for the rest of your life. He remembered being so afraid that it would slip out that he’d avoided even thinking about Dad.

That’s why he’d blurred out the image of the father he’d loved and idolized.

At least he’d finally broken down and told someone about it. The inner ban on talking about it had been so strong, he was still sweating as he drove back to Lake Bittersweet. What would happen now? He half expected a concrete block to drop on him from above.

When he rolled into Lake Bittersweet, he didn’t feel like going to the office just yet. He was still rattled. He needed to collect himself first. The SweetBitter. That was what he needed, a strong cup of coffee from his old friend. Rick was one of his fishing buddies, and he didn’t know anything about the Cooper brothers’ father.

When he stepped through the door, he took a grateful breath of warm air scented with the aroma of roasting coffee beans. Then he pulled up short as he caught a flash of auburn across the room.

*Brenda.* He’d recognize that hair anywhere, even from the back. She sat at one of the round ironwork tables, so small they were only suitable for two. Romantic, intimate. Across from her sat a man in a patchwork corduroy blazer and jeans.

He sipped from an espresso cup as he gazed into Brenda's eyes.

Galen backed up and hit the door with his ass. The contact made a surprisingly loud bang, which caught the man's attention, and suddenly his gaze was on Galen instead of Brenda.

*No. Don't turn around*, he thought desperately. He didn't want Brenda to see him right now. He was having a Galen moment, one of those times when he felt awkward and clumsy around anything having to do with civilized society. Had he just broken Rick's fancy beveled-glass door?

"Galen!" That was Brenda, calling to him. She'd turned to look his way and was now rising to her feet. "Are you okay?"

He didn't answer, just turned and walked out the door—using the knob this time—and hurried away down the street.

Obviously that man was in love with Brenda. She was probably dating him. No wonder she hadn't called him. Maybe she had an actual boyfriend to show off to her mother now. What mother wouldn't love a man in a corduroy blazer?

Goddamn it, he kinda wished a concrete block had dropped on him instead of this.

*six*

“Who was that?” Duncan leaned to one side to watch Galen as he rushed away down the street. “I thought it was a Yeti.”

Brenda wished she could dash after Galen and make sure he hadn’t hurt himself when he banged into that door. But it would be rude to ditch someone her favorite colleague had set her up with. He was a professor at a nearby community college, which meant he’d start off with solid points on her mother’s suitability index. Not as many points as a surgeon or a corporate lawyer or, best of all, someone independently wealthy—but a few.

“He’s a friend of mine.” She put enough reproof in her voice to get the point across.

“Sorry. He looks like a real character. We have a few of those types wandering around our campus.”

“Those types?”

Duncan shrugged. “Lumberjack types. Great guys, for the most part. It’s hard work.”

“Galen is a wilderness guide. And a great guy,” she added. Even though she’d met Galen so recently, she felt confident in saying so.

“Maybe I’ll hire him for my upcoming epic inner journey.” He paused, giving her a chance to weigh in with an “ooh, tell me more.” But she couldn’t summon up enough enthusiasm for that. She felt as if she already knew everything there was to know about Duncan Scott.



That didn't seem fair, so she forced herself to offer him a politely curious smile. "Oh?"

"I'm going to spend three days in a cabin on the Mackinak Trail. No cell phone, no internet, no food. Just water. I'm taking my notebook and my meditation pillow and nothing else. I'm pulling a Thoreau."

"Well, don't come back until you've hit your quota of deep thoughts."

He didn't laugh at her quip. "Everyone tells me it will change my life. I'll come back a different person."

"A hungrier one, for sure."

Yet another quip that he didn't seem to appreciate.

"You should talk to Galen. He's an excellent guide, and I'm sure he's spent plenty of time alone in the wilderness. He can probably give you some good survival tips."

"This isn't about mere survival. It's a spiritual quest. I don't need anyone else for that. This is about getting in touch with my own inner guide."

That sounded arrogant to her. A bear wouldn't care if Duncan was on an inner quest. But whatever. "When is this happening?"

"As soon as my gear arrives. I more or less bought out Gore-Tex." He started listing off all the items that were being shipped to him. She tried to imagine Galen fitting himself out with all the latest high-tech athleisure-wear, and nearly laughed out loud.

She tuned out of the conversation after that, and began mentally brainstorming her villain's next murder. He'd surprise everyone this time and do it with a crossbow. Her villain liked to be unpredictable because he knew the police looked for patterns. His biggest thrill was outwitting the frustrated detectives who were trying to track him down. She was still trying to nail down his back story. Maybe he had some longstanding hatred for law enforcement. Maybe his brother had been framed and wrongly imprisoned, and now he was out for revenge.

Duncan was still going on about his quest, but she'd had enough of the conversation. On Monday, she'd thank Marissa for the thought, but tell her it wasn't a match. *On the bright side, I got some brainstorming done*, she'd say.

She realized with a start that Duncan was waiting for an answer to a question she'd missed. "Sorry, what was that again?"

"The phone number of that guide. Do you have it? I want to know if I should bring firewood or if there's plenty out there."

She couldn't resist. "Won't you think deeper thoughts if you have to face the elements?"

Damn, he really didn't seem to appreciate her comments on his spiritual adventure.

She extracted Galen's business card from her bag, but paused before handing it over. "I should probably call him first."

"Why? Isn't it his job?"

"Yes, but..." She had no good explanation, so she just put up a finger and stepped away from the table to make the call.

This was the perfect excuse to call Galen. He'd given her his card so that she could call him if her mother came to town. She still hadn't set a date for that visit, so Brenda had felt funny calling for no particular reason. She had thought about it, though. She'd thought about *him*. He was so interesting to her, so different from most of the people she knew. She'd even looked him up on social media, but found no Galen, only the wilderness tours.

"Yeah," he answered, as if he was in the middle of something and barely managed to get the phone to his ear.

"Oh hi, I didn't mean to bother you, this is Brenda. You know, with the grandmother?"

Okay, that was pretty lame.

"Is she okay?"

“Yes, she’s fine. It’s nothing like that. I was just...I just saw you at the café, and the person I was with wants to ask you some guiding questions. I wanted to see if it’s okay if he calls you.”

A long silence followed. Then, “Is it a favor?”

“A favor? You mean, for me? No, not at all. Honestly, I don’t care if he gets eaten by a bear. That’s an exaggeration, of course I don’t want *that* to happen. But a little nibble wouldn’t be so bad.”

She glanced over her shoulder to make sure Duncan couldn’t hear her. He was busy talking into his own phone, his earbuds in place.

When Galen spoke again, his tone was considerably lighter. “I can probably arrange a mountain lion scratch. But my contract with the bears is under negotiation.”

She laughed, something she hadn’t done once during her entire coffee date with Duncan. “I’ll tell him to call you, then. Just brace yourself for lots of talk about quests and inner journeys. You might be cringing a lot.”

“What do you think the beard’s for? Hides a lot.”

“So unfair. Now I wish I could grow a beard.”

“I’ve known a few bearded ladies. It’s not so unusual. It’s the testosterone levels that do it.”

Was he saying he had high levels of testosterone that accounted for all that facial hair? She found it fascinating that he was both intensely male and sort of shy and sensitive. Compelling combination, if you asked her.

“Would you be going on this journey with him?” Galen asked, a little bit stiffly, she thought.

“Me? Oh no. I’ve already burned my tongue trying to drink my tea too fast so I can get out of here.”

“Is it a...date?”

“Sort of. One of my coworkers thought we might hit it off, but I don’t think she knows me as well as she thought. Is there

any chance you have an emergency going on that you need help with?”

She caught some rustling on the other end of the line, and a male voice muttering something from a distance.

“Redbull ate too many Cheetos and I’m pretty sure he’s about to throw up all over our computer, does that count?”

“Absolutely. I’ll be right there.” She was only partially joking, because helping Redbull with his vomiting issue sounded more fun than tea with Duncan.

But just then, another call came in. “Sorry, Granny’s calling. Talk to you soon, Galen. I’ll pass along your number to Duncan.”

He grunted, which she understood was his form of goodbye, though she imagined some people wouldn’t understand that. For some reason, she found Galen pretty easy to translate.

She clicked over to the other call, and knew right away that something bad had happened, just from the way her grandmother was breathing on the other end of the line.

“Granny? Are you okay?”

“It’s not me,” came her grandmother’s shaky voice. “It’s Rosalind.”

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For the next few days, when Brenda’s students asked her why she was sad, she had to explain that she was worried about a friend. Several drew her pictures to cheer her up. One boy showed off his newest Razor scooter trick. Another one brought her a dreamcatcher that one of his aunties had made.

She was one lucky teacher. The kids could always make her smile—in between driving her nuts with their resistance to math, of course.

But Rosalind wasn’t so lucky. Hospitalized for pneumonia, a few days later she was gone. CeCe was inconsolable at first.

When Bryce wasn't available to comfort her, the job fell to Brenda.

"Granny, she was over ninety." Brenda patted her back as she sniffled on the living room couch.

"But I wasn't ready. It was that stupid fire. Rosalind was fine until we all had to move out."

Did snoozing her way through *Judge Judy* marathons constitute "fine"? Brenda decided not to bring that up.

"At least you got to spend time with her at the end." Every day after school, Brenda had taken CeCe to the hospital in Braddock. She'd had no time for anything else, other than walking poor Olaf. Her Maltese was currently curled up in Granny's lap, doing that comforting-simply-by-existing thing he did so well.

"Yes, it's a good thing, because we got her last wishes squared away. They had a lawyer there who put it all on paper. Signed, sealed, delivered. But you're not going to like it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you're going to find out soon enough. You're in Rosalind's will. You're the only one we could call on. None of her family lives here anymore. They were terrible anyway. That's why she chose you."

Brenda got the feeling there was a story there, but she was more concerned about this news about her will. "Chose me for what?"

Granny picked up Olaf and plopped him on Brenda's lap. Brenda welcomed the warm weight of her dog, who hadn't even woken up during his transfer. CeCe got off the couch to grab her carpetbag. After rummaging inside for a while, she came up with a manila folder. "It's all in here. Everything you need to know."

Brenda took it and scanned it quickly. At first it all made sense. Rosalind had chosen cremation, and prepaid for everything. Then she reached the part where her name came up. She glanced up at her grandmother, mystified. "What the hell is LadyBird Ridge?"

## *seven*

Galen didn't see or hear from Brenda after that phone conversation. He called her once but didn't leave a message because he never left messages. Phones made him uncomfortable in general, and voice mails gave him hives. Her cell phone would tell her that he'd called, and if she wanted to call him back, she would. She didn't.

Duncan Scott did call, however.

Galen led him on the fifteen-mile hike out to the Mackinak cabin. The two of them chopped some wood—well, Galen chopped, Duncan stacked—and Galen made sure he knew how to set a fire in the old barrel stove. But since he was dressed in at least two thousand dollars worth of Gore-Tex, he probably wouldn't freeze.

At first, Duncan made no mention of Brenda, or what she was up to, and why she'd more or less disappeared for the last week. Galen didn't ask. He didn't like thinking of the two of them on a coffee date. If he did, he might be tempted to lead him to a bear den instead of a hunter's cabin.

Even though Duncan claimed to not want any food, Galen made sure to subtly let him know that the cupboard was well-stocked with cans of beans and so forth. He didn't want the guy getting hungry and deciding to try out random mushrooms growing in the deep moss. He also showed him how to use the bear spray canister, but emphasized it was only for emergencies.

“This is bear territory, so we have to work around them, not the other way around.”

“If a bear appears, I’ll consider it a spirit guide on my quest. I almost hope one does.”

Galen almost did, too. Except that bear encounters sometimes provoked bear panics in the local populace, and made him fear for the bears.

“Make sure to check in with me when you come back down the mountain,” Galen told him. “If more than five days go by, I’ll come and check on you.”

“Is that necessary?”

“Standard protocol.”

“Well, Brenda says you’re an excellent guide, so I’ll take your word on that.”

Finally, a mention of Brenda. “When did she say that?”

“Over coffee. It was our one and only date. She’s not really my type, as it turns out. I need someone a little edgier than a small town elementary school teacher.”

Galen gritted his teeth against the urge to smack him. This was good news, after all. Duncan wasn’t any kind of competition.

“Did she say anything else?”

Duncan shot him a sardonic look. “Crushing on Teacher?”

“Want me to leave some fresh meat out to draw the bears?”

With a laugh, Duncan threw up his hands in surrender. “Mountain man wins. He’s got a bite, too. Brenda also said that you were a great guy.”

*What?*

Thank God, once again, for the beard that hid his reactions. It didn’t work a hundred percent, though. Duncan eyed him sideways.

“Hey man, you should ask her out. Nothing to lose, right? I know she’s single. The friend who set us up says she doesn’t

date much. Personally, I think she might be asexual. Ace, they call it. Some people just don't have a sex drive. I didn't pick up any kind of vibes from her, not even lesbian vibes. But you might as well take a shot."

In a blast of fury, Galen grabbed him by the Gore-Tex collar. "Don't fucking talk about her like that."

"Whoa, man. Be cool. I was just speculating."

Galen dropped him like a burning coal. Where had all his professionalism gone? He'd never done anything like that before. "Sorry," he muttered.

Duncan backed away, keeping a wary eye on him. "It's all right. I'll consider it part of my inner quest. In the spirit of radical honesty, she turned me down for a second date and I'm not used to that."

Galen felt as if the sun had suddenly appeared from behind a cloud. Brenda had turned him down. There was still a chance for him, if he could screw up the nerve to shift from fantasy to reality.

He left Duncan perched on his meditation pillow on the porch of the cabin. As he headed down the trail, he smirked at the sound of Duncan slapping yet another mosquito. Before long, there would be a swarm of them, and no doubt Duncan would seek shelter inside. Inner quests and mosquitoes didn't go together very well.

Two days later, he got a text from Duncan. *Off the mountain.*

*How did it go?* He texted back. What he really wanted to ask was how many mosquito bites he'd ended up with.

*Cabin didn't work out. I'll try another mountain.*

He was still laughing at that—sure, blame the mountain—when Brenda appeared next to him. It literally seemed that way, as if she'd stepped down from a cloud in a beam of sunlight. He was down at the lakeside launch site, loading up a canoe with supplies for a late-season river trip. How had she even known to find him here?



“Brenda?” He blinked at her.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt your work. Redbull sent me this way.”

She looked tired, he thought, and maybe a little sad. She was wearing a soft pale blue sweater with little pearl buttons down the front. It clung to her beautifully formed chest in the most distracting way. She also wore a black wool skirt and boots that zipped up the side. And pink pearl earrings.

“Is everything okay?”

Her pretty green eyes blinked at him. “How did you know?”

“Know?” A horrible thought struck him. “Is your grandmother...”

“No! Galen, you have to stop thinking something’s about to happen to Granny. She’s very healthy. She has a better sex life than I do now that she has a boyfriend.”

Why was she talking about her sex life? Was she just trying to torture him? “Sorry,” he muttered. “I worry about people that I like.”

She softened. “It’s okay. I understand, I worry about her too. It’s actually her friend Rosalind from the senior home. She passed away.”

“I’m sorry.” Should he offer her a hug? A touch on the hand? Some sympathy? He wrestled with the question for a moment, then went with a light touch on her upper arm.

She gave him a grateful smile. “Thank you. The really sad thing was that she didn’t have any family around here. In her will, she asked if I would take care of her last wishes. That’s why I’m here.”

He gazed at her blankly. What could some stranger named Rosalind’s last wishes possibly have to do with him? “Okay.”

“She wanted to be cremated, and her ashes scattered from a place called LadyBird Rock. I’d never even heard of it, but I looked it up and it’s in our local mountains. I certainly can’t go by myself, so I’m here to hire you, if you’re willing.”

LadyBird Rock. He knew it well, since it was one of the most spectacular overlooks in all of Minnesota. A sheer granite cliff at the end of a twelve-mile hike...two thousand foot elevation...

He shook his head, causing her to take a little step back. Then he shook his head again, trying to take back the first head-shake. "I'm willing, but it's late in the season. The LadyBird Trail can get dicey this time of year."

"Oh." It was as if her whole body deflated. Her shoulders slumped, her head dropped.

"I suppose it can wait until spring. That's not too disrespectful, is it?"

He'd rather cut open a vein than disappoint her that much. "We can look at the forecast," he said dubiously.

Her face brightened. "Yes, let's do that. We'll let the weatherman decide."

He hadn't exactly said that, but he led the way up the winding trail from the beach to the office anyway.

"I have a weather app on my phone," she said halfway up.

"That won't tell you anything about the mountains. I have my own system. Satellite imaging and radar."

He found the office empty, and a sign on the door that read, "Gone Twinning," which meant that a baseball game was on and Redbull had decided things were slow enough that he wouldn't miss much if he hopped over to Mariano's.

"Best business partner ever," he said sarcastically as he unlocked the door. He crossed to his weather computer and booted it up.

"He's very sweet. He said that you were contemplating the fact that your best friend Jason just found his soulmate and that you were feeling lonely. He said I should give you a hug."

Goddamn that gossip-goon. No wonder Redbull had skipped off early. He hadn't wanted to face Galen's wrath. "I'm very happy for Jason and Kendra," he said tersely.

“So you don’t want a hug?”

He found himself without words, until he noticed the mischievous glint in her eye. She was teasing him. Wow. He didn’t know what that meant, but he liked it. “Would it be a pity hug? Or a real hug?”

“Would it matter?”

He laughed, finally relaxing into this conversation. She was being flirty, he realized. He should flirt back. He didn’t generally flirt a lot, since he liked directness. “Probably not. You can test it if you like.”

Her eyes widened just a bit. Their gazes held. Time seemed to stop. Was she going to hug him?

If she actually hugged him, he had no idea what would happen. Would he have a heart attack? An instant hard-on? Would he levitate like a goddamn hot air balloon?

Just then his computer *dinged*, indicating that it was online. They both jumped and he hurried over to it.

Duncan’s comment flashed back to him. *I think she’s asexual. I didn’t pick up any vibes.*

That guy was full of shit because there was no way an asexual person could make Galen feel the way he was feeling. An asexual person wouldn’t have looked at him the way she had. No. Brenda hadn’t given Duncan any “vibes” because she didn’t like him.

Which meant that she must like Galen enough to spark some vibes.

His hands were shaking just a bit as he bent over the computer to punch in the coordinates of LadyBird Rock. His system included all the topography within a two hundred mile radius. He could home in on any part of the local terrain and see what was happening in the moment and what the forecast was for the next few days.

He consulted it before every trip, but it had its limitations, like all weather prediction systems. Even though Minnesota wasn’t an especially mountainous state, its highest peak only

reaching twenty-three hundred feet, that was high enough that things could change quickly when cold air hit the jutting granite-hewn land masses. It was impossible to entirely predict all the factors at play, which was why he always insisted on rain gear no matter how sunny the forecast.

For a long moment he studied the satellite radar, toggling back and forth between the twelve-hour and the twenty-four-hour maps. He took a look at the three- and four-day forecasts as well, though he knew those would be less accurate.

“We might be okay,” he finally said. “The nighttime temperatures are holding steady at around thirty-five, and there are no big storm systems in the area. How long would you want to be up there?”

“I’ll just say a few words, then scatter her to the wind. It shouldn’t take much time. How long is the hike to get there? Can we go in the morning and come back in the afternoon?”

“It’s a six-hour hike on a good day.”

She blanched a little. “Six hours? What was Rosalind thinking?” she murmured.

“It’s beautiful there. Maybe she forgot how far it is.”

“I’m not sure she’s ever been there. Maybe she just liked the name. She did have some dementia toward the end. She mentioned a man from her past, but as far as I know she never married.”

“Sounds like material for a book.”

She shot him a look that said he had no clue what he was talking about. “I don’t write romantic novels.”

“But maybe she lured him up there and pushed him off the cliff.”

“Oh my God.” She clapped her hands together, the delight on her face making him lightheaded. “I think I love you for that. Let’s do it, if you’re still up for it. It can double as a research trip. I’ve been looking for one more murder method for my WIP. Work in progress,” she explained when he shook his head blankly.

They selected the day that looked the most promising according to the forecast. He gave her a list of everything she'd need to bring. "I'll take care of food and water. But you'll need some solid hiking boots, extra layers of clothing, and rain gear. There's a few other items."

She scanned the list. "Reminds me of Girl Scouts when I was eleven. Thanks for this, Galen. I really appreciate it. Granny will be grateful, too. She's been mourning her friend. I get the impression there's a story about Rosalind that she's keeping to herself. She's been re-reading her journals and listening to Adele."

After she left, Galen studied the computer a while longer, his head spinning. He was going on a six-hour hike with Brenda McMurray. Twelve hours round-trip. Chances were, she'd be too exhausted after the climb up to the ridge, and they'd have to spend the night up there. He knew of a cabin that was rarely used anymore. Just to be safe, should he bring sleeping bags?

The sound of the door opening made him start. Redbull ambled inside, a can of Modelo in one hand, a paper plate of fried fish in the other. "Did I give you enough time?" he asked.

"For what?"

"Nail down a date with your crush."

"I thought you went to watch the game."

"You know I'm more of a basketball fan. No offense." He winked, since Galen was always guaranteed to react to any hint of disrespect toward Billy's sport.

But right now, Galen didn't have the bandwidth to react to any baseball slurs. "So you were trying to give me some time alone with Brenda?"

"I didn't want to overpower her with my charisma. Had to give you some space." Redbull strolled toward the desk with his usual unhurried pace. That was something they shared, an abhorrence of being rushed. Putting numbers on the passage of time offended both of them—which meant they'd never posted official office hours. People either lucked out and found

someone in the office, or they left a message. It worked out.  
“So, what’s the what?”

“I’m taking her up to LadyBird Rock to scatter her friend’s ashes.”

Redbull pursed his lips. “That’s some first date you lined up.”

Galen snorted, and soon they were both laughing. “Don’t count me out. I think she might like me.”

“Enjoy it while you can, because she’s gonna hate you after that hike.”

## *eight*

Brenda requested a day off at school, since the big hike was scheduled for a Friday. Classes had just gotten going again, and she had a new batch of students to get to know. Normally she didn't like to take time off this early in the year because the kids needed to get used to her.

But Rosalind deserved to have her last wishes respected.

Granny followed her into the garage, where she'd stashed totes containing her extra stuff when she'd moved to Lake Bittersweet from Arizona. So many memories were stored in those totes—many of them related to Maura—and hopefully her old hiking boots right along with them. In Arizona, she'd done a fair amount of hiking. Hopefully it was like riding a bike.

Olaf kept getting in the way, sniffing each tote as she sorted through it. Granny scooped him up.

“Will you walk him at least once, Granny? I'll only be gone one day, two at most.”

“*Two* days? Are you saying you might spend the night up there?”

“Galen said it's a backup option if we're too tired. By which he means, if I'm too tired. He could probably run up to that ridge and back ten times and be fine.”

Her grandmother fluttered a hand to her chest.

“You might spend the night with *Galen*? That's different, then. You'd better bring your fancy underwear.”

“Good lord, lady. Must you?”

“Someone must. I’m only saying what Maura would have. You need more girlfriends. If you did, you might have a boyfriend by now.”

Brenda shook her head at her unruly grandmother. No one else could mention Maura like that and get away with it. Besides, in a weird way, Granny might be right. She thought about a recent encounter with Kendra Carter. They’d joked about sex with exes and nosy grandmothers, and it had been light and fun.

There was nothing like a good female friend. She and Maura had fought sometimes, but they’d always had each other’s backs and kept each other’s secrets. All the way until the end.

She wished she could get to know Kendra better, but between teaching and getting used to a new town, she hadn’t established much of a social life. Maybe she should work on that.

If she survived LadyBird Rock.

Galen had given her a map to pore over so she’d know what she was in for. She’d never used a topographical map before—he called it a topo map—and it took a while to get used to the plethora of squiggly lines representing steep slopes and switchbacks. Suffice it to say, it would be a challenge.

“Got ‘em.” She found her old Merrell boots and thrust them triumphantly into the air. They still had traces of red canyon dust from Arizona.

Granny eyed them with disgust. “How about you turn them into ashes too? Make it a two-fer.”

Brenda laughed so hard that she knocked the tote onto its side. “Don’t hold back, Granny.”

“You know I never do.”

Wiping away the tears streaming down her face, Brenda sat back on her heels. “Are you going to be okay for a couple of days while I’m gone?”



“Of course I am. You won’t mind if I have a friend over, will you?”

She sobered even further. “Are you talking about Bryce coming here?”

“I am. And I’m not asking for permission. Poor Bryce has been staying at the Blue Drake cabins, and he’s going stir-crazy. They say we have another week before we can all move back in.”

That news really wiped the smile off her face. She was going to miss having her grandmother around. And this thing with Bryce...it unnerved her to think her grandmother might be forming a new relationship at this stage of her life.

Granny had never married. She’d raised Laney by herself and to this day refused to say much about Brenda’s grandfather, just that he was long dead and good riddance. Brenda often thought that her mother had sought out wealth and stability because she’d had such an unpredictable childhood.

It was a good thing if Granny found someone to love. She deserved to be happy. But how was it going to affect Brenda?

*Not the point*, she lectured herself. *It’s Granny’s life.*

“Have all the fun you want with Bryce. Just no wild parties while I’m gone.”

“How did I raise such a party-pooper girl?” She snapped her fingers. “That’s right, my uptight daughter’s the one responsible for that.”

Brenda got to her feet, boots in hand. “Don’t forget to use a condom.”

“It’s the lube I need to remember, not the condom.”

Brenda gave a mock-shriek and covered her ears. “*Granny!* I don’t need to know that! Too much information!”

“You’ll want to know it when you’re my age. Why don’t people talk about these things? It’s quite ageist, I’ll have you know.”

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Brenda was still recovering from that conversation when Galen swung by just after sunrise on Friday to pick her up. When she'd quizzed him, he told her that door-to-trail service wasn't normally part of the drill. But he wanted to pick her up so she didn't have to carry the urn to the office.

Not that it was an urn, as it turned out. Rosalind hadn't wanted one. It was just a cardboard box containing a plastic bag that held the ashes.

Galen eyed the box. "Do we need that? I can just put the bag in my backpack."

"It's heavier than you would think."

In his hands, it didn't look heavy at all. "I'll make it work." Then he hesitated. "Is it okay if I carry it? Rosalind didn't know me."

She was touched that he remembered her name, which she'd only mentioned once.

"She didn't say anything in her will about that, so I'm sure she wouldn't mind. Thank you." She smiled at him, noting that his plaid wool jacket in shades of deep green and black really suited him. It made his eyes seem even more filled with light.

She herself had paid extra attention to her outfit, not just because she'd be counting on it to keep her warm, but because she wanted to look good—for Rosalind, of course. She'd chosen a pair of cobalt blue joggers with pockets, over long underwear. Galen had warned her away from cotton, so she'd bought herself a charcoal gray synthetic top with a built-in bra. Over that she wore a soft warm flannel shirt in understated heathery sage colors that brought out the green in her eyes. She also wore a pink bandanna to keep the hair out of her face. It could double as a scarf if it got colder.

Maybe it was silly to spend so much attention on a hiking outfit. But Rosalind deserved her best effort. And if Galen happened to notice...

Not that he had any particular reaction to her outfit. He was focused on the backpack that sat next to her on the driveway.

“Let me see your pack.”

She handed it over and he adjusted a few items. “Never put hard things against your back,” he explained. “Now put it on.”

He helped her slip her arms through the straps, then stepped back and eyed her. “It’s sitting too low on your hips. I need to adjust the buckles. Do you mind?”

She shook her head and he stepped closer, focusing his gaze on her hips. A tingle of reaction went through her. Wow. Where had that come from? It wasn’t going away, either, as he gently lifted the padded hip strap and settled it in a better spot. He cinched the buckle to keep it in place.

She sighed in relief. “That already feels better.”

“It’s important to take the time to get this part right.” His voice, which always had an element of rough sand to it, sounded even more gruff than usual. “People want to rush onto the trail to catch the light, or they want to beat their friends to the top. But I believe in being as comfortable as possible for a long hike like this one. Especially if you’re not used to hiking.”

He glanced down at her boots. Her pulse was doing odd thing, slowing, speeding, skipping. “Those look nice and broken in.”

“I’m not a total newbie. I hiked in the canyons when I lived in Arizona.”

“So you know to stay hydrated.”

“Oh yes. I always took a couple of gallons of water with me.”

He reached into his own pack and pulled out a filter. “I brought a gallon, and when that runs out, we’ll use stream water. This filters out everything except hydrogen and oxygen.”

She nodded as she examined the lightweight contraption, that was little more than a canister and a flexible hose. “I obviously picked the right guy to guide me.”

“I hope so, but let me get you back in one piece first.” He smiled as he put back the filter. “I’m going to make one more adjustment.” He gestured to her front, and she looked down. “That strap takes some weight off your shoulders. It needs a little tightening.”

Oh. He meant the strap that buckled right over her breasts. She waited, but he didn’t move.

“You can do that one yourself,” he finally said, showing nothing but professionalism. “Just tighten it until you feel some weight come off your shoulders.”

Her face flaming, she did as he suggested. Had she really expected him to come that close and put his hands on that chest strap? *Had* she wanted him to?

It had been too long since she’d had sex, that was the problem. Ever since saying goodbye to Maura, she’d stuck to teaching, writing, dog-walking and Granny-tending. She’d poured all her jagged emotions into her books. She hadn’t been interested in anything or anyone else.

Besides, when it came to men, she was stuck between a rock and a hard place. The men she liked never met her mother’s standards, and the men her mother liked bored her to tears. But her life would be impossible if she chose someone her mother didn’t accept. The drama would be too much. Besides, her family, dysfunctional though it was, mattered too much to her. Especially now that Maura was gone.

So what about that tingle of attraction to Galen? That was real. She felt it deep in her belly, in her nipples. And lord, did it feel good. It made her feel alive again.

“How does that feel?” Galen asked.

Her face still warm from that intense flush, she flexed her shoulders. “That’s pretty good. Better.”

“Any time you want to stop to adjust a strap or take a break, just say the word.”

“I will,” she promised him. He helped her take off the backpack, then slung it into the bed of his truck.

Before they left, she looked back at her house. In the living room window, she saw her grandmother holding Olaf, who was clearly barking up a storm.

“Let’s go,” she said quickly. “Before my dog breaks through the window.”

They hurried into his truck, and a moment later they were zooming away from her house. A sense of freedom settled over her. She was going on an adventure. She loved adventures, but so rarely allowed herself to have them except while writing. Everyone in Lake Bittersweet thought of her as a “good girl”—teacher, granddaughter, volunteer, all-around nice person.

If they had any idea the sort of things she put in her books, they’d probably back away slowly, then run screaming.

Galen took the route toward town, since they’d have to go through Lake Bittersweet to reach the two-lane road that led into the mountains. The September morning sun filled the town with golden light. The storefronts were haloed with it, their windows glinting, as if even the buildings were enraptured by the new day.

“Do you need a coffee for the road?”

“I don’t drink coffee,” she said automatically. “But a tea would be nice,” she added quickly.

He swung the wheel just in time to park in front of the SweetBitter. Inside, a yawning Rick Gonzalez greeted them. “Look at you two. I didn’t even know you knew each other.”

“She’s a client,” Galen said, sounding self-conscious. “It’s a funeral.”

“*Que querida meliatta?*”

Rick had the most ridiculous habit of making up Spanish-sounding curses. He claimed it was a type of ironic performance art because he was pissed that his parents hadn’t

taught him any Spanish, despite the fact that they were from Mexico.

“It’s a ceremonial ash-scattering,” Brenda corrected.

Rick gasped. “Not—”

“God no. Granny’s fine. She’s barely past seventy, I wish everyone would stop assuming she has one foot out the door.” Nothing got her more upset than being forced to think about her grandmother’s passing.

Galen planted his hands on the counter and scowled at Rick. “Take it back, bud.”

“Take...what back? All I said was ‘not’.” But under Galen’s fierce stare, he shrugged. “I take it back. Sorry, Brenda.” He shot Galen a cautious look. “Are we cool?”

“Get her some tea. Fill my Thermos. Then we’ll be cool.” He thrust a stainless steel Thermos across the counter.

“The usual?” Rick asked Brenda.

She nodded, and Rick went to grab an Earl Gray tea bag.

“You don’t have to scare people just because they upset me,” she whispered to Galen.

“You’re my client. I take my job seriously. No one’s going to talk sideways at you while I’m on guard.”

“I thought you worried more about bears than café owners.”

“I’m ready for anything at all times. Once I had to chase away a raven that got obsessed with one of my hikers.”

“I’m sorry, a raven?”

“They can be very emotional birds. I think her hair caught his attention. He wouldn’t leave her alone. He kept dive-bombing us.”

“What did you do?”

“I made her wear a hoodie and I rigged up a slingshot with some shiny rocks for the raven to chase after.”

Rick reappeared with her favorite foamy drink, a tea latte with oat milk. “Thanks, Rick.”

“I’d say be safe out there, but I know you will with this guy.” He jerked his head toward Galen. “He was the first one I came out to, way back in the day, because I knew I could count on him. We’ve been friends for a long time.”

“That’s good to know. If I decide to come out, I’ll keep that in mind.”

Rick’s eyes glinted with curiosity. “Come out about what? Gay? Trans? Nonbinary? There are so many options these days.”

“It was just a joke. I’m none of the above.”

“I know a bunch of guys who’ll be happy to hear that. Just let me know if you want some numbers.”

Rick handed Galen his Thermos back. “Filled to the brim with coffee, black as the tar on a midnight road.” Then he gave a double-take. “Hey, you said we were cool. Why are you glaring at me again?”

“Come on, let’s go,” Galen growled to Brenda.

Was he...jealous of Rick’s comment about the bunch of guys? She smiled to herself. That thought, whether true or not, filled her with a warm sort of excitement that she hadn’t felt in a long time.

Back in the truck, they settled their drinks into cupholders and headed out of town. Brenda gazed out the window and watched the sun on its slow rise into the autumn sky. Occasionally she sipped her tea, but mostly she enjoyed the quiet and the lovely scenery sliding past her window.

Galen didn’t seem to mind the lack of conversation. It was such a comfortable silence. He didn’t expect or demand anything of her, and in her life, that rarely happened. Between her chatterbox students and her high-maintenance grandmother, she spent a lot of her life giving attention to other people. It relaxed her, knowing that Galen required nothing from her. If she wanted to talk, she could. If she

didn't, she could just relax and lose herself in her own thoughts.

Like how her heroine, who had just been buried alive by the criminal underworld gang she'd been trying to rescue her niece from, was going to escape. Brenda had left her knocking frantically on the pine box in which they'd dumped her. It was a soft wood, so maybe it would splinter eventually. But wouldn't the dirt just fall onto her face then?

Her heroine was just an ordinary person who had a knack for getting in and out of trouble. Maybe she should rewrite her, give her extraordinary strength or martial arts training. She dismissed that idea because she liked the fact that her heroine didn't have any special skills beyond a lucky streak and a refusal to back down to bad guys.

"Have you ever fallen into a pit?" she asked Galen after mulling over her problem for a while.

"A what?"

It seemed she'd startled him out of his own reverie.

"On one of your trips, have you ever stumbled into a deep hole, about the size of a shallow grave." The bad guys hadn't had enough time to dig six feet down. At least Zina, her heroine, had that going for her.

"I tumbled into a ravine once. The scree gave way, and when I grabbed onto a young birch, I uprooted it. The soil was soft from a month of rain."

"How did you get out?" This didn't sound like the same situation, but she was curious anyway.

"Climbed. Slowly, because my ankle got twisted in the fall. I also dislocated my shoulder, but I fixed that before I went anywhere."

"That must have been terrifying."

"Nah. I'd always been curious about that ravine. I found some ancient native rock drawings while I was down there. Wound up going back with some tribal archeologists."



She shook her head, marveling at his calm. “You could have died. What if you hadn’t been able to climb up?”

“Then either someone would have found me, or I would have died. Either way, I was in the right place. The wilderness,” he added, as if that wasn’t clear. “When my time comes, I hope that’s where it happens.”

Maura had wanted to be outside, too. The windows had been wide open, the desert air blessing her with peace.

Brenda shoved the thought aside. “Not this trip, please,” she said lightly.

“No need to worry about that. I’ve never even let a client get injured.” He paused. “Well, I did punch a client recently, but he deserved it. Not a real injury. Why are you asking about pits?”

He already knew she was trying to write a book. There was no harm in picking his brain. “My poor heroine just got buried alive. I’m trying to figure out how to get her out.”

“Is she in a coffin?”

She loved the fact that he didn’t miss a step in following her line of thought.

“Yes, made of soft pine. It’s under about three feet of dirt.”

“Where?”

“On the outskirts of Los Angeles. In the woods, but the woods there aren’t like here. It’s more like sagebrush and pinyon.”

“Mountain lions,” he said thoughtfully.

“Yes, I would imagine. Coyotes as well.”

“Does she have any meat with her?”

Brenda gave a startled laugh. “Why would she have meat?”

“Like a snack. Beef jerky or something. Did they bury her purse with her?”

“It’s a messenger bag, but yes, they dumped it in with her, after they took her cell phone and all her money.”

“But she could have a Slim Jim.”

“I suppose.” She had no idea where this was going. “Do you mean so she doesn’t starve?”

“No. All she needs to do is crack the wood somehow.”

“Okay, but even if she can do that, which I think she can because she always has a metal nail file with her, what about all the dirt?”

“A mountain lion will dig through loose dirt if there’s meat under there. She just has to get that jerky close enough to the surface so it’ll draw a lion to her. Once the mountain lion has dug away enough of the dirt, she can get through the rest. Then toss the meat as far as she can so the lion doesn’t go after her.”

“Meat,” Brenda said thoughtfully. “I guess. She does have a blood sugar problem that makes her grumpy if she doesn’t eat. I suppose she could have some beef jerky in her purse.”

“I recommend the hickory smoked. Wild animals go crazy for it. I don’t ever give human food to animals, in fact I have a strict rule about it on my trips. But I’ve seen a lynx get hold of a piece of smoked pork. He ate the pork and about a foot of dirt surrounding it because it still had the smell.”

“All right. I’ll make sure she stops at a convenience store for some snacks before she gets kidnapped by bad guys. Now I just have to figure out how she can make a hole in the coffin.”

They spent the next hour or so conversing about ways to splinter plywood. This was Brenda’s “happy place.” Brainstorming issues in her book was something she usually did alone, although sometimes Maura used to toss ideas around with her. It had been a good distraction from her treatments.

Maura would have loved this particular brainstorming session. Some of Galen’s ideas were so ridiculous they sent both of them into gales of laughter.

“She can’t lick a hole in the wood. Saliva isn’t going to soften the wood that much,” she said through her giggles.

“Enough to get that nail file in.”

“Hmm...maybe?”

“Does she have any power tools in her purse? Or a hammer?” he asked.

“No! She’s just an ordinary person. Like me.”

“Ordinary?” He shot her a glance full of offense, as if she’d just insulted the queen of the realm. “You are not ordinary.”

His fierceness took her aback. “Of course I am. I’m about as ordinary as a person could be.”

He gave her one more appalled look, then turned his attention back to the road ahead. After that he clammed up, and she didn’t get another word out of him until they reached the trailhead.

## *nine*

Galen set a beginner's pace as they headed up the LadyBird Ridge Trail. When they'd walked for about an hour with no complaints from Brenda, he sped up just a bit. He wasn't sure what she could handle. Often people believed themselves to be in good shape, until they encountered the real-life conditions of a trail.

But Brenda was a trooper, and even though he heard her breathing pick up and noticed sweat gathering on her forehead, she kept up with him quite well. He could do this trail at twice the speed, if he had to, but this pace would get them to LadyBird Rock in plenty of time to do the return trip if she still wanted to.

Was he hoping they might have to spend the night on the ridge?

Sure. He was only human. He'd take any moment with her as gravy, an unexpected bonus that he should appreciate while it lasted.

He kept coming back to the way she'd called herself ordinary. Didn't she know about the light that surrounded her, the kindness that radiated from her, the allure that flowed around her? Was he the only one who could see it?

It was true that not every man who encountered her became entranced. Redbull, for instance, thought she was too pale. Of course he said that about any woman who wasn't Native American, no matter how dark their skin.

“She seems nice, but it’s the nice ones you have to watch out for,” he’d warned Galen. “I’ll take a woman with a buck knife and a sharp tongue over a girl who smiles as she lies through her teeth.”

“When did Brenda ever lie to you?”

“I’m just saying. Nice isn’t always nice. And you’re so bewitched by her that you think she’s all that and a can of beans.”

“A can of *beans*?”

Redbull didn’t know what he was talking about. And he didn’t know Brenda.

Nevertheless, he’d tucked that warning away in the back of his mind. *Nice isn’t always nice*. That part was definitely true. He preferred straightforward communication to smiles that hid resentments.

He paused at an overlook and waited for Brenda to catch up. While he took a sip of water from his canteen, he eyed her lagging stride. She needed a rest.

“How are you doing?” he asked as she made it to his side.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not. You need a rest.”

“No, I’m—”

“You need a rest,” he said firmly, setting his backpack on the ground. “This is as good a spot as any.”

She followed his lead and gingerly slid her arms from the straps of her pack. “Just a short break.”

He shook out a tarp for her to sit on. “I have an important rule on long hikes. If you’re tired, tell me. If you’re thirsty, tell me. If you have to take a piss, tell me. If you want a snack, or a piece of chocolate, or you want to take a photo, or identify a bird call, you tell me. This isn’t a forced march. It’s a long-ass hike and we have to pace ourselves. Me included.”

She gazed up at him with those riveting green eyes. Here in the wild, they took on the deep jewel tones of a fjord. “Did

you say chocolate?” she finally said, then took a long drink from her water bottle.

He laughed and dug in his pack for one of the bars of dark chocolate he'd brought. Standard procedure. Nothing gave you a burst of energy like a square of chocolate. “Do you understand my point?”

She sighed. “Yes, but I don't like to complain about things. My general approach is to suffer through uncomfortable situations. That's what my imagination is for. I just start telling myself stories. Like just now, my feet were getting sore, so I distracted myself by fleshing out my heroine's character. I decided that she's divorced.”

“Oh yeah? Are you divorced?”

Since she seemed to put a lot of herself into her heroine, it was worth asking.

“Oh, no. To my mother's disappointment. She'd rather I be divorced than still single at my age.”

“How old are you?” She couldn't be more than thirty, could she? He was thirty-five himself.

“Thirty-one. When I turned thirty, my mother acted like I should have a funeral instead of a birthday party. I once asked a friend of mine if he would marry me and divorce me right away, just so my mother wouldn't be so upset about my singlehood.”

He couldn't imagine that kind of pressure. Then again, his mother hadn't cared about much of anything he did, so long as he didn't get into so much trouble that the police got called. That was her red line. “Why does she care so much? A lot of people don't get married.”

“She cares because that's what the people around her care about. Everything's a competition, even your children. What school do they go to? How successful of a man did they marry? How many children? How many homes? Where do they spend summers? Where do they ski?”

With each word, his heart sank further. No wonder CeCe had thought it would be hilarious to drag him into that scene.

He was the exact opposite of everything Brenda's mother wanted for her daughter.

"She wants the best for you," he managed.

She shot him an astonished look. "She wants to look good for her friends. I mean, she loves me. But she also wants to impress her friends."

"She also probably thinks you'd be smart to marry a successful man who skis and has a summer house. You'd be set for life that way."

Brenda stretched out her legs and leaned back on her elbows. She'd put on a straw hat that shaded her face, but he could see the downward curve of her mouth. This conversation wasn't making her happy.

He looked at the vista before them, steep slopes of thickly wooded balsam fir and white pine, giant cottonwoods and yellow birch. In the mountains, the fall foliage wasn't as dramatic because maple trees didn't grow up here. The flash came from the brilliant molten gold of birch leaves. When the winds came, they'd get blown off the branches in spectacular showers.

"Did I offend you?" he asked, when she hadn't said anything for a few minutes.

"No," she said after a pause.

He didn't believe her. "Remember I said you should tell me if you're tired and so forth? That applies if you're annoyed or upset, too. Everyone knows I'm blunt and I say the wrong thing a lot. How can I fix it if you don't tell me?"

"Okay," she said slowly. "You said 'set for life,' as if that's what life is. Being safe and taken care of financially. That's what my mother believes. My father died when I was little—he's the Bogosian in my name—and almost right away she married my stepfather. But my best friend had all the money she could ever need, and she's no longer here. Since she died, I don't see things the way my mother does, not anymore. I don't think I want to marry just for stability. I guess I'm a rebel in my own boring way."

He felt ashamed of himself that he hadn't seen that. She was living in Lake Bittersweet, after all, teaching elementary school. She wasn't following what her family wanted. And that wasn't even counting her gory book writing.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "About your friend."

"Maura. It's okay. How would you know?"

A thought came to him out of nowhere.

"Is she the reason you always wear something that's pink?"

She turned her face toward him, confusion on her lovely features. He experienced a moment of dizziness, of astonishment that he was here alone with her under the vibrant blue sky of September in the mountains. She put a self-conscious hand to her bandanna. "You noticed that?"

"I did."

She continued to stare at him blankly. Shit. His habit of blurting things out had just bit him in the ass. Now she was going to figure out he had a crush on her.

"Well, you're right. It's because of Maura. She had breast cancer, and also her favorite color was pink. We were best friends growing up. Then I went to live with her in Arizona while she was getting treatments. I thought she was going to get better, but she didn't. It was...it really shook me up when she died."

He desperately wanted to offer her some comfort, but she seemed to want to talk, so he held his tongue and listened closely.

"I had no reason to stay in Arizona after that. Granny found me the job here, and that's why I came to Lake Bittersweet. My mother wanted me to go back to Connecticut and go right back to dinners at the country club and so forth. She still puts the pressure on for Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, summer vacation, family weddings, graduations, you know the drill."



He very much did not know the drill. “My family isn’t really like that.”

“What are they like?”

He shrugged, not sure how much she could handle. “My father’s MIA. My mother might be in rehab again, but we don’t really know. My brother Billy sent her some money for it. But we haven’t heard from her since. She didn’t even come to Thomas’ wedding.”

She went quiet. “I’m sorry. You must think I’m a spoiled bitch, complaining about my mother.”

Appalled, he said, “Good God, of course I didn’t think that. Besides, my therapist says there’s no point in comparing people’s suffering. It’s not a competition.”

She swung her face toward him, astonishment making her mouth drop open. “You have a therapist?”

“Yeah. It’s kind of new, but I like it. Gives me some perspective on things. It turns out that I had a pretty fucked-up childhood. We raised ourselves, well, Thomas did a lot, too.”

She touched his forearm gently. “I’m glad you have your brothers.”

It was hard for him to focus with her hand on his arm. It wasn’t just a fleeting touch, either. She let her hand linger. When she took it away, he realized his heart was hammering. He cleared his throat. “My brothers are the best. I’d die for either of them. They would too, except they both have kids now so I wouldn’t let them.”

That got a smile from her. “Please don’t die until you get me off this mountain.”

They smiled at each other, and, perfectly in sync, brought an end to their rest break.

As they hiked the next portion of the trail, the incline steepened. Galen kept a careful eye out for bear sign. This was the time of year when the black bears would be making their way toward hibernation. They were fat and lumbering after a long summer of feasting on fish and berries. No bear was

looking for a fight, but if they ran across a human they would react, either warily or aggressively.

He spotted one pile of bear dung, but judged it to be about three days old. He showed it to Brenda, who took a photo of it.

“For Granny,” she explained. “She wants to see everything.”

“If you zoom in close, you can see this bear has been to the blueberry fields.”

“Oh wow.” She took another shot. “You know, I should thank Rosalind. I never would have come out here if she hadn’t given me this task. But it’s so beautiful.” She straightened up and turned in a circle, her head tilted back to take in the tall pines and the sky. With her arms spread wide, she filled her lungs with mountain air.

He loved this moment, when it all clicked for a client. When the deep peace and beauty of the wilderness settled over them, and they felt in tune with nature in a way a person never could when surrounded by civilization.

With Brenda, it meant even more. It meant that she now understood a core part of him—or would, if she thought about it and made that connection.

“I see why you love it out here,” she said.

A smile spread across his face. She did understand. Somehow that made his beloved mountains even more beautiful. The sunlight, filtered through the branches of a white pine, shone on her face and the very air around her seemed to glow.

His heart clenched in his chest with an almost physical sensation.

“Yeah,” was all he said. All he trusted himself to say. He turned away from her and continued up the trail.

The air had shifted. What had started as a gentle, intermittent waft of a breeze now held steady. The temperature had dropped as well. Only a few degrees, but it was enough to tell him that the incoming cold front had shifted. Instead of

passing mostly to the north of them, it was headed right for this ridge.

He wasn't too worried, because the system wasn't predicted to bring much precipitation. Also, it was moving fast, so even if it dropped some rain, or snow if it got cold enough, it wouldn't be much. The worst-case scenario would be a light dusting, which would hopefully melt when the temperatures warmed back up again.

Then again, this time of year, you never knew what could happen with the weather. That was why he prepared for all possible scenarios.

But how could he prepare for the scenario of losing his head because Brenda was so close he heard each breath, each footfall, each rustle of her clothing? Now that he knew more about her, his crush had grown even bigger. Brenda was a good friend, the best there could be. She thought for herself instead of following the path laid out for her. He'd learned so many amazing things about her and they'd barely started this hike.

Right now, his crush felt like a curse. He had to focus on his job instead of on the magic of her presence.

Maybe he should tie a bandanna over his nose so he didn't keep catching whiffs of her fresh fragrance. She smelled as if she'd danced through a lavender field before hitting the trail. If he got really desperate, he'd have to put that bandanna over his eyes so he didn't keep catching glimpses of her curvy thighs in those hiking pants, or a flash of her auburn hair catching the sun.

Gritting his teeth, he grimly fixed his gaze on the trail ahead. One step at a time.

## *ten*

Something had shifted, and Brenda didn't know why. One minute she'd been telling him about Maura, and he'd been sharing details from his childhood. The next minute he was totally ignoring her. Had she said something wrong?

Maybe he was embarrassed because he'd told her about his therapist. Galen didn't seem like the kind of person who cared what other people thought. That was one of the things she found so fascinating about him. But maybe it was unusual for a rough-edged mountain man like himself to seek therapy. Should she tell him that she thought it was wonderful, and not embarrassing at all?

But every time she tried to catch up with him, he maintained the distance between them and kept his focus on the trail. So she gave up her attempt and did the same.

The trail needed her complete attention anyway. The farther into the mountains they went, the trickier the trail got. It would be so easy to trip over the tree roots that rose from the dirt, or slip on moist patches of rotting pine needles. The more tired she got, the harder it was to keep from face-planting onto a stray boulder or one of those rotting logs with mushrooms sprouting from them.

The other problem was that her gaze kept drifting to the man a few yards ahead of her. Seeing Galen on the trail was like watching a seal slide from a rock into the ocean. In town, he always seemed a little uncomfortable, as if he wasn't completely sure of how he was standing or talking or walking.

Here, he flowed like water through the forest. He was so graceful and never seemed to put a foot wrong.

So fit, too. She had yet to see him even get out of breath. He looked as if he could hike at this pace indefinitely. She considered herself to be in pretty good shape, thanks to all the Pilates and cardio she did. But Galen was clearly on another level.

It made her feel safe to know that she was being guided by someone so capable. If they ran into trouble, he could probably run all the way back to Lake Bittersweet for help. Carrying her on his back.

As she smiled at that image, her foot caught a wandering root and she tripped. She caught herself before she fell, but Galen paused and turned around to check on her.

“I’m okay,” she assured him.

“Need a break?”

“Do we have time?”

“If you need a break, we have time.” Then he hesitated. “But I should tell you that I think we have some unexpected weather coming our way. We should consider turning back.”

Maybe that was why he’d gotten so businesslike over the past hour.

She drew her bottom lip between her teeth, then checked the time. They’d come so far already. They’d been hiking for over four hours. “How far are we from the peak?”

“It’s another two hours. We have plenty of time to reach LadyBird Rock, it’s the getting back down that I’m worried about. If some weather comes, we’ll have to stay overnight. We won’t have a choice.”

“But you said there’s a cabin.”

“Yes, but it’s unheated and unmaintained. I can’t vouch for what condition it’s in.”

She absorbed that warning. “Do you mean it might be a mess, like the last person forgot to tidy up?”

“That, and it might not have a roof,” he said dryly. “I had to bang in some loose roofing metal last time.”

“But it did have a roof then.”

He nodded. “It stayed dry last time.”

Okay then. Her feet throbbed in her boots. They weren’t used to this much walking at one time. If they went back down now, she’d have to do this same hike all over again another time.

“Do you think there’s any danger? Like, life or death?”

His dark eyebrows pulled together. They were just as thick and black as the rest of his facial hair. “There’s always some risk out here, but not especially. The trail is safe, and even if the cabin is a wreck, I can make it work. I won’t let you die.”

She believed him, both because of the quiet confidence he exuded, and because her gut told her he’d probably put himself in danger if it would save her.

“Then let’s go forward. We’ll plan to stay overnight. I already warned Granny we might have to do that. She’s taking care of Olaf. I’m not expected back at work until after the weekend. I want to get this done. Unless you think we should turn back?”

“No. Just wanted to give you the option.”

They resumed their steady trudge up the mountain. Brenda’s thoughts wandered to her work-in-progress and her poor trapped heroine. Would a wild animal be the key to her escape? Or maybe a wild human would come to her rescue. There could be someone living in the woods who witnessed the cruel actions of the bad guys. Maybe he would wait until they were gone, then tiptoe into the night and dig until he reached the coffin. Then he’d pry off the lid so he didn’t hurt her. She’d sit bolt upright, gasping for breath, and she’d be so happy to be out of her airless imprisonment that she’d kiss him on the mouth. His beard would tickle her face and—

She snapped out of her brainstorming. *Beard? Kiss?* Where had all that come from? Did this fictional character she’d just invented a moment ago look like *Galen*?

She gasped for breath, causing Galen to shoot another look over his shoulder at her. “You okay?” he called.

“Fine.” Her voice sounded strangled, even to her. She tried again. “Great. Just got my second wind.”

“There’s a nice spot up ahead where we can stop for a bite of lunch.”

“Do we really have time for lunch?”

“This isn’t a race,” he said firmly. “We have time. Besides, you’ll want to take some photos.”

Boy, was he right about that. After they rounded the next bend in the trail, Galen led her down a short side trail that brought them to the edge of an outcropping. The world opened up before them. More forested ridges as far as the eye could see. Pine trees marched up hills and down into deep ravines. Clouds of gray mist clung to the highest points of rock. Around them, wind stirred the trees and whispered at the back of her neck. But out there, all was still.

There didn’t seem to be another human being anywhere in that panorama. It was just her and Galen, alone in the world. And it was so beautiful.

She was so entranced that she barely noticed Galen setting up lunch for them. By the time she looked around, there was a Thermos-top cup of hot chili waiting for her. He’d also opened a sleeve of Ritz crackers.

“How did you know I love Ritz crackers?”

“I...I...” he stammered, as if he’d been busted in some way. “I noticed a few boxes in your kitchen when I was there.”

“Well, thanks. I appreciate your attention to detail. In general, I don’t even like crackers, but I’m obsessed with these.” She took a handful and nibbled on one, savoring the buttery taste. “Especially with chili. How did you know that part?”

“I always bring chili. It’s filling and the beans are good protein. I don’t put meat in it so it’s less likely to attract a bear.”

*“Less likely?”*

He grinned. “Human food is always interesting to them. They’ll catch a whiff and decide if it’s worth their while. If it doesn’t have meat or fish, the chances are they’ll move along.”

*“Chances?”*

“This is their world. We’re just passing through.” He took his own insulated cup of chili and settled cross-legged on the ground cloth he’d laid out for them. “I think of it like walking through a grumpy neighbor’s yard without their permission. Be graceful, be respectful, pack out what you pack in, don’t leave any messes, and if they spot you, stand your ground but recognize that they have a right to be suspicious.”

Had she ever crossed through a neighbor’s yard? She thought about it as she licked chili from her spoon. “Where I grew up everyone had box hedges and fences. If you lost a Frisbee over the hedge, you just said goodbye to it.”

She shivered as another cold wisp of wind sent a chill through her. “It’s getting colder.”

“Higher elevation. And a cold front’s coming in. We should put on another layer.”

He got to his knees so he could rummage around in his backpack. When she didn’t move, he glanced her way. “Problem?”

She screwed up her face, embarrassed to admit her mistake. “I’m wearing all my layers except rain gear. I couldn’t fit an extra shirt in my pack, so I left it behind. I have lots of extra socks, though.”

It must not be the first time a client had messed up their packing. Galen nodded and tossed her a long-sleeved shirt made out of some kind of super-wicking high-tech fabric. “Socks are good,” he said mildly. “And the rain jacket will help with the wind.”

She put down her chili and pulled the shirt over her other clothes. Instantly she felt warmer. The shirt held a pleasant scent, like pine needles mixed with blueberries.



“Did you go berry picking in this?” she asked as she sniffed the arm.

“Sorry.” He turned endearingly red. “Do you want a different shirt?”

She had no idea why he was embarrassed. Maybe he thought she couldn’t handle a shirt that wasn’t perfectly clean. “No, why would you say that? It smells good. I’m not some shrinking violet princess, you know. I can handle a little dirt.”

His mouth curved behind that beard. “Good to know, since we might be sleeping on dirt tonight.”

He found another of those insulating shirts, then shrugged off the flannel lumberjack shirt he wore over a snugly fitting Henley-type shirt that clung to every hard muscle of his torso.

Her heart beat fast as her eyes slid across his chest. Those broad shoulders, those thick muscles, that burly perfection. What would he say if she asked him to take off that undershirt too? Her mouth went dry at the prospect of seeing him shirtless. It wasn’t just that he was built. He was just so...solid and real and completely, thoroughly himself. She found that outrageously sexy.

Maybe she had some kind of mountain-man kink.

Before he could catch her drooling over him, she turned back to the view and snapped a few photos. By the time she was done, he’d pulled on his extra layer and his flannel was back in place. He’d also pulled on a watch cap to keep his ears warm as well.

Before she could admit that she hadn’t brought a hat, he handed her a hand-knitted stocking cap made with a moire wool that ranged from teal to violet. “It’s beautiful. Did someone make this for you?” she asked as she tugged it on.

“I made it.”

“No way. You know how to knit?” She took the hat off to admire it more closely.

“I do. It’s a winter night kind of thing for me. Nothing like listening to the wind howl across the lake while I knit one, purl

one. I'm not the only one around here who likes to knit. There's a craft circle that meets in the winter."

"You go to a craft circle?" So many surprises coming out about this shy-seeming mountain man.

"Sometimes, when I need help with something tricky. I'm pretty good with the needles, but you should see some of the others around here. Masters of the fricking craft. You know who else likes to knit? Bliss Gault. We talk knitting sometimes."

Brenda knew about the beautiful model who'd recently returned to Lake Bittersweet, and who'd just given birth to twins. She must have some kind of connection to Galen, but she couldn't figure it out right now. Small towns were like that, so many interconnections that you lost track. So many of her grandmother's friends thought of her as "CeCe's grandkid from that girl who married the Scottish lord."

A minor lord, she always wanted to say. One who grew up in Connecticut and never went to Scotland, and only used that title to network with other Social Register types.

She put the hat back on, its soft wool caressing her ears. Now she could face the rest of the hike, wearing Galen's shirt and hat, safely encased in Galen-ness. It was such a good feeling that it made her heart glow.

"Maybe you could teach me to knit," she said tentatively. "I've always wanted to learn, but I've never taken the time."

"You want me to teach you how to knit?" For some reason, that thought seemed to shock him. "You mean, after this trip?"

"Well, I certainly didn't bring knitting supplies along. Did you?" She smiled to take the edge off her comment.

He shook himself out of his shocked state. "No. Sure. I'll teach you. When?"

"You mean, when, specifically? Like, let's choose a date?" That choice of word flustered her. "Not that it's a date, I didn't mean that."

Oh great, now she'd embarrassed him. The patches of skin visible between his hat and his beard were turning pink. "I didn't think you did."

But no, that didn't sit right either. "Not that there would be anything wrong with it being a date," she said carefully.

"Right." He nodded, then swiveled to look at her. "There wouldn't?"

"I...no." The look in those light-filled eyes turned her head. She didn't know what to make of it, except...did he *like* her?

Also, did that make her sound like one of her fourth-graders?

He didn't say anything more, and neither did she, and an awkward silence took over. Her heart sank as she realized something. Maybe she would want to go out with Galen, but not if he didn't step up and ask her. And he might not ever do that, even if he wanted to, for reasons she couldn't fathom.

She could ask him out. But that wasn't the issue. If he didn't have the desire or wherewithal to ask her, how would it ever go anywhere anyway?

The silence stretched on, more moments ticking past without him following up on her blatant hint that he should ask her on a date. Now she felt like an idiot. What made her even think he wanted to?

She finished her chili. "Should I clean out this cup?"

"I'll take care of it."

While he handled the cleanup, she shouldered her backpack again. Even with Galen's hat and shirt, she shivered. "It's definitely getting colder up here."

"It is. We should get moving." With a practiced, graceful motion, he settled his own backpack into place. In that short amount of time, he'd cleaned their cups, stashed everything in his pack, and attached the groundcloth to his pack with little bungees. He was really good at this hiking stuff.

He set a faster pace this time, which she didn't mind at all because it kept her warm. About an hour later, they reached the high point of the LadyBird Trail, marked by a simple wooden sign. An arrow pointed onwards, to something called the Iron Maiden Trail. Another pointed back the way they'd come.

"Let's skip the Iron Maiden trail, shall we?" she murmured.

"Good idea, unless you want to climb another three thousand feet in about a mile."

He surveyed the terrain, then pointed to a path that led through some scrubby bushes. "There. That's the spot they call LadyBird Rock. Wind's out of the north, so it'll pick up the ashes and take them out into the valley. Are you ready?"

When she nodded, he put down his pack and dug around for the plastic bag of ashes. He forged down the path, carrying the bag in one fist, as if it was a sack of potatoes. As she followed, she wondered if Rosalind had known she'd have to hire a guide to take care of this task.

Was this the ultimate act of matchmaking from beyond the grave? Come to think of it, had Granny put her up to it? She wouldn't be surprised, especially since Rosalind and Granny had been pretty close, despite their fifteen-year age difference. Granny could have concocted this whole plan and gotten Rosalind to sign off on it without blinking an eye.

If so, she'd have to thank her grandmother. She'd never expected to enjoy a six-hour uphill hike as much as she had, and that was thanks to the intriguing man leading the way. The more she got to know him, the more he fascinated her. She was glad they'd decided to stay overnight so she could learn even more.

And maybe see him without his shirt on, too.

She sucked in a breath as she reached LadyBird Rock. The jutting granite cliff was surrounded by a magnificent panoramic view of mountain peaks and steep ravines. But that wasn't the only thing that took her breath away. Near the edge

of the cliff stood Galen, his feet planted firmly on the ground, legs braced apart, the plastic bag held high in the air. Wind buffeted his body, but he seemed oblivious to it. He was muttering something under his breath.

To the bag? To Rosalind? To the wilderness? She wasn't sure.

She snapped a quick photo of the view before stepping next to him. "What were you just saying?"

"I was telling Rosalind that she chose a good spot to become airborne. She'll be carried on fresh mountain air currents until she reaches a million resting places in this beautiful forest. It's an honor to nurture this land."

She tugged her lower lip between her teeth, trying to reconcile the appearance-conscious Rosalind with a desire to become part of the wilderness. The high point of her week, aside from art sessions, had always been the arrival of the visiting stylist.

"Do you want to say anything before we release her?"

"Um, sure."

He offered her the bag, but she waved him off. It was heavy and she didn't want to fumble it.

She thought for a moment about the woman she'd mostly known as quiet and dreamy, even discounting the dementia. Galen waited, wearing a serious attentive expression. It didn't seem to matter to him that he hadn't even known Rosalind. He was here for this moment, and he was giving it his all.

"Rosalind Stanley, you were a heck of a woman with a beautiful and kind heart. Thank you for honoring me with this request. I feel fortunate that I got to know you at the end of your life, and I wish I'd known you much earlier. Thank you for your wonderful watercolors and all the other beauty you brought to the world. I can't say that I know why you wanted your ashes scattered at this particular spot, but it's a brilliant choice. This place is glorious and you will always be part of it now. You didn't mention anything about your religion in your last wishes, so I hope you don't mind if I share my version of a

prayer. ‘May the longtime sun shine upon you. May all love surround you. May the light within you guide your way on.’ Amen.”

“Amen,” Galen echoed.

She nodded to him and he stepped even closer to the edge, giving her the urge to grab onto his shirt to keep him from getting blown off by the rising wind. He turned so the wind hit him full in the face, held the bag to the side, and undid the twist tie that fastened it.

She had to admit that the swirling billows of ash—which looked nothing like ashes from a fireplace—were a stunning sight. The wind played with them like a rhythmic gymnast performing with ribbons. Even with the sun hidden behind drifting clouds, the stream of ashes caught glints of reflected light.

“So beautiful,” she sighed when nothing was left but a shimmer. “Now I understand why she wanted this.”

Galen was frowning down at the cliff face. “There might be another reason.”

“What are you talking about.”

He pointed, but she couldn’t see from where she stood. Gingerly, she stepped closer, not objecting when he linked their arms in a forearm safety hold. Peering down, she spotted faded red letters painted onto the rock. Her first reaction was anger that someone had defaced this wild natural treasure. But then she read the letters. EK and RS. There was a symbol in between them, but she couldn’t make it out. Maybe a plus sign? Maybe something else?

*Oh Rosalind.* There was definitely some kind of story that had unfurled here at LadyBird Rock. She’d have to interrogate her grandmother when she got back to Lake Bittersweet.

## *eleven*

**B**renda insisted on taking a photo of the letters on the cliff, which meant Galen had to hold onto her ankles while she lay flat on her stomach and crawled to the edge.

He didn't like it one bit, except for the holding her ankles part. First of all, it always pissed him off when humans left their mark on a landscape. Second, the weather was worsening fast. They needed to get out of here and either find that cabin or race down the mountain.

But holding Brenda's ankles made up for all of that. Even through her thick socks and hiking pants, he savored the knob of her ankle bone, the tensile firmness of her Achilles tendon. Sure, maybe it wasn't the sexiest part of a woman's body. He didn't care. It was part of Brenda's body, and that made it riveting, in his eyes.

When she was done, he helped her scramble away from the edge. They got to their feet and she brushed off debris from the front of her jacket. "Rosalind must have been quite tall in her younger days."

Galen was getting antsy. "We need to make a decision." He pointed to the dark clouds flowing around the next peak over. "That's headed our way. If the temperature drops enough, it'll be snow. Feel that wind?"

In the time she'd been taking the photo, it had picked up another two knots.

"It's going to howl tonight. If we head down the mountain, it'll be at our backs, so we'll have that going for us."

“I thought we already decided to stay in that cabin.”

“We did, but that’s before I saw those clouds. If it snows, we might be hiking back down in very different conditions. If we try to beat the storm, we can make it back tonight.”

“Well, what do you recommend?”

He appreciated the fact that she deferred to his judgment without any argument. Out here, he was the expert, but some clients seemed to think that “the customer is always right” principle extended to life or death survival situations.

“It’s a long hike and we’re tired.” They both knew he used “we” out of courtesy. “If we hadn’t just hiked six hours, I’d say we should take our chances and go back. But since we have, I recommend we hole up in the cabin and wait for that storm to pass.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

Without any more discussion, they heaved their packs back on their shoulders. At the last minute, Brenda paused and blew a kiss in the direction of the cliff. “Goodbye, Rosalind. Rest in peace,” she said softly

Her sweetness made his heart ache. She was such a gentle person, although also stronger than she’d seemed at first. To complete that entire twelve-mile hike without a single whine or groan...that impressed him. Even now, with the wind picking up, she didn’t complain. When a branch whipped across her face, making her shriek and jump back, she only laughed at her overreaction.

“I’ve always been afraid of jack-in-the-boxes,” she said breathlessly. “That branch had the same kind of energy. Sorry about that.”

He did the best he could to block the wind with his own body, but the way the trail twisted and turned, it wasn’t always possible. By the time they reached the cabin, their eyes were watering and it was a struggle to make any headway against the fierce wind, which was blowing about thirty miles per hour, with gusts up to forty-five. He judged the temperature to



be about thirty-six degrees. If it dropped just a few more degrees, who knew what they might encounter in the morning.

He was relieved to find that the cabin still had a roof and four walls. He pushed the door open and noticed that the wood was rotting away from the hinges. Inside, it looked dry. It would do for the night.

Motioning for Brenda to stay where she was, he decided to take a thorough look inside before allowing her in. Even though there were no signs of human activity, he couldn't take a chance that someone might be squatting here.

He set down his backpack and dug around for his headlamp. Even though it was barely four in the afternoon, the heavy clouds made everything dark and ominous. Early dusk on a stormy night. The more light they had, the better.

The constant whine of the wind subsided as soon as he stepped inside the cabin. It still found its way through cracks in the wall planks, and past the plywood nailed over the missing windows. The cabin held no furniture, other than two benches built into the wall, wide enough for sleeping pads. There used to be a wood stove, but it had been removed long ago, along with its stovepipe. Plywood had been nailed over the former vent. The entire place was more or less a wooden box. But a safe, dry box out of the wind, so he'd take it.

Brenda stepped in behind him, having apparently gotten tired of being alone with the howling wind out there.

"Minimalist," she murmured. "I like it."

"It'll do."

"Is there any way we can have a fire?" She rubbed her hands together to warm them.

"Sorry. It's not safe with no stove and all that wind. This cabin isn't vented anymore, so even if I could start a fire in something, we'd be smoked out in no time."

She nodded. Again, not complaining. "At least we're out of the wind."

"I'll make it as comfortable as possible, I swear."

Her dubious expression told him he had his work cut out for him. “How?”

“Watch and learn.”

He loved nothing more than rising to a wilderness challenge. For the next few moments he bustled about the little cabin. First, he spread the sleeping bags on the two benches. He stuffed extra clothing in the gaps under the door and windows where the wind came in. When the drafts had been sufficiently blocked, he hung a portable LED lantern from a hook in the ceiling. The light gave the illusion of warmth, if nothing else.

He got some water heating up on his high-powered portable camp stove. It generated some heat, maybe enough to make a difference in a small space like this. He gestured to Brenda to come stand near it. “You can warm your hands while the water boils. Are you hungry?”

“I could eat.” A moment later she broke into a grin. “I’m famished, thanks for asking. What’s for dinner?”

“Beef stew, mac and cheese, mashed potatoes, chana masala, mushroom barley soup, mung daal with tofu.”

He’d listed all the dehydrated meals he’d brought, expecting her to choose one or two. Instead she smiled again. “Excellent. That all sounds great.”

A woman with an appetite. She just got more and more attractive to him.

“I also have some beef jerky, salmon jerky, and plenty of chocolate. I brought an instant chocolate mousse for dessert. If you’re a drinker, I have a flask of brandy, but let’s make sure we’re warm and snug before we get into that. Alcohol can lower your body temperature.”

“You are a prince.” Her heartfelt tone matched the way she clasped her hands under her chin. “A prince among guides.”

“Here to serve.” He sketched an elaborate bow. Whenever he was in the wild, even in a cabin, he felt looser and more free to be a goofball if he felt like it.

She burst out laughing. “You look like an actor in a Shakespeare play. Or a *Bridgerton* episode.”

He had no idea what that was, but he could cop to the Shakespeare. As he pulled out the food packages from his pack, he told her about the time he’d been recruited to play Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. “At least I think that was the name.” He frowned, trying to remember. “I got stabbed, I remember that. I was always so relieved when I reached my death scene. After that I got to go backstage and work on my knitting with my friend who played Juliet’s nurse. I made sixteen pairs of socks during that run.”

“Was it at the high school?” Brenda perched on one of the benches, pulling up her legs to sit tailor-style. “In the auditorium?”

“Yes, but this was years ago. Before you came.”

She shot him a curious look. “How do you know when I came?”

Oh shit. Busted again. One of these days he was going to let it slip that he knew exactly when she came to town because he’d seen her carry her box of personal items into the elementary school and stopped dead in his tracks, unable to move until she’d disappeared through the door. “Didn’t you say you’ve only been here a short time?”

“Oh. I probably did. Besides, I suppose everyone knows that kind of thing.”

“Not really. Things happen all the time that I don’t know about. My own brother became an alderman and I was on a backcountry trip when it happened. Conor Gault moved here because he got together with Emmaline from the maple syrup farm and that was news to me. I took her brother Henry fishing and he kept raving about Conor but I didn’t know why. Generally, I have to get my town news from the *Clarion*, but they only put it out in the summer time. In the winter, I drop by the firehouse or the Blue Drake to get updates. Also Redbull’s aunty knows everything that goes on in town. She’s a one-woman tribal network, and I guess Lake Bittersweet is

one step removed from her tribe. Sorry, I guess I'm talking a lot. I can stop."

Why was he talking so much? Probably because it made him nervous being this close to Brenda with all her beauty and kindness. In this small space, he couldn't just ignore her, and he don't want to confess his attraction, so that left him with jibber-jabbering.

"No, I like hearing you talk." She propped her back against the wall and smiled at him brightly. "It's a good distraction. Are you sure there isn't anything I can do to help you?"

"I got this. It's my job. Your job is to rest and recover. That was a long hike and you did good."

"Well," she corrected automatically. Then her face flamed. "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. I do that with my kids all the time, and now it's a habit. But it's rude to correct someone's grammar."

He frowned, thinking over what he'd just said. "What did I get wrong?"

"It's nothing. Forget it."

"I'm serious. I sucked at English, but I don't mind if you school me. What should I have said?"

"'You did well,' instead of 'you did good.' One's an adverb and the other's a noun. If I did good, that means I did a good thing, like a good deed."

"You did. You climbed a mountain to scatter a friend's ashes. Doesn't that count?"

He peeked at the water, which was almost boiling. They'd start with chana masala, he decided, because the beef stew tended to leave a certain residual smell behind. He tore open a packet and divided the dehydrated food between two lightweight tin bowls.

"Sure, but it's not used to mean something specific, it's more of an abstract good, like doing good in the world."

"But you do good in the world." He really wasn't understanding the issue. "You hiked well, and you did good."

Does that work?"

She finally gave in with a laugh. "I guess it does."

With a cheeky smile, he winked at her. "I'm getting the hang of this grammar shit, ain't I?"

As he poured boiling water into the bowls, out of the corner of his eye he watched her press her lips together to hold back the automatic correction.

"It's okay, you can say it," he told her.

"Aren't I," she burst out. "Or am I not, if you want to be old-fashioned." She fanned herself as if she'd just run a sprint. "Whew. That was hard."

"Nice effort," he complimented her. "You almost managed it. I thought you'd give in sooner."

"So you did that on purpose? Just trying to torture the poor teacher?" Her eyes filled with merry laughter. Rays of sun seemed to radiate from her. Did they even need a lantern when Brenda was in the room?

He shook his head to get rid of these crazy thoughts.

"I was just teasing. I'm an ignoramus when it comes to grammar rules. Society rules in general, actually. The only rules that make sense to me are the ones that try to save lives. All the others roll off me like water off a wood duck's back."

He brought her a steaming bowl of chana masala and a bamboo spoon. "It needs to cool down a bit," he warned her.

She held the bowl in her hands to warm them. "I like how you don't use plastic utensils or plates."

"I use some plastic. There's nothing like a black contractor bag to keep your things dry on a canoe trip. Except a dry bag, but those are expensive. I use both. I'm not a purist. I'm more of a scavenger. I like to reuse things, so if I find a dry bag at a garage sale, I grab it. But I wouldn't buy one new. I've never bought a new piece of clothing."

She gave a surprised laugh, then blew on her bowl of soup. "Never ever? What about underwear?"

“What’s underwear?”

When her mouth dropped open, he laughed. “I’m kidding. I do buy underwear new. I like my silk boxers too much to give those up. Kidding again,” he said when her mouth dropped even farther. “I wear normal underwear, and yeah, I buy it new.”

“Galen Cooper.” She shook her head, as though marveling at him. “You really had me going. Both times. I don’t know what’s more believable, you not wearing underwear or you wearing silk undies.”

“To be honest, neither one is impossible. I’ve gone commando before. And I wouldn’t mind seeing what silk feels like against my—” He broke off, suddenly realizing where the conversation had brought them. His face turned to fire. “Sorry,” he managed. “That was unprofessional. I shouldn’t be talking about my...you know...”

She was laughing so hard she sloshed chana masala onto her hiking pants. He plucked the bowl away from her so she didn’t waste any more food.

He honestly wasn’t sure what was so funny, but he found himself smiling right along with her.

“Oh my gosh, I haven’t laughed so hard since I don’t know.” She wiped tears from her eyes. “It was your expression, that was what set me off. You looked so horrified, as if you’d just mooned the queen of England or something.”

He grinned happily at her. Making her laugh was a joy, even if entirely unintentional in this case. “Just for the record, I’m not that uncivilized.”

“You’re not uncivilized at all. I think you’re a perfect gentleman.” After blotting one last tear with her fingers, she picked up her bowl again. “You even blushed when you got onto the topic of your underwear.”

“I didn’t blush.”

“You did.” Surprising him, she reached for his face and touched the skin of his cheek, above his beard. “Right there, you turned red.”

He couldn't move. She was touching him. *Red alert, red alert.*

The miraculous moment was shattered by a terrific howl from outside the cabin, followed by a loud clattering sound. He jumped to his feet, motioning for Brenda to stay put. Wind swirled inside the cabin, sent his camping stove tumbling to the floor.

Holy shit. The wind was tearing the cabin apart.

"I think it took a piece of the roof off," he told Brenda. "We have to get out of here. If the roof goes, anything could happen. It's not safe anymore."

## *twelve*

Brenda didn't question Galen's assessment. In a flash, he packed up everything he'd spread around the cabin, including the nice comfy sleeping bag she'd been very much looking forward to sleeping in. They pulled on their outerwear, shouldered their packs, and forged into the ferocious wind.

The noise was insane. She hadn't realized how much the little cabin had protected them from the sheer decibel level of the storm.

Galen pointed in the direction he wanted them to go, but he made Brenda go ahead of him. A moment later, she understood why.

With a terrible splintering sound, the wind ripped the door off its hinges. It cartwheeled across the clearing. Galen ran to Brenda and used his body to shield her from the debris flying toward them. She felt him flinch, felt the wild rush of the wind slamming everything in its path.

"Are you okay?" he yelled when the sounds had died down.

"Yes. You?" She dared a glance over her shoulder, and saw with a shock that the cabin was missing part of its metal roof too. A sheet of metal had slammed into the trunk of a swaying pine tree.

"Let's go." Galen nudged her forward. She noticed that he hadn't answered her question, but she did as he directed. Lowering her head, she planted one foot in front of the other



and headed for the trail that would take them back down the mountain. Every step was a challenge because the wind kept whipping tree branches against her face and pelting her with forest debris.

“Give me a break!” she yelled back at the wind, which didn’t seem to notice.

“What?” shouted Galen.

“Nothing, just shouting into the wind. I finally know what that phrase means.”

“What?”

With a smile, she dropped any attempt at conversation. Keeping her focus on her boots meeting the ground, she let her mind wander back to that moment in the cabin before the gale had hit.

His skin had felt so much softer than she’d imagined. Galen came across as such a rugged guy, someone capable of fighting off a bear with his bare hands. But when she’d touched his cheek, it was as if she’d unlocked a window into another side of him. He’d looked so surprised, arrested even, and the way their eyes had met and held...like a shaft of light connected them in that moment.

She’d almost kissed him.

Holy mackerel. *She’d almost kissed him!* If the storm hadn’t ripped the roof off the cabin, her next movement would have been leaning forward and touching her lips to his.

Crazy! Where had that impulse come from? She should thank the storm for interfering with such an unwise move. If she kissed Galen...well, what would be wrong with kissing Galen? If he didn’t want to kiss her, he would just draw away. He was a straightforward person, which was one thing she appreciated about him. He was perfectly capable of telling her they shouldn’t do things like kiss while they were trying to survive in the wilderness.

The wind whined in her ears like one of her fourth-graders when they needed to go potty. *What do you want from me? What?*

She realized that she was yelling out loud again—something she'd never do with her actual fourth graders. Yelling was something she kept in reserve for crisis moments, so that when she did yell, the kids knew it was ultra-serious.

Behind her, she heard Galen laugh.

“What?” she called over her shoulder. “What’s so funny?”

“You’re different in a storm, that’s all.”

Turning back to the path, she smiled to herself. Right now she was Storm Brenda, and no one on earth knew what Storm Brenda was like, because she'd never been in a storm like this before. *In* it, meaning exposed to the elements, flesh meeting wind, body claiming its ground, fighting for each step against the mighty forces of nature whirling around.

Storm Brenda wished that she *had* kissed Galen. What kind of force of nature was he? A powerful one, she knew that already. Galen was the reason she didn't feel scared right now, only exhilarated. She had complete faith in him to get them out of this alive. If not for him, they might have gotten pummeled by flying splinters of wood inside that cabin.

They reached a section of the trail that bypassed a boulder the size of a buffalo. Obviously the trail blazers hadn't wanted to attempt to move it, so they'd just gone around it.

Galen took her hand and tugged her into the thick bushes surrounding the boulder. “Wind screen,” he yelled.

She was dubious until they reached the back side of the enormous piece of granite and noticed the immediate drop in the intensity of the wind. It was still blowing all around them—she could hear it whistling overhead—but here, in the shelter of the rock, it was a lot less fierce.

He pulled her down to ground level, where it was even more quiet. The relief was immediate. She wrapped her arms around her bent knees and hugged herself into a tight ball. “That was freaking intense.”

“Yeah. It could be a microburst. It shouldn't last too long, but we don't need to waste our energy fighting it. We'll lay low until it's calmer, then keep going.”

She glanced up at the rock jutting protectively overhead. It was practically like a cave back here. “Can we just stay here for the night?”

“We could, but it’ll get cold, and there’s a chance we might get some rain.”

“We have tarps.”

“Which might blow away. It’s really too windy to put them up right now.”

She pointed up at the rock shelf overhead. “Won’t that keep the rain off?”

“Not all of it. Cold and wet is a bad combination. We’re much better off moving, it’ll keep our body temperatures up. It’s not too cold so far, but it can drop fast here in the mountains. You can get hypothermia even at forty degrees if you get wet.”

Squinting at the sky beyond the tall pines, she tried to assess the chance of rain, but the darkness was now closing in. “Is it going to rain?”

“It could. These wind storms can be very unpredictable.”

She sighed. “I guess we keep moving then.”

“In a minute. Rest now.” His deep voice filtered through the constant howl of the wind like a steady lifeline. “I’ll keep watch. If you can catch a little sleep, go for it.”

*Sleep.* As soon as he said the word, her eyelids began droop, as if he’d put a spell on her. She was so tired, not just from all the hiking but from the aftermath of the adrenaline hit of the microburst. She adjusted her back against the boulder, shifting to find a comfortable position, only to discover that was impossible. There was a reason why people didn’t sleep on granite beds, apparently.

Gently, Galen shifted her so that her back was nestled against his chest instead. Now that felt better. A warm, firm wall of solid bone and muscle was just what she needed. She practically moaned as his body heat penetrated through all their layers of clothing.

“Is this okay?” he murmured.

She nodded and rested her head in the nook between his collarbone and his pectoral muscle. In a moment she was so blissfully comfortable and warm that the keening wind sounded more like a lullaby. She remembered how when she was little, sometimes they’d get up early in the morning to drive to Granny’s. Her stepfather would pluck her out of bed, wrap a blanket around her like a burrito, and plop her onto the backseat, where she’d go back to sleep immediately.

Such a happy childhood memory. If only her parents had done more road-tripping and less social climbing. More mountain climbing and less party-throwing.

Her eyelids closed and she began to drift off.

And once again, she imagined kissing Galen. How would that beard feel? Soft or bristly? Silky or rough?

She turned her head so her forehead brushed against his beard. Soft. Delightfully so. Its texture was almost sensual. And a little ticklish.

Smiling to herself, she fell asleep.

She woke up to Galen whispering in her ear. “We need to go. The wind died down and we should get a move on.”

“Nooo.” She didn’t want to move anymore. She wanted to stay right where she was in this delicious nest of warmth and comfort known as Galen’s lap. Squirring, she nestled her face deeper into his wool jacket. He smelled so good, like wood smoke and pine sap and a faint memory of laundry soap.

“The temperature’s dropping and we need to keep moving.”

To make him stop talking about moving, she twisted so she could put her arms around him. He was so broad and solid and comforting. And when she buried her face in his neck, she picked up more of that delicious woodsy smell. She inhaled deeply, then sighed with contentment, and began to drift again.

“Sweetheart, wake up.” He peeled her arms from around him.

Sweetheart. Had he really called her sweetheart?

That woke her up, as did the fact that he was trying to straighten up without dumping her onto the ground.

“Sorry,” she said, embarrassed that she’d plastered herself all over him like that. “I was...half asleep.”

“It’s okay, but we really need to hit the trail. There’s another spot I know, about a mile hike from here. It’s more sheltered, and we can actually start a fire there. Doesn’t that sound good?”

He was talking to her as if she was a child, which, she decided, was justified. “I’m good. You don’t have to bribe me with campfires. I’m up. Let’s go.”

With one strong hand, he helped her to her feet. She blinked around at the forest, which had gotten much darker while she’d been asleep. At least the wind had died down. The gale had transformed into a fitful breeze. But Galen was right; it was colder. She shivered and hugged her arms around herself.

Galen noticed, and took off his thick wool jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

“I can’t take this.”

“I run hot. As soon as we get moving I’ll be roasting. Take it. It’s fine.”

She pulled it on, and immediately felt warmer.

“Ready?”

Galen was watching her closely, a hand on her shoulder, and suddenly she was so grateful to him that she wanted to cry. There was nothing like walking through a literal storm with a person to bring you closer together. She felt as if she’d known Galen forever.

Impulsively, she lifted herself onto tiptoes and brushed a kiss onto his cheek. It wasn’t quite the kiss she’d been picturing, but even so, the contact gave her a shiver of pleasure. Her lips tingled, and she ran her tongue across them.

“What was that for!” Equal parts surprised and pleased, judging from his expression, he put a hand to his cheek.

“Everything,” she said simply. “For keeping me alive, letting me snooze. Helping me with Rosalind.”

“Just doing my job.”

“Do you want me to take the kiss back? I can take it back.” This time she nibbled the same spot on his cheek, as if taking a bite out of his skin.

“Is that how you take back a kiss?” Bemused, he touched his cheek again.

“Doesn’t everyone know that? Or did I just make that up?”

With a soft snort, he shook his head. “You’re...you’re cute.” He moved his gaze away from her, as if he couldn’t quite meet her eyes while he was complimenting her. “Very...adorable. But you didn’t need to take it back.”

“I don’t think I did, technically. Should we go?”

“Yes. Yes.” He shook himself back to attention and handed her a headlamp. “This has a sensor, so all you have to do is wave your hand in front of it and it’ll turn on. Or off.”

She slipped the headlamp over her hat and aimed the beam at the ground. “Is it safe to hike in the dark?”

“These give a lot of light. We’ll be fine. It’s such a stormy night that I don’t think we have to worry about wildlife. They dislike bad weather as much as we do.”

She wished he hadn’t mentioned wildlife, because as they headed down the trail, all she could think about was bears lurking behind every tree.

“Galen?” she called after a few minutes.

“Yeah?”

“Can we walk together? Like closer together?”

He paused and swung his beam back toward her. “What’s wrong?”

“Bears. Darkness.”

To his credit, he didn't show any impatience with her silly fears. Or not-so-silly fears. That was the problem, she had no idea if her imagination was just running wild or if there really could be bears nearby.

"Things are always scarier in the dark," he said softly as he backtracked toward her. "Can I hold your hand? Would that help?"

"Yes, I think it would."

His warm hand, big as a lion's paw, came around hers. They both wore gloves against the cold, but even so, his touch was comforting. They hiked side by side, even though there wasn't quite room enough on the trail for that and they kept bumping into each other. Before long, he settled his arm around her shoulders and drew her close to him. After that they hiked in perfect synchronicity.

And warmth.

And something else.

Maybe...awareness?

She lost herself in the feel of his strong body moving alongside her. Flexing thighs, compact stride, agile movements. He guided her so perfectly. A nudge when they were about to hit a tree root, so she'd remember to step over it. A slowdown when they reached a muddy patch of the trail. A tug around the remains of a mouse dropped by an owl.

He moved so fluidly in this alien territory. She found it mesmerizing.

After a time, she asked him to tell her about their surroundings, and he launched into a fascinating account of all the wild things that inhabited this territory. He'd personally encountered everything from beavers to lynx, not to mention many black bears.

"For better or worse, at least we don't have to worry about grizzly bears. Those haven't been seen in Minnesota in centuries. But I've heard stories from Canada. Want to hear them?"

“Maybe those can wait until we’re safely inside a house with the doors locked.”

“You let me know when, and I’ll come tell you stories.”

“You’ll be my Scheherazade?”

“Yes, whatever that is.”

The gaps in his knowledge always surprised her. “She was the bride of a sultan who had a bad habit of marrying someone new every night, then executing her in the morning. On her wedding night, she told him a story, but when dawn came, she still hadn’t reached the end. He had to let her live another day to hear more. She told him a new story every night for a thousand and one nights, and by then he was in love with her and pardoned her. Not only had she saved her own life, but those of all the young women he would have married if she hadn’t bewitched him with her storytelling.” She hesitated, unsure if she should share this next part. “Maura used to call me Scheherazade because I used to read my books to her and we’d brainstorm story ideas.”

“Scheherazade,” he repeated, sounding entranced. “It suits you. Did she have red hair?”

“Probably not, because it’s a Persian tale about the power of storytelling.”

“I believe in the power of storytelling. I’ve spent too many nights around a campfire not to. On the rez with Redbull, too. That’s where you hear the best stories. They go back hundreds of years. Redbull can trace his family back thirty-five generations. He says each generation tweaks the stories so who knows what’s true. But it doesn’t matter, it’s still a good story.”

“How did you meet Redbull?”

“Hunting. We were teenagers. I didn’t know anything about hunting because I’d only ever lived in a city. I was roaming around the woods when I spotted Redbull and his family setting up a blind. It was him, his father, his uncle. I had no idea what they were doing, but I tried to stay out of sight. Redbull’s dad nearly shot me, but then they figured out I



wasn't a deer. They dragged me behind the blind and lectured me about wearing orange in hunting season. Right after that they shot a big nine-point buck, so they decided I was a lucky charm. After that I got invited to lots of hunting trips. Fishing too. I tried to get good at all that stuff so I could live up to my lucky charm rep."

"Did you get good?"

Galen wasn't normally this chatty, and she knew exactly why he was talking up a storm like this. He was trying to distract her, to uplift her and keep her moving. Maybe he was just doing his job, but even so, she appreciated it.

"Oh yeah. Then Redbull's aunt got hold of me and dragged me on her blueberry picking expeditions. I got real good at that too. I'm practically a legend now."

"I've heard that if you're really accepted by a tribe, they give you a name."

"Tribal initiation." He lowered his voice to a solemn tone. "There's an all-night drumming session and a meeting of elders to choose your name. Just call me Walks on Pine Cones."

"Shut up."

"Yeah, I'm just kidding. Maybe some tribes or nations give names to non-Natives, I'm not sure. We have eleven recognized tribes in Minnesota alone and they have different customs and histories. Generally, names are pretty important in the community. I just stick with Galen. If I was really going to be part of the tribe, I'd have to marry an enrolled member, and even then they'd have to decide if they like me enough to grant me membership."

Her ears perked up at the mention of Galen marrying. He seemed so very single, and yet also she knew he was really good with kids. "You sound like you've looked into it."

"I dated a girl from the Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa for a while. She's one of Redbull's cousins. We got pretty serious."

He didn't go on from there. "And..." she prompted.

“And then we broke up. She fell in love with someone else.”

She caught the trace of pain still lingering in his voice, and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder to comfort him. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was a while ago. Over ten years. I was young and dumb. I didn’t know anything about being in a relationship. I thought once we started sleeping together, that was it. Together forever. I don’t know where I got that idea. I was a dumbass.”

She found it sweet that he’d been so naive. “But an idealistic one.”

“Maybe. Or maybe just dumb. The good thing is that we’re still friends. Every once in a while she calls me up and says, ‘I finally found the perfect girl for you.’ She’s always wrong, so maybe she’s just pranking me.”

“Maybe you’ll end up with her after all.”

She didn’t want that to happen. Not at all. So why had she brought it up? *You sound jealous, dummy.*

“She’s married now. Three kids.”

In the dark, an involuntary smile spread across her face. He guided her around a dip in the trail. Despite the wind, the darkness, the terrain, there was something wild and magical about walking through the night forest like this.

“You like kids, don’t you? I noticed that before.”

“Yeah, what’s not to like?”

He startled as she burst out laughing. “You’re asking an elementary school teacher, you realize that, right? I love kids, every day is another adventure when you have twenty of them in a class. But they’re a lot of work. Sometimes at the end of the day I go home and just lie on the floor like a jellyfish.”

“Jellyfish don’t lie on floors.”

“They do if they’re dead. That’s how I feel at the end of a rough day. Like a dead jellyfish. I even smell bad from anxiety sweat. And every muscle aches.”

“Next time, call me up. I have a salve that Redbull’s aunt makes. We sell it in the office. It’s fricking amazing.”

“I’ll do that.”

“You will?” He sounded almost surprised.

“Maybe. Do you want me to?”

“That’s why I said it.”

She looked up at him, the beam of her headlamp slashing across his face, sending his features into harsh light and shadow. “You don’t play games, do you, Galen?”

He blinked. “I play lots of games. I’m good at chess. Lacrosse, too. Hockey.”

“I mean, emotional games. Like, with people’s feelings.”

When he glanced down at her, he nearly blinded her with his own headlamp. “Never have. Won’t start.”

Well damn, she realized. She really liked him. And now she wanted to kiss him again. For real, this time.

## *thirteen*

It was past midnight by the time Galen located the spot he'd been thinking of, a safe place where they could rest until the morning. It was a cave-like space nestled under a sharply angled overhang, softened by thick moss and lichen.

They still had several hours until they reached the trailhead, and the more tired they got, the more likely they'd take a wrong step and get injured. A rest would do both of them wonders. At dawn, they'd hit the trail again and be back at his truck by breakfast. Maybe brunch.

He checked the cave thoroughly for any sign that a bear had claimed it, but found none. As he explored, he knocked down spiderwebs and disposed of a dead mouse. These things didn't faze him, but he never knew how a client might react.

Not that Brenda was just any client. He already knew that in future days, he'd look back at this hike and remember it hazed in gold, like an autumn sunrise. Every moment would be gilded by the magic that came from being with her. He'd relive that kiss on the cheek a hundred times, a thousand, maybe wondering why he didn't try to kiss her back. Instead, he'd interrogated her about it. *What was that for?*

Redbull always said that his biggest problem was follow-up. *Girls like you, he'd say. But you wait too long and then they move on.* Jason said similar things, though he was less blunt than Redbull. Jason said things like, *You could have a girlfriend if you want to. You'd be a kickass boyfriend, and I can say that because I'm a hundred percent confident in my masculinity.*

His therapist said he needed to deal with his anger about being abandoned, and his fear that it might happen again.

She might have a point. But he had no idea what that looked like, “dealing with his anger.” As for fear, he faced fears all the time, but they were physical, tangible fears, things like getting mauled by a bear, or drowning in a waterfall, getting lost in a storm. And none of those fears were for himself; he feared only for his clients.

He set the LED lantern into a crevice halfway up the cave wall. It cast an eerie, almost moonlit glow around the space.

“Come on in,” he called to Brenda. “It’s safe and dry and nobody’s booked it for the night. It’s all ours.”

“And it’s deluxe!” As she ducked inside, she clapped her hands together. “This is perfect.”

She couldn’t have looked happier if he’d presented her with a five-star hotel suite overlooking the ocean. He appreciated that deeply. He could only imagine what this trip would have been like with someone less game than Brenda.

“I was thinking we’d set up our sleeping bags over here.” He crouched down next to the flattest spot in the cave and began tossing aside any rock bigger than a pebble.

“This is where we should put the kitchen.” She gestured toward a shelf-like protrusion from the wall of the cave. He didn’t want to tell her that it was a giant mushroom, but in the next moment she figured it out for herself, and snatched her hand back. “Never mind, I’ll let you do the interior decorating.”

He spread out his ground cloth, then unrolled the two sleeping bags, putting them head to toe. “We’ll be next to each other for warmth, but...”

He trailed off as she picked up one of the sleeping bags and reoriented it so they pointed the same way. “I prefer it this way, if you don’t mind. I tend to kick in my sleep. I don’t want to knock you unconscious while you’re...well, I guess you’d already be unconscious. I wouldn’t want to knock you *more* unconscious.”

Oh God. How was he going to be able to sleep if he could simply lift one eyelid and feast his eyes on the sweet curves of her face and the fall of her hair? He reminded himself that it would be dark once he turned the lantern off, but that didn't help. He'd be alone with Brenda in the dark, and that brought all kinds of sensual images to mind.

He cleared his throat. "I'll move the bags further apart."

"Do you have to?" She stepped next to him and took his hand. *What was going on?* "I'd rather sleep close to you."

"Safety?" he managed. "I promise you're safe here. I'll protect you."

"I know that. Thank you. It's not that. It's because I like being close to you. I feel like we've been through an ordeal and we...bonded? Is it just me?"

"No," he said quickly. If she thought they'd bonded, he wasn't going to say otherwise.

"I guess I...don't want it to end. Do you mind?"

Dumbly, he shook his head. A smile curved her lips; not one of her usual gentle smiles, but a much more wicked one. "Besides, Storm Brenda is in charge right now."

"Storm Brenda?"

"I guess that's what happens when I get caught in a storm. A different side of me comes out." Her sea-green eyes held his. Was she going to kiss him again? In a flash, he realized that she was considering it, and that he couldn't let her do that.

This time, it was up to him.

He curved his hand around the back of her head. The silky strands of her hair cascaded across his skin. They caught golden fire from the lantern. "You're so beautiful," he said, pouring his whole heart into those words.

Her lips parted. Surprise? Invitation? He waited one more beat, to give her time to object, to back away, but she didn't. So he claimed those fresh lips with a kiss that felt like so much more than a kiss.

It felt like a revelation. *Here I am. This is what I feel. This is how much I want you.*

She kissed him back, without any hesitation. In a moment, he was tasting her deeply, drinking from her sweetness, exploring the exquisitely tender warmth of her mouth. His heart raced so fast he thought it might explode. If so, it would be a race between his heart and his head. It was surreal to be kissing here under this overhang, with the wind rustling the bushes just outside. A few steps away, a storm was fading. Inside, the storm was taking hold.

With his other hand, he palmed her lower back to hold her closer. Her body bent like a willow, her middle pressed against his. He was so hard he worried that he might frighten her away with his intense reaction to her. He tried to shift his hips so she wouldn't notice, but it was no use. She refused to lose contact, as if they were joined together at their cores.

He wanted to throw her down right there on the sleeping bags, but surely she wouldn't want that. It wasn't the proper place for an angel like her. They were both dirty and sweaty from the hike, not to mention exhausted. And then there was his beard. It had probably picked up a few twigs and bits of dead leaves along the way. There was no way he was going to sully her perfection with his grime.

He moved his hands to her shoulders and firmly drew away from her. She gazed up at him, her eyes as dreamy as frosted sea glass. "I want you," he said simply. "But not here."

She blinked at him, slowly coming back to awareness. "Why not here?"

"Because we're dirty."

"Maybe I like dirty."

"But you're always so neat and tidy."

"Is that how I seem?" She smiled, her expression relaxing, and it felt like the entire cave was flooded with sunshine. "Storm Brenda isn't like that. Maybe Storm Brenda likes things dirty."

"Storm Brenda's pretty cool."

“She is, isn’t she? I don’t know where she’s been all my life. Maybe waiting for the right storm. Or holed up in her room writing.” She put her hands on the collar of his jacket and pulled him back to her.

He held her off for one more question.

“What’s real Brenda going to think the next morning?”

“Oh, who cares about her?” She made a sassy face that sent shivers of delight through him. He could plant himself in an armchair and watch her expressions all day, and never get bored. “But I suppose you have a point. Let’s just keep making out. Some kissing, a little smooching. Are you okay with that?”

“I have no problem with that. Come here.”

Fire rushed through him as their bodies closed the gap he’d put between them. He felt the lush swell of her breasts against his chest, ran his hands along the hairpin curve of her waist. It reminded him of a switchback on the trail, transporting him to somewhere new and magical.

They kissed until they were both breathless and panting, until steam seemed to rise from their warming bodies.

Should he tell her he’d had a crush on her since she’d first arrived in town? Was this a full disclosure situation? He tried to pin down the right words to explain it, but his head was swimming with the intoxication of their kisses. He didn’t want to talk. But he didn’t want things to go too far before he confessed to her. He didn’t like keeping something back from her. It felt wrong.

Get off this mountain first, then tell her, he decided. That way she wouldn’t still be stuck with him while she let him down easy.

He drew away from her. “We should get some sleep,” he murmured.

“You’re in charge.” Did she sound disappointed? He couldn’t quite tell. He was still as hard as that cave wall, and his heart was jumping out of his chest.



He crouched down and unzipped her sleeping bag. “This is a sub-zero bag that gets a solid five stars at every store. Highly recommended.”

She bit her lip, hesitating. “Should I wear these same clothes?”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with. I’ll probably strip down to one layer. These sleeping bags are toasty. If I was here alone, I’d take everything off. Bare skin works best with the sleeping bag, thermally speaking.”

“Hmm.” She shot him a teasing look. “Storm Brenda might be tempted to do that.”

She unbuttoned the wool jacket he’d given her, then tossed it aside. Underneath, she wore a tightly-fitting synthetic top that shaped her breasts beautifully. He caught the faint outline of her nipples, and got lightheaded for a bright moment.

Everything in him wanted to let her keep stripping her clothes off. Everything except his conscience.

He cleared his throat reluctantly. “On the other hand, if we get surprised by something in the middle of the night, you might want to have some clothes on.”

“Right. That’s a very good point. I’ll just take this off and sleep in my bra and long underwear.”

And there went the top. A rush of cream and gold was all he saw at first. Skin like vanilla ice cream, freckles like spice dust. She wore a surprisingly sexy halter top sports bra; or maybe any bra on her would be sexy. Her flesh curved above the cups in a way that made his mouth water.

He kept watching, slack-jawed, while she peeled off her hiking pants. The long underwear underneath nearly came off, too, giving him a quick glimpse of lushly curved hips before she straightened herself out.

She was spectacular, and she lit up the cave like a goddess rising from the earth. He couldn’t manage to move until she slid into the sleeping bag and rested her head on her joined hands.

“Do you need a pillow? I’ll make you one.”

He rolled up one of his extra shirts to form a pillow and gently lifted her head to put it into place. She sighed as she adjusted her neck to it. “Heaven,” she murmured.

He couldn’t agree more.

“Your turn,” she told him.

“I don’t need a pillow. I’m used to sleeping on bare ground.”

“I mean, your turn to take most of your clothes off. Or you could pretend I’m not here and take them all off.”

“I’m sorry to inform you, that would be impossible. I could never pretend you aren’t here.” He unzipped the rain jacket he’d put on after he gave her his wool one, then pulled off the sweater underneath. His layer of Thinsulate came next. He tended to think of his clothes in terms of what material they were made out of. Rubberized rain gear over wool over Thinsulate worked best, in his experience.

When his head emerged from the opening of his Thinsulate, he saw that she was devouring his chest with her eyes. It felt almost physical. His cock gave an eager pulse of response.

Did she lust after him the same way he did for her? It seemed miraculous after all these months of pining for her. But she was obviously riveted by his bare chest, and didn’t bother to hide it.

“I’m a little hairy,” he said awkwardly.

“I’d say you’re the perfect amount of hairy. It sets off all those muscles. You’re really fit, aren’t you?”

“Fit as I need to be. I don’t go to a gym or anything. I just do what I do and this is how it works out.”

“Pants now,” she said, sounding almost impatient. “I’m looking forward to seeing that silk underwear. Unless you’re going commando today.”

“Nope. Just plain old Hanes.”

He stripped down to his navy blue boxer briefs, hoping to God that he hadn't worn the pair with a quarter-inch hole over his left ball.

"You should be a model."

He laughed, then realized she was sincere. "What?"

"I'm serious. You should be an underwear model. Those guys work out hours every day so they can look like you."

"Oh yeah? Beard and all?"

"Sometimes, I suppose. There's the whole 'lumbersexual' thing."

Now she'd completely lost him. "The what?"

"You've never heard of 'lumbersexuals'?"

"No, but if it involves anything that'll give you splinters..."

She burst out laughing. "Oh my God, I don't even want to go there. A 'lumbersexual' is a hot woodsy guy. Like a 'metrosexual' except in the woods. A lumberjack with sex appeal, except they also tend to be on the hipster end of the spectrum instead of the lumberjack end."

He'd never heard of such a person, but he might have run into a few while guiding. "I'm not on any part of that spectrum," he said as he reached for the lantern to turn it off. "I'm just a guy who loves the forest. Ready for the light to go off?"

The last thing he saw before he pressed the button was her expression as she surveyed his body.

Which meant she probably got a good look at the bulge swelling his boxers.

## *fourteen*

Brenda dreamed of sex. She dreamed of a hard, muscular body moving over her, inside her. She dreamed of eyes filled with light and lust, of calloused hands with a gentle touch.

She dreamed of Galen.

The dreams left her tossing and turning in her five-star sleeping bag. It had been a while since she'd had any form of sex in her life. The last time had been a short-lived relationship back in Arizona, with someone her mother had insisted she meet. Alan was a good-looking guy, just starting his career as a corporate lawyer, not necessarily looking for a wife, but open to marriage should the right person come along.

Or so he'd told her on their first date, in a tone that told her she'd be so lucky if he decided she was the right woman.

They'd gone to bed on the second date, and looking back, she knew why. Because her mother always said things like "men enjoy the hunt, you have to make them work for it or they'll lose interest."

So either she'd slept with him out of rebellion or out of sabotage. Either way, it worked. They'd seen each other a few more times, but no sparks had ignited, and he stopped calling. She'd never dreamed about Alan, though, that was for sure. Especially a sex dream like this. Was she just sex-starved? Or was it something about Galen in particular?

Those thoughts ran through her mind as the first light of dawn filtered into the cave. She opened her eyes and realized

that her and Galen's sleeping bags were spooned together. He was on his side, his back to her, while she snuggled up to him for extra warmth.

No wonder she was so content here in this cocoon of a cave. The cold air nipped at her face and the top of her head. She should reach for her hat, but she didn't want to pull her arms out of her cozy warm bag.

What a random, surreal place to wake up in the morning. She was in the middle of the wilderness with someone she hadn't known very well before yesterday. But even stranger—she felt energized, alive. And she knew a lot more about Galen than she had when they'd started this trip.

She thought back to all the times she'd interacted with Galen, before she even knew his name. Once he'd bought a muffin from her at Sunburn Fest, when she was manning the school's fundraising stand. She'd wondered who he was—he stood out—and why he hadn't said anything beyond, "how much?"

Once she'd seen him at school, come to think of it, when he'd been walking down the hall with Zack Cooper. She'd recognized him from the market, and started to smile at him, but he'd abruptly turned down a side hall as if to avoid her.

Well, he couldn't avoid her now, because she was right next to him, wide awake, and feeling extra adventurous. She'd survived her first ever night in the wilderness and that felt amazingly empowering. No one could say she was just a spoiled suburban girl anymore. She'd done something she'd never even thought about doing before, and she'd liked it. The sky was the limit. There were so many adventures to be had.

And it was all thanks to the man lightly snoring next to her.

She snuggled closer to him, so her knees rested against the backs of his, and his rear end pressed against her pelvis. *He was so warm.* His body heat relaxed her, made her muscles feel almost liquid. His shoulder-length black hair brushed against her nose. It smelled like the forest, like adventure... like excitement.

She hoped he never cut his hair. Maybe some people would find it too messy, or too in need of a pair of scissors. But she liked the way it flowed from his head and tumbled over his shoulders. She found it beautiful. Even the bushy beard didn't bother her any more.

At first she'd thought that it hid too much of his face, and therefore made him look suspicious. But now that she knew him better, she saw it differently. He was on the shy side, a little bit vulnerable. The beard protected him. It wasn't so much that he was hiding, as that he was choosing what to reveal and to whom.

He'd revealed quite a bit to her, including his incredibly fit body. She'd like to see more—not just his body, but everything about him.

This might be the last chance for Storm Brenda to be free. Maybe she should make some trouble while she could.

She blew a breath of air onto the back of his head. His hair stirred, and his body gave a twitch. Uh oh, she didn't want him to think she was a late-season mosquito. She squirmed closer against him, moving her body in a sensual, provocative way.

He shifted, stretched, then gave a groan. Or was it a gasp? “Where are you taking him? Stop!”

Oh dear, he must be having a bad dream. Gently, she shook him awake. “Galen. It's okay. You're just dreaming.”

He sat bolt upright, his bare chest emerging from the sleeping bag. “What's wrong? Did something happen?”

“Everything's fine. You were having a dream.”

He pressed the heels of his hands over his eyes, then shook his head as if to clear it. “Sorry.”

“No need to apologize. Do you want to talk about it?”

He was quiet for a long moment. In the morning light, his cheekbones stood out against his beard. Maybe he really could be a model.

“It's a dream about something that happened when I was a kid. I've never understood it, so I think my sleeping mind tries

to figure it out.” He shot her an arrested sidelong glance. “Maybe you could help.”

“Me? How?”

“You write those crime thrillers. Here’s what I know. A man came to our apartment and dragged my father away at knifepoint. After already stabbing him, or at least someone did. They told me never to say anything. The next thing I heard was that my father was in prison. And that’s it. He’s out now, but I know nothing else.”

She stared at him in the pearly cold light of the cave. “You’re saying that actually happened to you? How old were you?”

“Eleven. I, uh...more or less blocked it out until recently. Then I started dreaming about it. You’re only the second person I’ve told. If you put that in a book, what would the whole story be?”

She was torn between feeling flattered that he would confide in her, and unsure of what to say. “I can speculate, but that’s about it. That must have been terrifying for you.”

“Like I said, I blurred it out. But yeah, I guess it was.”

He still seemed to want more from her, so she pictured the scenario he’d described. “The fact that he swore you to silence instead of telling you to get help, that seems significant.”

His expression lightened. “God, you’re right. Does that mean he knew the guy? Maybe he was working with him? I know my father did some shady things.”

“Could be.” She ran through more possibilities in her head. She was used to brainstorming, but not when it involved real events. “Or maybe he was in over his head and trying to limit the damage, not get you involved. Or maybe—”

He shushed her with a hand gesture, and they both went still. Holding a finger to his lips, he climbed out of his sleeping bag and padded to the entrance of their hideaway. There he paused, his head cocked, listening to something outside. She heard a faint rustling, but couldn’t identify the sound.

He turned and hurried back toward her.

“We need to get out of here.”

“Why?”

“There’s a large animal grazing out there and most likely it’s a bear. We don’t want to get trapped in here if he wanders inside.”

He was already pulling on his clothes, hiding that incredibly fit body underneath fleece and wool. She forced herself to leave her cozy sleeping bag nest and did the same. With lightning speed, he packed up all their gear and stowed it in their packs.

When they were all packed up and ready for the outside, he paused, then stepped close enough to her that he could speak in a low, nearly audible whisper. “We need to make as little noise as possible, see if we can sneak out before it spots us. But if it does see us, follow my lead. Just do what I do. Got it?”

She nodded, gazing up at him with wide eyes. He scanned her face, his eyes darkening. Then he bent down and brushed a kiss across her lips. A firestorm of tingles ignited, as if he’d made her skin sparkle.

Her lips parted and she answered his kiss as if it could be their last, and she wanted him to know how much she appreciated and wanted him.

When he drew away a moment later, his expression had gone full caveman. “All I want is to get down this mountain, take you to breakfast, dive into a shower and get into a real bed with you.” It all came out in a deep growl of pure lust.

Her breath stopped in her chest. *Me too*. She didn’t know if she said it out loud, but it must be written all over her face.

“Ready?” he whispered.

They moved in total silence, two ghosts drifting like mist from under the overhang. He pointed into the woods and there it was. About twenty yards away, a dark figure hunched over



what was probably a blueberry bush. His thick fur was more black than brown.

“It’s a bear, all right,” he murmured. “If he sees us, make lots of noise and try to look bigger.”

“Look bigger?”

“Wave your arms, yell, that kind of thing. They’re don’t want any trouble. If worse comes to worst, I have a can of bear spray. I don’t like to use it, so I’ll try everything else first. I don’t see a cub, so that’s a stroke of luck.”

A moment later, the bear moved and revealed a much smaller figure behind her.

“Oops.”

She wanted to giggle, in a hysterical kind of way, but managed not to.

“The wind’s in our favor, so we’ll have to count on that. Let’s go before it shifts.”

He didn’t have to say it twice. He gestured with his chin toward the trail, indicating that she should go first. He’d deal with any bear drama, in other words. As quietly as she could, she stepped toward the trail, keeping a sidelong eye on the oblivious ball of fur.

It was magical, in a way, encountering this wild creature in the dawning morning. If only she could hide behind a bush and admire it, take notes for a book. Was there a way she could work a homicidal black bear into a story? Maybe he’d been mistreated by humans and was out for revenge?

The bear’s head swung around, and its eyes met hers. There was something ancient about them, primitive, as if this bear knew things she could only imagine.

“Go,” said Galen urgently. “I’ll head her off.”

Brenda picked up the pace and got about forty yards down the trail when she heard Galen yelling toward the bear.

“Be a good bear, that’s right, go on, take that little cub of yours and keep him safe, I’m not going to hurt you, go on, be a

good mama bear, like I know you are, look at that beautiful cub you raised, you're both nice and fat and you don't want to mess with a human, do you?"

She turned back to find him standing tall, hand waving like a windmill, the bear up on her hind legs.

If he was trying to intimidate the bear, wouldn't it be better to have two people?

Plucking up every speck of courage she had, she hurried back up the trail to join him. Mimicking his movements, she jumped up and down and waved her arms, feeling her pack bounce on her back.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Galen yelled at the bear, though she knew he meant her.

"Helping!"

"You're supposed to be heading down the trail!"

"What if there's another bear down there?"

He couldn't argue with that. Besides, they needed to focus on *this* bear.

Standing upright, the bear was at least a head taller than Galen. She watched them for a moment, as the cub bounded away into the brush. They kept at it, shouting whatever came to mind, until the bear slowly dropped down to her four paws and loped after her cub.

Worn out, Brenda dropped her arms to her sides, then hunched over to rest her hands on her knees. "Oh my God. We did it."

She felt his hand on her hair, a light touch, and glanced up at him.

He was looking down at her with the oddest smile, almost proud.

"Yeah, thanks for coming back. That was brave. It was touch and go for a minute, but once I multiplied, she calculated the odds and decided to move on."

"I scared away a bear," she marveled.

“Yes, you did. You’ve got guts, Brenda McMurray.”

“You didn’t know that?” She winked at him. “What do you think I’m doing out here with you?”

He threw back his head and let out a hearty laugh that had a healthy dose of relief in it. “No arguments here. Now how about we go get some breakfast?”

“Don’t you have any of those magic pouches for breakfast? Hot cocoa, instant coffee?”

“Sure, but I figured a hot breakfast at my favorite diner would be better. Are you hungry now?”

“I could eat a bear,” she deadpanned.

They decided to put more distance between them and the bear family before stopping. As they hiked, Brenda watched the sun rise over the valleys and ridges and fill the woods with light. She felt buoyant, like a superhero, bounding her way down the mountain. It was so much easier going downhill, and they’d just scared off a bear, and they were maybe going to go to bed together, her and Galen.

No wonder the morning enchanted her.

The adrenaline kept her going all the way to the trailhead. From there, Galen drove them about fifteen minutes to a diner called the Loading Dock, which was located just off the highway on the way back to Lake Bittersweet.

The serving staff at the Loading Dock all knew Galen, and wanted to hear about their hike and how they fared in the storm. Brenda got to tell the bear story. She embellished it a little bit—in real life, the bear hadn’t actually snarled, as far as she could remember. And she gave it at least a foot of extra height. But Galen didn’t offer any corrections.

“She did great,” Galen said proudly. “Can you believe it’s her first time out there? She’s a natural.”

High fives all around. Brenda glowed with satisfaction. Not only had she survived her first wilderness adventure, she now had an epic story to tell.

“Is anyone booked in the rooms upstairs?” he asked the waitress as he handed over cash for their breakfast. “We could use a shower.”

“There was, but they checked out this morning. You can sneak up there and use the bathroom if you like. Even take a nap if you feel like it. So long as you clear out by eleven, have at it. That’s when the cleaner shows up.”

Brenda’s heart sped up at the thought of the rest of their morning dreams. Breakfast, check. Now came the shower. Would bed be next? She couldn’t keep from smiling as she followed Galen up a set of stairs to a landing with a door that stood ajar. He pushed it open to reveal a simple but clean suite of rooms. The furniture looked like it came from a real home, with old-fashioned upholstered couches, hooked rugs on the painted wood floor and jars of potpourri scenting the space.

Besides the living room, the suite had two bedrooms, and only one of them had been slept in.

She caught Galen’s eye, excitement mounting within her. But he gestured toward the bathroom. “First shower is yours. I’ll give you some space. Be right back.”

He leaned his backpack against the couch and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to call Redbull and report in. I should have done it before but I forgot.”

His teasing tone made it clear why he’d forgotten. It was all her fault, said his hot glance.

She took a long time in the shower, savoring the hot water and the lavender-scented bath gel. By the time she was done, Galen still wasn’t back. So she went into the bedroom that hadn’t been used and stripped off the bedspread. Soft sheets called to her, and she couldn’t resist.

She dropped the towel and climbed onto the bed, moaning with contentment. Goddamn, how had she never noticed how amazing sheets were? Such simple but miraculous pieces of cloth. People really took them for granted. Everyone should go

camping in a cave sometime, they'd have new appreciation for the little things like sheets. She stretched luxuriously, arms overhead, toes pointed, easing the tension that had accumulated in her muscles on that hard dirt floor. God, that felt good. She moved her body, working out kinks in her lower back, her shoulders.

A strangled sound made her look toward the door. Galen stood there, his mouth open in shock. A noise made her jump; he'd dropped his Thermos to the floor.

Oh right. She was naked.

Usually, she tended to be shy about exposing herself to new lovers. She liked to take it slow, make sure they didn't mind a fleshier type of build. But it was different with Galen, because she already knew how much he desired her. He'd told her, and she'd seen it for herself. Sudden erections, hot looks, tented briefs.

Instead of hiding herself, she met his eyes and smiled. She dropped one hand to her chest and let it trail across her skin. *You could be touching this. Don't you wish this was your hand?*

As he stood there, riveted, feet frozen to the floor, she felt a tingle in the space between her thighs. Being looked at like that, as if she was the queen of nudes, turned her on.

But then he didn't move. What was going on? She pulled the blanket over her body, and that seemed to wake him.

"We...we have to go."

"What?" She clutched the blanket to her chest, feeling like a complete idiot.

"I just got a call from Redbull. Your grandmother's been trying to reach us, but I guess your phone ran out of battery. Your mother's here. We need to get back right away."

## *fifteen*

When they reached Brenda's house, sure enough, a hybrid SUV sat in the driveway, black and sleek as a panther.

They'd said barely anything on the drive back. Galen still couldn't get the image of Brenda's glorious naked body out of his mind. His raging erection refused to subside. Maybe they should have made love at the Loading Dock, maybe he should have jumped onto the bed and tasted that golden freckled flesh and those sweet lips tucked in their soft ginger nest. Her nipples...my God, he couldn't get them out of his head. They were the color of cinnamon, and they'd made his mouth water.

Why did he have to have such a conscience? Redbull had sounded about as irritated as he ever had in his life. "She's been calling me every five minutes, man. You gotta get back here. I don't need any more angry elders on my ass."

As soon as he'd mentioned her mother, all of Brenda's open sensuality had evaporated. It was amazing, as if she'd turned off an inner switch. She'd jumped out of bed and snatched up her clothes, then disappeared into the bathroom to put them on.

Now she shot him a sidelong, dubious glance from the passenger seat of his truck. "Do you want to come in?"

He snorted. "Like this? Not a chance." He'd never gotten his shower because they'd left right away. A quick glance in the rearview mirror told him he'd be liable to give any upscale suburban mom a stroke.

She didn't argue. "Thanks for everything, Galen." Then she winced. "I didn't mean that to sound so final. I'll probably be busy with my mother for a bit, but after that..."

"Text me. Or come by. Whichever's easier."

He noticed that she didn't mention anything about playing her boyfriend in front of her mother. Along with relief, he felt some disappointment about that. It would have been another opportunity to do something for Brenda. Maybe she was regretting everything that had happened between them. Maybe she was wishing she hadn't gotten naked in front of him.

But then she leaned across the bucket seat and kissed him on the cheek. "That was one of the most amazing times of my entire life," she murmured against his skin. Then before he could respond, she climbed out of the truck and grabbed her backpack. "See you soon."

That sounded like a promise, he thought as he drove towards his own house, where he planned to take a lengthy shower, him and his hopeless erection. He wondered how long Brenda's mother was staying, how long he'd have to wait until he saw Brenda again. Maybe her mother's arrival hadn't interrupted things for too long. Maybe he should find sneaky ways to run into her. He could volunteer to take Zack to school more often. He could do a presentation on wilderness survival at a school assembly, as he'd been invited to several times.

His cell phone rang, interrupting his reverie. He answered it with one hand. "Where'd you run off to?" It was CeCe, Brenda's grandmother. "I was hoping you'd come inside and meet my daughter."

"Sorry, I need to get home. I'm almost there already."

"You rescued me once, I think you should rescue me again. From *boredom*."

He laughed. "You're never really bored, are you? You entertain yourself."

"That's true, and very perceptive. Well then, Galen Cooper, you'll just have to come back for dinner. Brenda says

she's too tired tonight for any socializing, but tomorrow should be fine."

Brenda said that, did she? He wasn't entirely sure he believed it. Should he check with her before he accepted CeCe's invite?

His stomach knotted with excitement at the thought of seeing her again so soon. He already missed her. Her light lavender scent filled the cab of his truck, and he hoped it never went away.

"Is this that prank you were talking about before?"

"Maybe a little." He could hear the mischief in her voice. "But it's for her own good. Laney needs to get that stick out of her butt."

"You're a menace."

"There's nothing wrong with a little prank."

"You sound like a Cooper brother right now—" He broke off as a stroke of brilliance struck. CeCe wasn't the only one who could pull a prank.

"I'll be there," he said firmly. "I'll bring some harvest ale from my buddy's brewhouse."

"Oh, you don't have to bring anything except yourself. That's more than enough."

In other words, bring on the mountain man.

This was going to be fun.

At home, he went straight to the shower. Hot, long, and soapy. And a fucking relief when he fisted himself into a long, sharp orgasm. Eyes closed, images of Brenda's nipples dancing on the back of his eyelids. The movement of her hand across her stomach, the shy glimmer of moisture between her thighs. *Oh God.*

After that, he made a quick phone call, then pulled on clean clothes and jumped back into his truck for the drive to Braddock.



To Sunny Lee, the stylist who'd come the closest to being able to cut his hair. She'd actually gotten her scissors within inches of his head before he'd torn off the plastic cape and fled her shop.

He found his favorite oldies station on the scratchy radio of his truck, and blasted it as loud as he could stand. Windows open, the road unfolding before him, Rolling Stones singing "let me introduce myself." Yeah, baby. This was it. He was finally going to do it; it was time.

The music made him think of his father, who'd loved two bands, the Stones and Pink Floyd. "Just another brick in the wall," he used to sing at the top of his lungs while he worked on his car in the front yard. The woman who lived next door used to hang over the fence and flirt with him.

Marshall Cooper had been a handsome man. He had a big charismatic smile that went from ear to ear. He never allowed facial hair to get in the way of blasting his good looks into the world. Galen couldn't remember ever seeing him with so much as a mustache.

Did Galen look anything like his father? He didn't entirely know anymore. It had been so long since he'd seen his own face.

Well, he'd find out soon enough.

Sunny Lee's salon was called Hair Cuts, a straightforward name that he appreciated. It reflected her style, too. She was a Korean woman in her fifties who didn't mince words. On his last unsuccessful appointment, she'd told him that at first she'd thought his hair was a wig.

"You're back," she said bluntly as he pushed through the door of her salon, which was located in the converted garage of her house. She was sweeping up the discarded hair from her last appointment. One reason he liked her shop was that she only had one chair, and therefore only one customer at a time. Another reason was that he found the faint trace of diesel fumes comforting.

"Surprised?"

“A little.” She shrugged. “With more warning, I would have prepared a tranquilizer dart, like for a rhino.”

“No need. I’m ready this time.”

“Are you sure?” She pulled a small flask from behind a jar of combs filled with blue antiseptic liquid. “You can have some of this.”

“It’s not the same thing you soak your combs in, is it?”

“No. Well, perhaps the chemical structure is not so different. But this is gin. It helps when I have difficult customers.”

“I suppose you’re including me in that category?” He took off his jacket and hung it on the hook. “But I won’t give you any trouble this time.”

Shooting him a doubtful look, she took a swig from her flask. Almost immediately, her skin flushed. She offered it to him next. He decided he might as well bolster his courage in case he lost his nerve.

One bracing swallow later, he eased into her chair. “Maybe you should give me something to bite down on too. Isn’t that what they used to do during Wild West surgeries?”

“I have a chew toy for my dog,” she offered. “Rawhide.”

“I’m good.” He settled back in the chair while she fastened the simple black cape around his neck, her movements efficient and no-nonsense.

This is why he’d come to her. This was the only salon he’d ever felt remotely comfortable in.

“Well? Do you know what you want?”

He wanted Brenda. But he didn’t need to cut his hair for her. He knew she liked his appearance just fine. But if he was going to meet her mother, that was different. He wanted to start off on the right foot with her, not as a prank. CeCe would just have to deal with it; he was reverse-pranking her.

But it wasn’t entirely about any of the McMurray women. It was him. He’d been using his beard as a crutch, as a shield,

a safety blanket. He wanted to see what life was like without it.

“Definitely a shave.”

“All the way? I don’t recommend that.”

“Why not?”

“Your skin isn’t used to being exposed. It will be quite tender at first. We could cut it in stages.”

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to make more trips to see Sunny. “No stages. Let’s just do it.”

She sighed. “I will give you some lotion. It might help the transition.”

She picked up a pair of scissors. Oh God, was this really happening? He balled up his fists against his thighs.

She handed him the flask, and he took another slug. “And your hair?”

“What do you mean?”

“Any special style? Layers? Buzz cut? Mullet?”

Now she was just torturing him. Were there really so many different styles of haircut? *Why*, for God’s sake? He took another long drink of gin. At this rate, he might have to book a hotel room in Braddock for the night.

“Just...short. I don’t fucking care. Whatever looks good with the rest of my head.”

She nodded decisively. “Leave it to me. I’ll decide as I go. Right now I can’t tell the shape of your head or face. When we get some of the weight off, we’ll know more.”

Bless her for taking charge. “Thank you,” he muttered.

“Final question. Do you want to face the mirror or away from the mirror while I chop off your hair?”

He drank from the flask again, and realized it was empty. “I owe you a bottle of gin.”

“No need.” She opened a drawer, and from among a jumble of blow dryers pulled out a nearly full bottle, from

which she refilled the flask.

With that fortification, he relaxed. "I'll watch."

After all, this wasn't just about hair. This was about becoming visible to the world as more than some kind of wildebeest.

She set to work, scissors and hair flying, like a small Korean Edward Scissorhands. Half-buzzed by now, lulled by gin, he watched layers of protection fall from his face.

As his hair got shorter and shorter, he saw his mother emerge. He had her cheekbones, he realized, and her eyes. Why had he never realized that before? Possibly because he spent zero time looking into a mirror. Her eyes had been a warm butterscotch brown, though very often bloodshot and bleary. His coloring was all Mom, who had dramatic black hair that she'd passed on to all her sons except Billy.

The last time he'd spoken to Mom, she'd been three weeks sober and antsy as hell. That had been a month ago, and he hadn't heard from her since. *Oh Mom.*

He screwed the cap back onto the flask and set it on the counter with all of Sunny's styling tools. This was why he usually stuck to beer or ale. Hard liquor brought back so many harsh memories.

After Sunny had made some progress on his hair, she announced that she was going to switch to his beard. "Then I will fine-tune," she explained.

Whatever.

She started with beard scissors to remove the bulk of the bushy mass. A twig fell out, one he'd somehow missed during his shower.

"If you find any bird nests in there, be gentle with them," he joked.

She sniffed and shook her head, entirely focused on her task. She darted from one side to the other, snipping away, and something even more shocking happened. His father emerged.

He had his father's jaw, broad and square. His full lips and finely carved mouth, check. Had he inherited Marshall Cooper's magnetic smile, too? He tried a tentative smile. Yeah, more or less. He might not have his father's star quality or his cowboy-next-door appeal, but anyone would know they were related.

His heart twisted as he looked at his reflection. He remembered that beer coozy he'd been making that fateful night. That eleven-year-old kid had really loved his father. Why hadn't Marshall Cooper ever come back? He wasn't in prison anymore. The brothers had all been in Lake Bittersweet when he got out, but he could have tried to find them. *Where are you, Dad? What happened to you? Don't you love me anymore?*

"Handsome man." Sunny admired her handiwork in the mirror. "I know just the cut for you."

He snapped back to the task at hand.

"Keep it simple," he warned. "I'm just a wilderness guide. I don't want anything that makes me look like a city guy."

"Military style?" She mimicked buzzing it off with a razor.

"Not that simple. I don't want to freeze when I'm out on the lake. Just give me a regular guy haircut."

She whooshed out a breath and tapped the scissors on his shoulder, making him jump. "You want to pick something from a magazine? Either you show me what you want or let me choose for you. You aren't providing good guidance."

He reminded himself that he'd chosen Sunny for her directness. "Do want you want. I might close my eyes for this part."

"Please."

He did so, and let his mind wander while she completed the rest of the process. The snip-snip was soothing, along with the alcohol settling into his veins. He actually fell asleep for a moment, only to wake up to the sound of an electric razor. Sunny stood before him, blocking the mirror.

“Your beard,” she explained, when she saw that he was awake. “Ready?”

He nodded, and she nudged his head up so she could work on his neck.

When she was finally done, she stepped out of his line of sight and stared hard at the stranger in the mirror. God, he really did look like Dad, except with more dramatic coloring and more striking cheekbones and eyebrows. He touched his jaw and winced. The skin there was red and irritated.

“Told you,” said Sunny as she whipped out a jar of salve. “You want this?”

He nodded and she smoothed it into his skin.

“Lots of hair.” She gestured at the floor, and he looked down to see a plush profusion of dark hair surrounding the chair, like a cushion.

“What will you do with it?”

“It goes in the trash.”

That thought gave him a nasty chill. He didn’t want any part of himself going in the trash. That was what his parents had done, more or less. “I want it. I’ll sweep it up and take it in a bag or something. You don’t have to do it.”

She shrugged. “Saves me the trouble. Well, how do you like it?”

“You did a good job.” Which didn’t exactly answer the question, but it was all he could think of. She’d left his hair thick on top, with a nice wave, and thinner along the sides. Did he like it? He had no idea. It looked good, but felt surreal. He didn’t even recognize that person in the mirror. Everything felt strange. His neck was cold. His face stung. His ears were cold. And he hadn’t even left her garage yet. What would it be like outside?

Maybe he should have waited until next summer before robbing himself of his homegrown insulation.

On the other hand...he tried another smile at his reflection. *Nice to meet you, Mrs.* ... Uh oh, what was Brenda’s mother’s

last name? Bogosian? No, she'd married again. It wouldn't be McMurray because that was her maiden name. God, he could ruin everything right off the bat with the wrong name.

"Galen," Sunny prompted. "You going to sit here all day?"

"Oh. No. Hey, you did a really good job, Sunny. Thank you. How much?"

He blinked at the amount she told him. Did people really pay this much on a regular basis?

"That includes the salve. Do you want more product?"

"Product? What product?"

She plucked a fancy-looking jar from the shelf next to the barber's chair. "Stuff for your hair, to keep it looking like this."

He peered at the thick dark waves and noted the nice shape. He'd like to keep it looking like this at least until tomorrow night. "What's in it?"

"Chemicals." She shrugged and gave it to him to examine. He handed it back after a second.

"Pass. I can get some bear fat pretty easily." Redbull's family kept a store of the stuff.

"No, you cannot use bear fat." She wagged a finger at him, then shoved the container back at him. "Take it. I insist."

He paid her, adding a big tip, then faced the outside air for the first time as he strode to his truck. *So. Strange.* He kept thinking that someone was breathing down his neck. He even whirled around halfway to his truck. A pretty woman in her twenties was walking her dog down the sidewalk. Her head was bobbing to whatever was playing in her earbuds, and clearly she hadn't been breathing on his neck. He felt like an idiot and smiled sheepishly.

And the most amazing thing happened. She smiled back, almost flirtatiously. *Definitely* flirtatiously.

"Everything okay, handsome?" she asked.

"Uh huh."

*Brilliant, Galen. Brilliant.*

He gave her a nod and walked the rest of the way to his truck. Shit. He hadn't been expecting that. Attracting the attention of women was Jason's domain. Or his brothers'. It usually took more time for women to appreciate him.

Inside his truck, he rubbed his jaw, wondering if that redness would go away before dinner at Brenda's tomorrow.

Shit. What was he going to wear? He couldn't go in his usual work pants and flannel. Getting out of his truck again, he called to the girl, whose dog was now pissing on someone's lawn. "Do you know of a good clothing store around here?"



## *sixteen*

Since there was no talking her granny out of inviting Galen to dinner, Brenda sent him a flurry of texts to prepare him.

*My mother likes people to call her Mrs. Abercrombie until she says otherwise.*

*Bring flowers. But not tiger lilies, they make my mom itchy.*

*Oh, and no carnations. Especially dyed carnations. You don't want to see her reaction to those.*

*She's picky about alcohol. Prosecco is ok, but no red wine.*

*How's beer?* He finally asked after she'd sent about twenty such texts.

*What kind?*

*Local craft brew type. Small batch.*

*Okay.*

After fretting a while over that, she changed her mind. *Maybe no alcohol. Her standards are impossible and she brings her own anyway.*

*What do you want me to wear?* he asked her.

She wondered if it would be rude to go through his closet. Did he even have a closet, or just a pile of clothes on the floor? She'd never seen his place, although Kendra had pointed out where he lived.

*Just be yourself,* she told him.

Not helpful, but she didn't want him twisting himself into a pretzel just because she was being neurotic. She and Galen had never even gone on a date, so why was she freaking out like this? A few kisses didn't mean anything.

And yet... somehow they did.

"You're over thirty," Granny lectured her as they carefully peeled the hard-boiled eggs for the deviled eggs. Her mother was taking her time getting ready in the upstairs master bedroom, which was usually Brenda's, but she always gave it over to her mother when she visited. "Why do you care what she thinks about anything? She's impossible to please and always has been. Even as a little girl, she turned up her nose at my cooking."

"I don't know!" Brenda groaned at her own absurd behavior. "When she's here, it's like a chemical reaction that I can't control at all. It just happens. I freak out and worry about every little thing."

"Well, if you want to know why I invited Galen, it's this. There's no chance at all that she'll approve of him, so you don't need to try so hard. You can relax, darling girl." She scooped a handful of eggshells into the garbage disposal.

"*That's your master plan?*"

"It's liberating, right?"

As Brenda tried to answer, she flicked the garbage disposal button and it roared into action.

When it stopped, Brenda said, "Actually—" Only to get cut off by another round of garbage disposing.

She gave up and began scooping out the yolks to make the filling. The entire menu was finger food because apparently that was a new trend in her mother's social circle. Everything they planned to serve could be eaten with one hand, including the mini-cupcakes they were making for dessert.

"It allows for more variety," Mom had explained grandiosely. "You can eat a little of many things without the calories adding up so much."

Of course that meant they had to *make* many things. Once her mother had realized that they didn't have a local Trader Joe's or the equivalent, and that last-minute caterers weren't a thing in Lake Bittersweet, they'd all swung into action. Mini crostini with tomatoes and basil, tiny squares of spanakopita, mini-sandwiches with deviled ham, wedges of watermelon, grapes, pickles. They'd basically bought out Lake Bittersweet's entire supply of toothpicks.

By the time evening rolled around, Brenda was exhausted. She dragged herself upstairs to shower and change. This was going to be a disaster, she could already sense it. All that miniature food would never be enough to feed a guy like Galen. She could already picture his confusion as he tried to balance a little china plate on his knee.

Once he got the full McMurray family experience, he might never want to see her again. If her father had come, it might be different, since there'd be another man present. But not really; her mother was the one who mattered. Her father's role in their lives was basically to provide the money and built-in social connections. Mom generally took it from there.

And what would Mom make of Galen?

She couldn't bear to think about it. But what scared her even more was what she might say or do to Galen. He could be a sensitive soul. That was why he hid behind that beard. On the other hand, her mother could be obviously ruthless. Her tongue was a deadly weapon of precision confidence-shredding.

Since she didn't want Galen to be in Mom's sights, she'd been very careful to make clear that she and Galen were not dating. The only reason he was invited was because he'd helped CeCe transition from the nursing home.

The doorbell rang while she was still getting dressed. She cursed out loud. Poor Galen. He'd be facing her mother and grandmother on his own. *Crap, crap.* She clawed at the zipper on the back of her dress, nearly dislocating a shoulder to get it zipped up. She'd chosen a simple sapphire blue dress that was just a few inches short of boring. Black tights and half-boots

completed the outfit. She left her hair loose, but parted on the side and swept it over one shoulder. Simple, but actually quite sexy. Tonight, only her underwear was pink.

Quickly, she swiped on some lip gloss and mascara. Here in Lake Bittersweet, she'd gotten out of the habit of wearing makeup. Would Galen even recognize her? He might be in for a shock.

Then again, that shock would be nothing compared to that of her mother when she first saw Galen. Turned out, she was actually looking forward to that. Mom should learn not to be so judgmental.

After setting up the doggie gate to keep Olaf in the guest room, she trotted downstairs, she heard the sound of pleasantly chatting voices, including one that was low and male, belonging to Galen. Then came her grandmother's sassy voice. Hopefully she was welcoming Galen properly while Mom waited in the living room.

And then she heard her mother join the convo with a laugh.

She knew that laugh. Laney McMurray Abercrombie had a number of laughs in her repertoire, starting with the genuine article, which was more of a snort, and progressing to the flattery-laugh she used with Dad's colleagues. Other versions could be various shades of cutting, dismissive or scornful.

This particular laugh was the social one she used at cocktail parties when she was chatting with someone she considered worth impressing.

Amazed, Brenda skipped down the last few steps and rounded the corner to the foyer. She stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of a stranger talking to her mother and grandmother. He was one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen, almost intimidatingly so. Those stunning dark features belonged in an ad for a high-end Italian watch that only celebrities wore. Slashing black eyebrows, eyes filled with light, a squared-off jaw, full lips that might have been carved by a sculptor. The only flaw was a redness around the jaw, as if he'd reacted badly to his aftershave.

And then there was his physique. His sleek cashmere sweater clung to his muscles. Was that a Luca Faloni sweater? She didn't know labels as well as Mom did, but judging by her mother's party-laugh, it could be. His trousers were also black, with a subtle charcoal plaid pattern that not every guy would be able to pull off. Those expensive-looking clothes set off a body that would make any woman look twice. Powerful thighs, compact muscles, strong arms.

Calloused hands.

Light-filled eyes.

*Wait a second.*

Even though she'd been knocked breathless by this stranger's looks, the pieces slowly fell into place.

*"Galen?"*

"Hi." He smiled, and the sheer charisma of it made her gasp. "I hope I'm not late. I had to return the ale I bought." He held up a bottle of sparkling apple cider. "Hope this is okay. One of our local apple orchards makes it. I should have cleared it with you first, Brenda, but I took a chance."

"Cleared it?" Mom gave *that laugh* again as she accepted the bottle of cider. "Oh Brenda, are you doing that micromanaging thing you do? You really need to relax."

"Just trying to make everything perfect, Mom," she managed. She caught Galen's eye. He gave her a quick up-and-down once-over and grinned. She got the message. *You look hot.*

*So do you, you sneaky mother-effer.*

She wanted to drag him out of the foyer and interrogate him about his new haircut. Why? When? Who? What the hell? But her mother had commandeered all his attention.

"He outwitted us," Granny whispered in her ear. "I didn't know he had it in him."

"Did you know he was going to get a damn makeover?"

“Ha! No. At first I was ticked off, but he’s such a looker it’s hard to stay mad.”

Brenda knew exactly what she meant. She couldn’t take her eyes off him. This was going to take some getting used to. It felt so surreal to be interacting with this devastatingly handsome man as if he was Galen.

“But all is not lost,” Granny murmured as they all trooped into the dining room. “He’s still Galen under those nice clothes.”

Granny had a point. Only Galen’s appearance had changed. He still had rough edges. He looked almost panicked when he saw the table arrayed with delicate bone china plates, which Brenda only used when her mother was visiting.

Ignoring his plate, he went immediately for the platter of deviled eggs. In less than three seconds, he’d popped eight of them into his mouth.

Brenda shot her mother a look, but she hadn’t seemed to notice his hearty appetite. Or she was choosing to ignore it while she circled Galen like a shark looking for an opening.

This was torture. No matter how much CeCe was rooting for some kind of Galen gaffe, Brenda wasn’t. She wanted her mother to like Galen—because she did, and because he deserved to be liked.

“So, Galen, how do you know my daughter?” Laney asked.

“I’ve...uh...had a—” He winced as Brenda kicked his leg under the table. She’d forgotten to mention that her mother knew nothing about them kissing. “I threw her friend off a cliff,” he blurted.

Mom’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me?”

Brenda clapped a hand over her mouth to hold back her laugh. Granny covered her mouth with a napkin, likely also burying a laugh. Neither of them could come to Galen’s rescue.

“Oh, don’t worry, she was already dead.”

“*What?*” Mom was no doubt picturing a body being rolled off a cliff, concrete shoes style.

“Ashes,” Brenda gasped, finally managed to dredge up some words. “Galen helped me scatter someone’s ashes. It was Rosalind Stanley, remember her?”

“Oh.” Her mother shot Galen a glance full of outrage. She was wearing a St John’s Bay tweed suit in shades of “sunset at the country club.” Her hair had recently been touched up so it nearly matched Brenda’s. “It’s a strange way of putting it. And not really appropriate conversation material.”

Which part? Brenda wondered. The ashes part or the death part? Her parents and their friends didn’t like to talk about death, unless someone had come to an especially lurid end.

Galen looked rattled by his misstep. “I’m sorry.”

Brenda stepped in to do what she could. “You asked how we met, Mom. All he did was answer. Although technically, we met earlier than that.”

“Yes, I’ve known Brenda since she started teaching here. She was carrying boxes into the school to set up her classroom. There was a ficus plant.”

Brenda shot Galen a startled glance. That was news to her, that he’d watched her move in. “I meant when Olaf attacked your cooler of fish the other day.”

“Oh. Right. Yes.” He looked around desperately, as if trying to find something else to talk about, anything else. “This food. It’s all so little. I was wondering if I could fit one of everything in my mouth at the same time.”

Brenda choked on a crostini. CeCe clapped her hands together. “Oh, do try, Galen! I’ll bet my pearl choker that you can.”

“Mother, you know that pearl choker is meant for me,” Mom said sternly.

After CeCe died, she meant. Brenda hated that kind of comment.

“If you want it, you should try to fit one of everything in *your* mouth!” Granny began filling a plate with morsels from each platter.

“Stop that. Your pearl choker is a statement piece and it shouldn’t be used to encourage uncouth behavior.”

“Maybe the statement is that I enjoy uncouth behavior.” CeCe smiled, unrepentant.

Brenda risked a glance at Galen and noticed that he was sweating. He ran a finger under his cashmere neckline. Was his jaw looking more red than before? “Granny, give it a rest. Galen was just joking. This isn’t the hotdog eating contest at the SweetSummer.”

Seizing on the tangent, her mother asked about the SweetSummer Fest. Brenda explained the festival, and what a success it had been this past summer, even though a billionaire’s boat had caught on fire and Jason had swum to his rescue.

Mom wanted to know all about that, of course. Billionaires were among her favorite topics, along with new diet trends and which member of the club was moving on to his third wife.

At least her parents were still together. She deeply appreciated that, because dealing with them separately would be a nightmare. Not that she didn’t love them; of course she did. But her mother was a handful and her stepfather was always working, unless he was networking, unless he was golfing, which was also networking, or unless he was reading the news, which was also working since he was usually keeping up with industry news.

CeCe continued the story of the billionaire’s burning boat, and Brenda took the opportunity to take a deep breath and steal another look at Galen. He was already looking her way so intently that she dropped her pickle fork.

“Here.” He slid his pickle fork toward her. “It’s too small for me. It’s like trying to stab something with a pine needle.” He lowered his voice. “Why is it so freaking small? I feel like I’m Alice in the rabbit hole.”



He was so adorably nonplussed by everything on their table. She suddenly wanted to eat him up, starting with his newly exposed earlobes and heading down to his reddened jaw. “Galen, will you help me with something in the kitchen for a second?”

“What?” Her mother’s head turned on a swivel. “Help with what?”

“Oh Laney, calm down,” said CeCe. “It’s probably the cupcakes, they still need to be iced. Did I tell you the best part about the Caldwells? Brent and his son Tyler are coming back to Lake Bittersweet for Christmas. Apparently he has fond feelings for us now that we saved their lives.”

“We? Really, you were there?”

“We’re a community, Laney. That’s what a community does.”

Never so happy to leave her squabbling elders, Brenda dragged Galen into the kitchen. When they were well out of sight from any prying eyes, she pinned Galen to the front of the refrigerator with one hand, while the other gestured at his face. “When did this happen? Why? Why’d you do it?”

His lips quirked. Did they used to do that behind all that facial hair, and she’d just never seen it? “I did it yesterday. Sunny Lee cut it. I’ve been wanting to for a while, but I couldn’t make it happen. I guess I finally had the motivation.”

“Meaning, my mother?”

“You, your mother, dinner. Your grandmother’s prank.”

She stared at him, conflicting emotions crashing like waves caught in a crosscurrent. “You look great. Sunny did a good job. But I liked your old look.”

“It wasn’t a ‘look.’ It was just me.”

“Well, I liked ‘just you.’”

“I’m still me.” Suddenly he looked worried. “Are you saying you aren’t comfortable with me anymore? It’s just hair. It’ll grow back. I’ll grow it back.”

His eagerness made her soften. “Don’t be silly. You should do exactly what you want with your hair.”

“I’m still trying to decide what to do with it.”

She frowned at him. “What do you mean? Like, grow it out or keep it this way?”

“No, I mean my old hair. I have it in a grocery bag in the truck.”

That was so...so *Galen*.

He was right. He was still Galen. Galen to the core. Still the man who’d stolen his way into her heart with his realness, his uniqueness, his kindness, his strength. That hadn’t changed one bit, and she was so relieved she wanted to laugh. Or cry. Instead she pulled his head down and kissed him hard on the lips.

“I missed you,” she whispered against his lips.

He responded by pressing his groin against her so she could feel his bulge. His hard flesh radiated heat through his soft wool trousers.

Speaking of which... “Are these clothes new too?”

“They’re from a thrift store. A girl in Braddock helped me shop.”

A twist of jealousy surprised her. Now that he was such a hunk, he’d probably get lots of attention and who knew what would happen.

“They look really good on you.” She rubbed her cheek against his. “I miss your beard though, and the rest of your hair. Not enough to invite that grocery bag inside,” she added quickly.

He chuckled, then gently drew her away from his cheek. “My skin needs to toughen up. It’s used to hiding under an inch of insulation.”

She touched his jaw lightly. “Poor skin. That really looks painful. I can’t believe you did that for my mother.”

“Did what?”

They jumped apart. Mom stood in the doorway, arms folded, eyebrows lifted.

“It’s nothing. It’s just...Galen got a haircut.”

She turned her eagle gaze over to Galen, who straightened his shoulders under the weight of her attention. Even so, he still looked rattled. She had the effect. “Why would you do that?”

“I was overdue for one.”

Nice. He was actually handling her mother relatively well. Maybe all those bear encounters had been good training.

“Not because you wanted to impress me?”

“That too.”

“Why would you want to do that?”

“Because...” he stammered. “Because...”

“Be honest with me. That’s more important than a haircut.”

Oh, for God’s sake, her mother was in full interrogation mode now. Brenda opened her mouth to rescue Galen, but he preempted her.

“I have a crush on her,” he blurted.

*What?* Her eyes went wide and her mind blank. *A crush?*

When he continued, he sounded much steadier. “Have for a while. From a distance.”

She blinked at him, suddenly rethinking all of their interactions. “Mom, can you give us a minute?”

When her mother didn’t move at first, she physically shepherded her back to the dining room.

Mom dug in her heels. “Are you manhandling me?”

“I’m gently guiding you back to the dining room. I need a moment of privacy to discuss *my* life in *my* kitchen.”

When she got back to the kitchen, she found Galen downing a big glass of water. He turned to meet her gaze, which he held steadily.

“How long is a while?” she asked. “Is that why you remember seeing me move into my classroom?”

“Yes. That was the first time I saw you. So yeah, since then. I didn’t know who you were at first. Then I found out, but...I didn’t do anything about it.”

“Why didn’t you? You could have asked me out, or talked to me. Why not?”

“Because you were so perfect. You are so perfect. And I was a bearded mountain man roaming the forest like a beast. I thought you might faint if I talked to you.”

She straightened her spine. “Faint? Are you kidding? What do you think I am? I’m not perfect. What do you think *you* are?”

“I just said what I—”

“Do you really think I’m afraid of a beard?” she interrupted. “Why would you have a crush on someone who’s afraid of a beard?”

“It’s not just the beard, it’s everything.” He ducked his head, looking miserable.

She remembered something he’d said on the trail. “When we were hiking, you said I could never be ordinary. That was because you had a crush on me?”

“It’s because it’s true.”

There was so much more she wanted to ask...was he ever planning to tell her...what about when they kissed...did he still have this crush...was it real or one of those transient, fantasy things that disappeared when they met reality...

But raised voices from the dining room interrupted. And then came a crashing sound.

Brenda ran into the dining room to find one chair upended, and her grandmother on her feet, brandishing a cluster of grapes in one fist.

Her mother was in mid-rant. “CeCe, you’re a terrible influence on my daughter. She never would have behaved this

way before she came here.” She wheeled on Brenda. “How long are you going to stay here in this forgotten little wasteland? It’s about the size of a frog that got run over by a car. It’s not funny anymore. You should both come back to Connecticut.”

Brenda exchanged a shocked look with her grandmother, then faced her mother. “Is that why you came here? To get us to leave?”

“It is. Since the senior home burned down, this is the perfect time to make the move.”

“Boo on you.” CeCe pelted her with a grape. Then she threw another, and another, until Laney shielded herself with her arms.

“See? You’re all turning into barbarians!”

As if on cue, Galen stepped into the room and into the path of one of CeCe’s grapes. He captured it with a quick motion, eyed it, then popped it into his mouth.

“Barbarians,” repeated Mom.

## *seventeen*

Later that night, Galen lay awake in his king-size bed with the lush pillowtop mattress—his haven when he got back from a guiding job. The windows of his first-floor bedroom were flung open, because even though it was early October, he needed air.

Had dinner with the McMurray women been an unmitigated disaster, or just a minor disaster? He couldn't decide. After that grape had gone into his mouth, he'd lost track of events. Perhaps even dissociated a little, the way he did when an especially obnoxious group wanted to throw beer cans into ravines.

There had been angry words spoken by everyone except him. There had been threats of various kinds—never speaking again, telling your father, disinheriting.

Every time he tried to leave, Brenda would grab his hand and silently urge him to stay. So he did, even though he had nothing to say that was at all helpful, except for occasionally speaking up for the goodness of the Lake Bittersweet community.

When he'd finally left, Brenda had put a hand to her ear in the "I'll call you" gesture. But she hadn't. He hoped she was okay, and that she wasn't already typing up her letter of resignation from the school.

A hiss sounded from his open window, an odd bird sound that he didn't recognize. He sat up in bed and saw a dark figure hovering outside his window.

“Galen. It’s Brenda. Are you awake?”

“Yeah. What’s wrong?” There had to be some bizarre emergency to bring her to his house after midnight. How did she even know where he lived? Then again, anyone could have told her, it wasn’t exactly a secret.

“Can I come in?”

“There’s a window screen,” he said stupidly, as if that was the main issue. “I mean, yeah, hang on.”

He got out of bed and crossed to the window, where he set about uninstalling the screen.

“You could open the front door,” she suggested.

“Right. Sorry, half asleep here. Come around front and I’ll let you in.”

It wasn’t until he opened the door that he realized he was buck naked. He preferred to sleep nude whenever he could get away with it, but he probably should have pulled some clothes on before letting her in.

He closed the door in her face.

“Let me get dressed!” he called to her, dashing into his bedroom. His house was an open floor plan A-frame made of Minnesota pine timbers. He emphasized comfort over adornment. The only things on the wall were topo maps and an enlarged photo of a loon.

She pushed the door open and came in, following him into the bedroom. “No need for that.”

“I want to prove I’m not a barbarian.” He clutched his boxers to his body, hiding his privates, which were already responding to her presence. She still wore the form-fitting blue dress that had been driving him crazy all during dinner.

“I don’t care if you’re a barbarian.” She shoved him lightly on the chest, causing him to back up until he felt the bed against his legs. “I don’t care if you never suffer through a dinner with my mother again.”

“I didn’t suffer.” He’d enjoyed Laney Abercrombie, in a weird way. Her energy reminded him of a grackle. The female grackles were very particular about their nests and spent days lining them with fine materials. “She’s protective of her young. That’s common.”

“Her young?” Brenda laughed a little wildly. Her hair was loose and tangled, as if she’d driven here with the top down. “Is that what I am?”

“I just mean...she’s wary of someone like me. Can’t really blame her.”

“Oh, but I do. And you know what? Screw her. I can be with who I want. I can *fuck* who I want.” She emphasized the word “fuck” as if trying to make a point with her language. “And that’s what I intend to do. Get into bed.”

“Excuse me?”

“I want to have sex with you. Right now.”

He stared at her burning eyes and heaving chest. She was angry, magnificently so. And he’d jump at the chance to have sex with her. But he didn’t want to be part of an anger fuck to get back at her mother.

“Why?” he asked directly. “Because of her?”

She crumpled into a seated position on his bed and dropped her head in her hands. “Maybe,” she muttered. “She made me so angry. I hate that she can make me feel this way, like everything I am is worthless. And she’s ramping up the pressure to get Granny to move closer to her.”

He dropped down next to her and rubbed her back with one hand. His other hand still held his boxers, which he was using to shield her view of his erection.

“Oh, that feels so good,” she moaned.

His erection swelled even further.

“You’re not worthless,” he said in a low voice. “You could never be worthless. Do you want me to take a poll of your students and see what they say?”



“You think Mom cares what a bunch of fourth-graders say?”

“Why not? Kids are pretty savvy when it comes to cutting through bullshit. Besides, is she the only one whose opinion matters? What about the rest of us?”

She lifted her head up and brushed her hair off her face. He saw marks of tears that just about ripped his heart out. “I must sound like a baby. I’m a grown woman who still gets all messed up by her mother. I’m sorry I dumped all this on you. It wasn’t my intention.”

He recalled the furious energy with which she’d burst through his door. “Your intention was...”

“Sex,” she admitted. “Blow off steam. I’m sorry, I guess that sounds like I was using you for sex.”

“It’s fine. I don’t actually have a problem with that. But let’s try something else first.” Her emotions were all over the place. He felt as if he was caught in a whirlwind, and the best thing to do during any kind of storm was to find some solid ground and hunker down.

“What?”

“How about a back rub?”

“Oh, that sounds amazing. Yes please.”

He drew down the zipper on the back of her dress, watching inch after inch of gold-sprinkled skin appear. The only light in the room was from the moon, but it was nearly full and seemed to caress her skin and hair like a lover.

She helped him pull off her dress. Down to bra and panties, she lay face down on the bed.

“You know I’ve already seen you naked,” he reminded her. “Might as well take it all off.”

She nodded, and he unsnapped her bra from the back. When she lifted herself up to extricate her arms, he caught the shadow of her breasts.

*Get a grip.*

“I’m just going to slide these off too,” he told her as he tugged on the waistband of her panties. The elastic had left marks on her skin, and he bent to kiss them as he pulled her underwear all the way off.

He wanted to bite the perfect globes of her ass. So lush, so juicy. But he couldn’t forget his task. He wanted to chase the sadness away, make her feel good, appreciated, glorious. Slowly, thoroughly, he worked the tight muscles along her spine, the tendons between neck and shoulder, her hips, her butt, even all the way down her legs. As he massaged, he learned. He noticed when she responded, when she stilled, when she sighed.

She sighed a lot.

“I won’t remember my own name after this,” she murmured.

“As long as you remember mine,” he joked.

“Oh yeah. George? Glenn? Gollum?”

He chuckled as he moved her mass of hair away from her neck and focused on the tightness there. Under his fingers, he felt her body melt and relax. He savored the satiny curves of her waist, her ass, the sides of her breasts. His fingers itched to caress her there too, but he kept his focus on her back.

She spread her arms and legs wide, like a starfish. That brought his attention to the shadow between her thighs.

A full body massage was nice, but there was nothing like an orgasm to relieve tension.

He allowed his hand to smooth across her ass and trace the crease between it and her thigh. Before he went further, he paused. “How are you doing?”

“So good,” she said in a strangled, breathless voice. “Please don’t stop.”

“Don’t stop what I’m doing, or what I’m about to do?”

“That. Touch me. Touch my clit.”

Sounded like consent to him, if not something more like “command.” He dipped his fingers between her legs and found glorious wetness and heat. Sliding forward, he searched for the hard kernel of flesh where her desire was centered. She wriggled and adjusted her position to guide his fingers. He followed her unspoken guidance and delved further into her slick folds. When his thumb brushed against that nub, she gave a grateful cry. “Oh please, Galen. Please please,” she begged.

Oh yeah, she needed to come. And he needed to be the man who got her there.

Her flesh trembled as she raised her hips off the bed to give him better access to her sex. He gritted his teeth against the hot, wild rush of lust that shot through him. God, he wanted to be inside her. Maybe later. Maybe not. Right now, he wanted to give her an orgasm that would blow the top of her head off.

He used his palm to massage, to arouse, his fingers to squeeze and tease. Frantic moans came from her as he found the pace and friction level that worked for her. He lost himself in her movements, her responses, her cries, her sighs. Shifting, he spread his own body over hers, nestling his hard erection against her rear. He needed some contact or he was going to explode.

She exploded first, lurching forward so hard he fought to stay with her, to keep stroking, keep stoking her climax. She was loud, he discovered, blissfully loud, and he loved that. He loved hearing how much he’d pleased her, loved hearing her cry of ecstasy simmer down as she floated back to earth.

She lay under him, still face down, gasping as she tried to recover. “Do you have any immediate neighbors?” she finally asked, sounding nervous.

“No. You can make all the sounds you want.”

“It’s...uh...a lot.”

Oh hell no. She’d better not get embarrassed by something he found so spectacular. “It’s great. Not a lot. A perfect

amount. More would be fine too. Or less. Whatever. It's good."

She laughed and rolled over. "Are you okay?"

The problem was that he was so turned on he could hardly bear it, let alone form words that made sense. Could he slip into the bathroom and jack himself off? He didn't want to assume that...

She wrapped one hand around his cock, and his thoughts obliterated themselves. Sweet relief...my God, the feel of her warm hand on his raging erection had to be the best thing he'd ever experienced in this lifetime.

"Brenda," he said in a choked voice, thinking he should warn her that he was about to freaking explode. But she didn't seem worried.

"Come onto my stomach," she murmured. "It's okay. Unless you have a condom?"

Maybe it was hearing her say the word "come." Or maybe it was the sheer intoxication of the way she fisted him. Or the moonlight, or her naked body splayed out under him, or the sound of her voice, or everything woven together into one magical shimmer of desire. Whatever it was, it didn't take any time at all until he was pumping into her hand. The relief was so intense he could have cried. He'd been wanting her for so long, and he still did. He wanted to be inside her, feel her soft heat surround him.

But for now, lord, how he'd needed that climax.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I have condoms in the bathroom. I just didn't..."

Have any self-control. Embarrassing.

"It's okay. I get it. It was perfect." She rolled off the bed and looked around. "Where's the bathroom?"

"It's in the garage. I mean, it's an addition. I built it onto this house when I bought it because all it had was an outhouse."

"And you have to go outside to get to it?"

“No, there’s another way, it’s just blocked right now because I’ve been hauling out my canoes for the winter.” He climbed out of bed too and brought her a blanket to put around her shoulders. “I’ll take you there.”

She shrugged off the protection of the blanket. “I’m not cold. I’m steaming hot.”

Yes, she was.

He led her out of the house and around to the addition, which was part storage and part bathroom. The night was warm for this time of year, and she spread her arms wide as she gazed up at the moon. “I’m walking outside, naked. I don’t think I’ve ever done that before.”

“Stick with me,” he said dryly. “You’ll end up doing all kinds of shit you never did before. For good or for bad.” He watched the wind play with her hair. Her beauty in the light of the moon made him stagger.

“I’d say it’s all good so far.” She twirled around, her bare feet pale flashes against his browning yard.

“Might want to wait until you see the bathroom.”

“Honey bucket?”

“Not any more. I got the toilet put in last year.” He ushered her into the addition and pointed her toward the bathroom.

“Just my luck, then. I do enjoy indoor plumbing. I hope that doesn’t make me too boring and suburban?” She tossed her auburn hair over her bare shoulders. Why had he ever thought she might be shy or reserved? She was completely unbothered by the fact that she was naked. So was he, for that matter. She didn’t seem to mind that either.

They took turns cleaning up in the bathroom. By the time they were done, they’d both chilled down, so they took the return trip at a run. They were laughing and panting by the time they dove back into his bed.

“How is this bed so amazingly comfortable?” she demanded.

“I like comfort when I’m home. Makes a nice change.” He wrapped his arms around her and snuggled her next to him in a bear hug. “I’m glad you like it.”

*You can stay every night if you like.*

She melted against him and he closed his eyes, inhaling the scent of her hair and skin, the faint trace of his hand soap, the lingering hint of fresh air. Had any moment in the history of Galen Cooper been so filled with unexpected happiness? His heart swelled until he thought it might burst.

Brenda was so quiet that he figured she’d fallen asleep, but after a moment she spoke.

“I think you should know something.”

“Hm?”

“I’m not what you think I am.”

## *eighteen*

That statement had come out much more dramatically than Brenda had intended. She felt Galen shift next to her.

“What are you talking about?”

“Sorry. Let me try that again. You said you had a crush on me.”

He gave a noncommittal growl.

“I just think that the woman you have a crush on doesn’t necessarily exist.”

“Huh?”

God, she was going about this all wrong. But it had been on her mind ever since he’d dropped that “crush” bombshell on her. All on its own, it wouldn’t have set off any alarms. But the fact that he’d completely changed his appearance to impress her mother, that did worry her. Her grandmother’s “prank” aside, why would he do such a thing unless he was putting her on a bit of a pedestal?

She needed to make sure he didn’t do that. She wanted to keep seeing him, wanted to spend time with him in bed and out. The more time she spent with him, the more she liked him.

Which was why she wanted to be real with him. “Tonight, when I came over here, I was all in a rage because of my mother.”

“I noticed.”

“Well, it’s kind of a pattern for me to do that. Or it used to be. I thought I was past it.”

His hand, which had been stroking her back, stilled. “What do you mean, a pattern?”

She forced herself to continue, even though she didn’t know if it would change things between them.

“It started when I was a teenager, maybe fifteen. My mother always micromanaged everything I did, who I spent time with, my grades, my friends, everything.” She passed her tongue over her lips. “I rebelled, I guess you would say. And I used sex to do it. When I’d had an especially bad fight with my mother, I used to sneak out that night and meet up with Maura. We’d go to whatever party was going on. I’d pick someone I thought was cute, and I’d...we’d have sex. It was my way of feeling like I had choices. It wasn’t cool. I’m...ashamed of it, not the sex part, but the fact that I was doing it for fucked-up reasons. It wasn’t fair to those boys, not that they seemed to mind.”

She paused, trying to measure his reaction from his silence and his stillness. But there was nothing to read. So she kept going.

“But I knew it wasn’t the healthiest pattern, so I saw a therapist after I went to college. That’s how I came to see that it was my way of claiming agency over my own body. I didn’t need to do it anymore, and I didn’t. But tonight...tonight I felt that same ‘fuck-it-all’ ‘burn-it-down’ thing from my teenage years.”

More silence followed.

When he finally spoke, it wasn’t a question but a statement. “So that’s the reason you came here tonight. To burn it all down.”

“Oh my God, no! I wanted you back at the Loading Dock. Why do you think I was waiting for you, naked? You’re the one who came in and dropped your Thermos and made us leave.”



“My hands stopped working,” he said simply, as if that explained everything,

She smiled into her pillow. Maybe this was going to be okay. “I came here tonight because I...I needed to see you. I don’t want you to think I’m some perfect being up on a pedestal. I admit that my mother made me spiral. That’s what drove me out of the house. But when I got here it changed. Because of you. Kind of like...” She searched for a metaphor that would make him understand. Something nature-based. “As if I was a lightning bolt and you were the earth. You grounded me.”

Wrapped in his warm arms, she still felt that way. But she felt there was something else, too. Worry. Fear. Would her confession change how he felt about her?

Normally, she wouldn’t share details from her past so quickly. She’d gone through a sexually overactive phase but, lucky her, she’d never gotten any kind of STD. One interesting aspect of taking charge of her sex life was that she’d always insisted on a condom. If a guy didn’t want to wear one, she walked away. It hadn’t been about emotions for her, at least not romantic ones.

Two things had brought that phase of her life to an end. The first was graduating from high school and getting some space from her mother. The second was a pregnancy scare. Her period had been three weeks late and counting. When it finally started, she’d actually gotten down on her knees in the toilet stall and thanked the heavens. After that, she’d decided to take a break from sex for a while.

She realized that Galen was stroking the hair away from her face in a tender manner. She turned her head to gaze into his dark whisky eyes. It took some courage to do that, since one thing she might see there was judgement. Galen didn’t seem like a judgmental person. But men could surprise you when it came to discussions of sex.

“Are we okay?” she asked him.

“I’m okay. Are you okay?”

He hadn't answered the question. "But are we okay?"

Another prolonged pause, during which her mind raced with possible things he could be thinking. *What a slut. ... Did I really have a crush on her? ... Good thing we didn't have sex yet.*

"I don't know what you're expecting." He sounded genuinely confused. Her heart sank, because she'd been expecting...acceptance? Understanding? But she'd always been expecting scorn and disgust. Which was very screwed up and something she'd been working on with her therapist before she left Arizona. "It's your body and your life. You don't have to explain anything to me."

She blinked at him. That was...so true. Straightforward and true. "You don't see me differently now?"

"Why would I? I don't know what you mean." Still with that confusion. "Maybe you thought because I had a crush on you, I saw you as someone who isn't real, or someone with problems or a past. Like a Barbie doll."

One of his hands was stroking circles on her upper arm. It was simultaneously soothing and arousing.

"Well, technically Barbie has whatever problems you give her. But you didn't know me when you had your crush. Maybe you thought I was a perfect virginal angel."

"I didn't think that. I wouldn't even want that. Unless you were actually that, then I guess I would."

Now it was her turn to be confused. "What?"

"I had a crush on you because...fuck, I don't know why. Because you're you. Because you're so beautiful and kind and your heart shines through every time you smile. I don't care how many people you've had sex with. I just care about you. I'm sorry you were unhappy as a teenager. I was too."

Her heart was fluttering madly from his words. "You were?"

"Yeah, all the way up until we came here, I was a mess. I was kind of a bad kid. I got into lots of fights. I got arrested

once for knocking out my stepfather. I'm sure I would have ended up in jail if Thomas hadn't brought us here. I probably would have sold drugs on a street corner or something. Stuff that actually hurts people. But you...you have nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not ashamed. You will never hear me slut-shame anyone. I believe we all have the right to engage sexually how we want to, so long as everyone consents. But..." She swallowed hard, thinking back to the angry mood that had driven her out of her own house that night. "That's not what I was taught. My mother lives in a world built on judgement, and that was how she raised me. Sometimes that judgy voice comes back and drives me crazy all over again. She also used to try to shame me into losing weight. You saw how perfectly fit she is."

A breeze wafted through the window, and she shivered. He ran his hands up and down her body to warm her. It did more than that. It reminded her of how deftly he'd fondled her into that ecstatic orgasm.

"You know, the first time I saw a woman naked, I felt something I usually only feel when I'm in the wilderness. It's a kind of awe that something so beautiful and miraculous exists."

"That's so poetic." The petty side of her wondered who this beautiful and miraculous woman was. Obviously, Galen knew his way around the female body. Where had he gained that experience?

The other side of her was just glad that he had.

"Thank you, but I'm no poet. I'm not a word person. The point is, I don't think you should feel any shame about anything to do with your body. No woman should. This one time, one of my clients started her cycle during a hiking trip. She was almost too embarrassed to ask me what she should do with her tampons. Why should anyone ever feel any shame about things your body just naturally does? It makes no sense to me."

Trust Galen to get her smiling with his always down-to-earth perspective. “Even farts?”

“It’s just fucking gas being released by your digestive system. Would you rather it stay in there?”

She giggled, imagining Galen delivering this rant at one of her mother’s dinner parties. “What did you do with the tampons in the wilderness?”

“Buried them, same as we do with poops. It all decomposes, you just don’t want a wild animal to follow the scent and dig them up. If there’s a plastic applicator, we rinse those and carry them back to civilization. The plastic won’t degrade.”

She giggled into his warm chest and the soft cushion of hair that grew there. Even with a new haircut, Galen was still a pretty hirsute man. She liked it, the texture, the softness, the contrast with his hard muscles. With one hand, she reached up to feel his jaw. She could already feel the grain of his scruff growing back.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Just imagining you explaining how to deal with menstruation in the forest to my mother’s friends.”

She felt him smile. “Don’t worry, I’ve learned all the euphemisms. I can sound civilized if I need to.”

“You don’t need to with me. I like your bluntness. I know what I’m getting with you.”

“You’re getting one hundred percent genuine barbarian.” With that declaration, he flipped her over onto her back. “Remember that condom you mentioned before?”

“Sure do.” She arched under him, nipped his shoulder, and spread her legs so one of his thighs could come between hers. “Where did you say they were?”

“Right here.” He flipped over one pillow and showed her the wrapped condom. “I grabbed it while I was cleaning up.”

“Ooh, good thinking.”

“More like, wishful thinking.”

“I think there’s a good chance that wish will come true.” She reached her hand between his legs to touch his penis and found him half-aroused. She’d only gotten a brief chance to hold him before, and now she took her time, stroking the velvet skin as his flesh stiffened. So direct, just like Galen. *Here I am, just as I am*, it seemed to say.

Which was exactly what she’d just said to him, more or less. Here I am, just as I am. Not perfect. But happy to be here.

He moved his head lower and licked one nipple, then trailed across to the other and gave it a little kiss. Sensation arced between them like lightning. She arched her chest so he wouldn’t stop, wouldn’t even think about stopping. She loved the way he lavished her breasts with those long, appreciative strokes of his tongue.

“You taste like mulled wine,” he murmured.

“Hm?” Lost in the pleasure, she wasn’t tracking his words anymore.

“It always goes right to my head. I can’t handle it.”

While he feasted on her breasts, one of his hands went between her legs, sliding through the moisture that still remained, and inspiring more. God, it felt good to be naked with a man again, to be touched, to *want* to touch. She’d avoided getting involved with anyone since she’d moved here. Lake Bittersweet was so small, and people talked.

But here, now, with Galen, she didn’t care about any of that. She bit him on the shoulder, telling him without words that he could go harder, go faster. He got the message.

He shoved her legs apart with his thigh and practically dove between her legs to replace his hand with his mouth and tongue. His scruff abraded her inner thighs, and she sensed the roughness that he held in check. She urged him on, flexing her hips against his mouth, muttering hot words to him, grabbing at his back, his hair, his shoulders.

A quick pause for him to put on the condom, and they pounced on each other again. They rolled back and forth

across that king-size bed, licking, touching, sucking, nibbling, moaning, savoring, surrendering, dominating, all in turn. When she was just about out of her mind with need, he pinned her hands over her head and settled himself between her thighs.

“Now, Galen. Now,” she whispered.

He surged inside her partway, paused to adjust, to check her reaction, something she herself was almost too crazed to do. He’d grown to an impressive size, and probably wanted to make sure it wasn’t too much. She wrapped her legs around him and pulled him in. It wasn’t too much. In fact, she wanted more. She wanted every bit of him inside her, filling her up, sending her into orbit.

He caught on to her mood, or maybe he was feeling the same ferocious hunger, because he set a deep and consistent rhythm that made her blood hum in her ears. She knew words were leaving her lips—she could hear them—but she didn’t bother to think about what they were. It didn’t matter, they were just sounds to let him know how she was feeling, how over the top her desire was, how good it felt when he touched her so deeply, when it was just him and her and bare skin and sweat and hands and cock and...the climax detonated deep inside her this time, like a depth charge in the ocean.

It ripped through him as well, as if the same natural event had struck them both. They held onto each other while the orgasm rocked through her, and him, and back to her, or so it seemed. His strong arms around her, his body surrounding her with heat, his heart racing against hers...her senses overloaded.

And when the spasms died down, there was comfort and a goose-down comforter and the sweetest, wildest man in the world by her side.

## *nineteen*

Lake Bittersweet Wilderness Adventures generally went through a seasonal lull that started sometime in late fall.

Hunting season brought a certain amount of business, and there were even some climbers and hikers who preferred the less mosquito-ridden months of the year.

But by October, Galen had much more time on his hands than he did during the summer. He usually spent his days chopping and stacking firewood, tidying up his property to get ready for snow, and stockpiling supplies for the winter.

This year, he had to devote a certain amount of time to dealing with everyone's shock at the sight of his new haircut. Every time he showed up anywhere—the grand opening of Kendra's new office, the bachelor party of Kirk Williams, who was getting married to Gina Moretti, or the last farmers market of the year—jaws dropped and he got peppered with questions.

At first he would say things like, "What haircut?" or "I woke up this way," just to mess with people. Then he tried, "I scared a yeti on the trail and figured it was time for a change." Or, "I'm thinking about a career change to corporate compliance officer." Or, "Next up, I'm going to wax my chest."

The one thing he didn't say was that he'd wanted to prove to Brenda's mother that he could be a normal person if he had to. It hadn't worked, anyway. Laney Abercrombie had seen right through him and stormed out of town the next day.

Even though both CeCe and Brenda kept telling him he shouldn't worry about it, he couldn't help it. His own family had disintegrated like wet toilet paper. He'd never want to contribute to someone else's family misery.

"It's not you, it's me," Brenda insisted. "She wanted to make us move to Connecticut. She's even threatening to stop paying for Granny to stay at the senior home. That's what she does. She uses money to control us. We told her 'no' and that's why she left."

The pit in his stomach told him it wasn't over yet. Families were important. He wanted the McMurray women to work things out. On the other hand, he sure as hell didn't want Brenda to move away. He wanted to see her as much as possible. After she was done with school for the day, on weekends, in the middle of a random Tuesday night when she couldn't sleep...whenever.

Redbull warned him that he was too easy to get. "Women like the chase."

"I thought men were the ones who like the chase."

"Men like competition."

Galen squinted at him suspiciously. "Is this some kind of tribal wisdom or something you read in *Cosmo*?"

"*Cosmo*. That's white people dating. For us natives, we show our love with actions. Haul enough wood for a woman, fix her car, maybe she gets under the snagging blanket with you."

He winked, letting Galen know he was joking, at least a little bit. "Brenda knows she doesn't have to chase me. She's got me. She knows I had a crush on her."

"Did you say 'had?' The crush is over?"

"I don't think it's a crush anymore. What's one step up from a crush?"

"Eh, read your own magazine." With that, Redbull went off to greet a group of hunters he was booked to guide into elk territory.



Galen didn't give a shit if he was too easy to get. He didn't even know what that meant. If you liked someone, and enjoyed being with them, why wouldn't you take every opportunity to do it? Life was short. Things could change at any moment. A father could be dragged away at knifepoint. A mother could fall off the wagon. Enjoy the good things while you can, in other words.

"I've been thinking about my father a lot," he told his therapist in his next session. "I don't know why. I wish I could just think about Brenda. She's amazing and she seems to like me."

"You can think about more than one thing, can't you?"

"I don't want to think about him."

She tapped her pen on the arm of her chair in that now-familiar habit. "Why not? Does thinking about him make you feel a certain way?"

"Yeah. Like shit."

"Can you say more about that?"

He'd heard that line over and over again. Could he say more about that? He forced himself to focus. "It makes me anxious when I think about him. And...angry."

"Can you say more about that?"

"I just did!" he protested.

She smiled wryly. "I know it's hard. If this kind of work was easy, there wouldn't be such a need for it."

He pondered that for a moment, then went back to the original question. "It's like a blank spot. Like a blurry place that I can't really look at. I can't remember much about my dad except that night. So when I think about him I just get panicky. It's always been that way. I'm used to it. I just don't talk about him."

"But you said you're thinking about him more these days."

"Yes, and I'm fucking pissed about that. I have better things to think about."

“Like Brenda.”

“Yes, like Brenda! I’ve been pining after her for so long, and now she’s in my bed almost every night and—” He broke off, embarrassed. “Sorry. Probably not supposed to talk about that.”

“You can talk about anything here.”

“Yeah well, I don’t want to talk about that.” At this point, his relationship with Brenda was as fragile as a soap bubble. He didn’t want to talk about it with anyone.

“Fair enough. One question, though. Do you think there’s some reason being with Brenda makes you think about your father?”

“No. No. No no no. I don’t know. No.” Apparently that question had put a wrench into his mental gears. What connection could there possibly be between the gorgeous and kind teacher slash sex goddess Brenda, and his fuckup of a father? It didn’t compute.

“Can you say more about that?”

This time she was joking, and they both laughed, and that was the end of that session.

That night he made a picnic for Brenda out by his firepit so they could watch a meteor shower. He grilled a trout he’d caught that morning and roasted some potatoes in foil in the coals. Brenda brought a bag of salad greens from her garden. After they’d feasted, they stretched out on one blanket, pulled another one over them and counted falling stars.

“Do you wish on them?” Brenda whispered, as if it was a movie that required hushed voices.

“You can. Doesn’t mean it’ll come true.”

“Have you ever wished on a falling star?” She tilted her head so it rested against his shoulder. His heart ached as her light scent drifted into his nostrils. It was the best smell in the world to him now. Better than pine trees and rotting logs, and that was saying something.

“Sure. The first year I came here, I saw my first meteor shower. I wished on every one I spotted. Four wishes.”

“What were they?”

“That I could stay in Lake Bittersweet and never go home.”

She lifted her head. “And it came true!”

He laughed softly. “Yeah, but it had already come true. We were staying. I just wanted to make sure it kept coming true. Things can change fast.”

“Okay, so what else?”

He thought about it, bringing up that memory from almost twenty years ago. “That my brothers would be okay.”

“They seem okay.”

“Thomas is. I just got a text from Billy, he’s coming home soon.”

“Will I get to meet him?”

He glanced at her, surprised. They weren’t being at all public about their relationship. She didn’t like the idea of being the focus of town gossip. “You want to?”

“He’s your brother. I’ve already met Thomas.”

“Yeah, but that was before...”

She laughed and rolled on top of him, blocking his view of the stars. He didn’t miss them. “Before we started making love every single night?”

“We missed last night.”

“Then let’s make up for it now.” She unzipped his jeans, revealing his already swelling erection. “Hmm, great minds think alike.”

He lay on his back, letting her do whatever she wanted. She swept her bright hair over one shoulder to get it out of her way. A halo of starlight glowed behind her. She was so beautiful to him. He couldn’t get over the fact that she was here with him.

Blowing his mind even further, she pushed up his sweater and kissed her way down his chest to his belly. The contrast between the cool October air and her warm mouth made him shiver. The heat from the firepit only reached one side of his body.

But it didn't matter when she was busy stoking a fire of her own with her tongue. His breath sped up as she pulled down the top of his jeans enough to gently extricate his swelling cock. He wanted to close his eyes to lose himself in the sensations, but he also didn't want to miss a second of the visual glory of her hair catching the firelight, her wet lips reaching the tip of his penis, her little pointed tongue going in for a taste.

When her mouth settled over him, tremors traveled through his entire system. *Red alert. Dream woman sucking your cock.* He half-groaned, half-laughed at his own intense reaction.

She glanced up at him, keeping her mouth fastened to his erection, but lifting her eyebrows in an "are you okay" gesture.

"I'm good," he promised her in a choked voice. "I mean, dead, but good."

He felt the breath of her laugh against his flesh, and wondered if he was actually dead, and this was heaven. That felt vaguely sacrilegious, and he didn't want it to be true anyway. Life was fucking incredible. Despite some rocky times early on, he'd found his joy in the wilderness. And now *this* joy had come to him. This passion, this connection, this woman.

When he was just about to come, she rose to her feet and stripped off her own jeans and panties. The firelight flickered over her naked body, emphasizing curves and shadows and moisture.

"I've always had a fantasy about making love in the open air," she murmured. "The closest I ever came was a swimming pool, but we got kicked out before we did anything."

Sometimes her stories about her past got him even more turned on. “We could try the lake, but we might get hypothermia. And my dick might freeze off.”

“That would be a travesty and a tragedy.” Smiling she knelt astride him, one sleek, satiny thigh on each side of him. He gripped her hips, giving her the firm pressure he knew she liked. Even when she was in charge, she wanted a certain degree of power from him. Learning about her preferences and boundaries was a joy, a hands-on educational process of which he savored every moment.

She took his erection, which glistened from its time inside her mouth, in her hand and positioned herself over it. They’d dispensed with condoms after the first two weeks, when they’d gone through an entire box. She was on birth control to even out her cycle, and both of them had gotten tested. Making love with nothing separating them added another level of pleasure, but only because he knew it was safe.

As she settled her body over him, he finally had to close his eyes because otherwise he might come immediately. He thought about his task list before snowfall, the repairs needed on the roof of his shed, the gravel load that was going to be delivered the next day. Mundane things that would distract him from the fact that the most stunning woman in the world was sitting on top of him, fucking his brains out.

She picked up the pace, sliding herself up and down his erection. He flexed his hips to meet her halfway, at that magic point where sparks burst into being. Opening his eyes, he saw that hers were closed, her head tilted back, her lips parted. One of her hands was fondling her own breasts, under her shirt, pinching her own nipple. The sight was so erotic he had to close his eyes again. But he loved it when she showed him what pleased her, because he always filed it away for the next time.

By some miraculous feat of willpower, he held off until she came. She cried out, her body arching like a willow after a snowfall, her inner flesh tightening around him. The hot pulses were the final straw for him, and he poured himself into her welcoming body.

Afterwards, he added some more birch wood to the firepit and they snuggled under the blanket. With her warm, lax body in his arms, he knew that he'd never been this happy before in his life.

And that terrified the fuck out of him. Because he knew exactly what happened when you thought things were going great. Catastrophe.

## *twenty*

Laney Abercrombie didn't take well to being told "no." She never had. Brenda and her grandmother knew that it was just a matter of time before she pulled her next power play. The two of them pored over their finances to make sure CeCe could go back to her room at Home for Seniors if Laney followed through on her threat to stop paying for it.

One day Alicia Moore, the director of the home, called and informed them that CeCe's payments had stopped at the time of the fire. After the home was declared safe for residence again, her autopays hadn't resumed. When Alicia called Laney, she'd refused to commit to starting them up again.

"She wants to know what my plans are," CeCe told Brenda after she hung up.

"You can always stay here," Brenda said for the millionth time. "I love having you here."

"You do for now, sure. But what if I start needing more help? It's best if I make the move now while I still have all my marbles and can pee by myself. Besides, I like it there with my cohort. All my friends have already moved back in. So has Bryce, and I don't get to see him nearly as much when I'm here. I'm afraid they're going to give away my spot if I don't go back soon."

CeCe was so worried about it that she was having trouble sleeping. It made Brenda furious, but she'd already had a huge fight with her mother and knew it was time to cool things down rather than starting in again.

She needed to figure out a way she could afford it herself, along with the social security payments that her grandmother received. Unfortunately, elementary school teachers in rural areas didn't make much money.

Galen offered to help out. He went to Conor Gault for advice, and wound up transferring his savings, which had built up because he never spent any money, into an investment fund. "You can borrow it, interest free, or I can take out a line of equity on my house," he told her. "I don't know what any of that means, but Conor says I can swing it."

But she refused to become financially dependent on anyone except herself. Granny had drilled that into her, although her own financial savvy could use some work, judging by the current situation.

Then one night, over pizza at Mariano's with Kendra and Jason, a lightbulb went off.

That was one of the surprise benefits of dating Galen—his friends. Jason Mosedale was one of his best buddies; he'd recently gotten together with Kendra Carter, who used to run her father's restaurant but was now relaunching her own business. Brenda and Kendra clicked right away, and before long Brenda felt comfortable enough telling her why her grandmother hadn't yet moved back to the senior home.

"My mother's trying to force her to move closer to her. She's...well, control freak is close enough. We're trying to come up with another way to cover those payments, but it's tough out here for a fourth-grade teacher."

"You need a side hustle," Kendra told her, in the confident manner of a successful businesswoman. "Sometimes the side hustle brings in more cash than a regular job."

Brenda screwed up her face. "I can't do anything that'll put me in trouble with the school."

"Don't worry, I'm not talking OnlyFans. I have a friend in Minneapolis who sells custom nail designs on Etsy. She makes a killing."



“I’m not really artistic—” She stopped abruptly as that lightbulb went off.

“What? You just thought of something.”

“I...write a little bit in my spare time.”

Kendra clapped her hands together, her face lighting up with delight. “Tell me it’s something sexy.”

Next to her, Jason broke off his fishing convo with Galen and draped an arm over Kendra’s shoulder. “Did I hear my name? Did someone say ‘sexy’?”

Kendra, her brown eyes shining, gave him a teasing kiss on the cheek. “This is girls’ talk, no men allowed. Besides, we could be talking about that babe sitting over there next to Brenda. You know, the one with the face you can actually see now.”

Brenda loved the way pink crept up Galen’s cheeks. He was still working on the perfect balance of facial hair, allowing his beard to grow in, but not take over his face.

Kendra winked at Brenda. “Side hustle, girl. That’s where it’s at. If you need any help, I always have time for friends.”

*Friends.* It felt so good to be forming new friendships, although of course no one could ever replace Maura.

Kendra introduced her to Gina Moretti, one of her oldest friends, who also happened to be besties with Carly Gault. Through Carly, she met her gorgeous sister Bliss, and her brother Conor, along with his adorable girlfriend Emmaline. All of a sudden she seemed to have friends coming out of her ears.

After giving Kendra’s side-hustle suggestion some thought, she ran the idea by her grandmother.

CeCe was in the midst of grooming Olaf, which, oddly enough, he loved. He shivered every time she dragged the comb through his silky coat.

“Oh, yes!” Granny dropped the comb in her excitement and clapped her hands. “Let’s do it! You should start with that sexy one. That’s my favorite.”

Brenda's mouth fell open as she picked up the comb. "What the hell, Granny? Have you been reading my books all this time? How?"

Unrepentant as always, CeCe gave her an impish smile. "You really should lock your laptop. But please don't. Your books are very good. Especially that sexy one."

The book she was referring to—*Best Kept Secrets*—was one Brenda never intended to see the light of day. It was a thriller, like all of them, but it was centered around a secret underground porn ring that operated out of a country club. She'd drawn on her own experiences with the hypocrisy of the Social Register world to write it, but she didn't want to ruffle any feathers by publishing it. Since she'd known in advance that it would never be read by anyone, she'd really let loose in her writing. Technically, it would probably be called an "erotic thriller."

"It could be a movie, that one," Granny declared.

"You know I can't ever publish it. Mom's head would explode."

"I don't give a rat's ass. You can use a fake name. What's that called? Nom de plume? As long as you get the money, that's what matters."

"I don't know, Granny. I thought about it, but people work their whole lives to get published. It's a slow process, and that's if you're really lucky. It's not some get-rich-quick scheme. I'm not sure it's really the answer to our problems."

"It's better than OnlyFans."

Good lord. Every time she thought her grandmother couldn't shock her anymore, she was wrong. "That would go over so well with the school administration."

"Oh phooey. They should pay you more."

"Now you're making sense. I'm going to see about taking on some extra responsibilities. Maybe I can coach something."

"Coach what? Dog-walking?"

Olaf's ears perked up at the word "walk."

“I’ll figure it out!” And she went to get her leash.

But the school was having budget issues, and even if there was something Brenda could coach, she’d have to do it on a volunteer basis. Which was how she found herself teaching after-school creative writing to the seventh graders on Wednesdays, for no extra pay at all.

So on a momentous day in November, she submitted her country club porn ring erotic thriller to an online publishing company her grandmother had found.

“I’ve been doing some research,” CeCe had said, “and there’s a publishing company with a very quick turnaround, online only, and they specialize in books like that. I bet they’d snap it up.”

“You really want me to do this, don’t you?”

“Absolutely. Your books are so good, and it serves Laney right, trying to call all the shots.”

“And you want to go back to the senior home.”

“I’ll be saying some prayers for *Best Kept Secrets*.”

Brenda didn’t tell anyone else about submitting her book, except Galen.

But she told him just about everything, so that was no surprise. No detail of her life seemed too mundane for him. He looked at everything with a kind of curiosity that sometimes struck her as childlike—except when they were in bed and he applied that same curiosity to how best to bring her pleasure.

“Hot damn,” he said when she broke the news about her submission. They were sharing a glass of wine in his cozy living room. Outside, the first snowfall filled the air with exuberantly twirling snowflakes. “Can’t believe I’m going to be fucking a published author. That’ll be a first.”

“All I did was send it in. They might reject it.” There was a good chance they’d reject it, in her opinion. What did she know about writing a book? Just because she’d read a million of them didn’t mean she could create one.

Except that she had. And was now working on her tenth. If the publishing company liked her writing, there were plenty more books where that came from.

“If they do, you can try somewhere else, right?”

She sipped her wine and let her head rest against the back of his couch. Other than his goldfish tank, everything in his place was either red or black or some combination—mostly plaid. It was like a lumberjack’s flannel shirt in home decor form. It usually smelled of wood smoke, although sometimes it smelled like sex. Like right now, since they’d just finished one of their breathtaking bouts of mutual sexual satisfaction. They never seemed to get tired of each other.

“I’ve been trying to think of a name to publish under, if they accept the book.”

“*When* they accept it.”

She wished she had his confidence. “Let’s stick with ‘if’. I don’t want to jinx it. What about my initials, B. S. McMurray?”

“B.S.? What’s your middle name?”

“Serena.”

“B.S. Wow.” He shook his head. “I don’t know about that name. If I saw it, I’d think the author was laughing at me for buying their B.S.”

She sighed. “I know. That’s why I never use my middle name.”

“Can’t you just make something up? Alexandra St. Clarence of our Lady of Roses or something like that?”

“I’m not a church. It’s a thriller. It needs to be simple and strong.”

“Brenda’s a good strong name. It comes from the German for ‘sword.’”

“How do you know that?” Astonished at that random bit of knowledge, she poured him more wine.

“I looked it up. Names are interesting to me. I picked that up from Redbull, because the tribes are very careful and intentional with their names. They say something about the person.”

“Except for the name Redbull.”

“Especially the name Redbull. He really does love drinking that shit.” She smiled at the thought of Galen’s friend, who was finally starting to warm up to her. He no longer lectured her about playing with his business partner’s heart every time she saw him.

“So what does the name Galen mean?”

“Take a guess.”

“Something about a gale? A storm?”

“Storm!” He snapped his fingers. “Brenda Storm. Weren’t you Storm Brenda when we were hiking? Just flip it around. You have the sword and you have the storm. That’s strong and bold.”

“Brenda Storm,” she repeated. It fit that other side of her, the “Storm Brenda” side that had plunged into a relationship with Galen. That was also the side that had rebelled as a teenager. It felt like a full-circle kind of moment. “Yeah, maybe, but it sounds made up. Like a drag name.”

“Same kind of thing. It’s the name you use to perform your art.” He grinned suddenly. “I danced in a drag show once, to raise money to save the Bittersweet Watershed. I used the name Honey Bear. Pulled in five thousand buckaroos.”

Delighted, she pounced on top of him. “Show me, I beg you! Do the dance. Show me what you wore. Please please please.”

“Fuck no.” Laughing, he fended her off. “I don’t have the hair to pull it off anymore.”

“I’ll get you a wig.”

They tussled for a while, giggling and teasing, until things shifted, and she realized her nipples were hard...and then they

were bare and Galen was licking them and they were diving into another round of soul-shaking sex.

It was only later that she remembered to ask him what the name Galen meant.

“Healer. Galen was a doctor in Ancient Greece. And a philosopher. The name means peaceful or calm healer. But I didn’t give myself that name. So I don’t know how much it fits.”

As her breathing fell back to normal and the sex flush faded from her cheeks, she thought that the name fit him quite well. “I think it’s perfect. You’re pretty philosophical. I think you’re a healer. You take people into nature, and that’s healing.”

“Okay. Sure.” He didn’t seem convinced.

Just then her phone pinged. She’d set it up to ping her every time an email came into the account from which she’d submitted her book.

Heart racing, she opened it.

“Oh my God. They want my book. They actually want it!”

“I fucking knew it!” He clenched his fists in the air with a triumphant roar.

She leaped off the couch and danced around his living room like a maniac. Galen joined her, punching his fists in the air, hooting and hollering, just as excited as if he’d just gotten his own book accepted for publication.

Galen had a pure heart, she realized. There wasn’t a speck of jealousy or competitiveness in him, at least when it came to her. He wanted the best for her no matter what. Which made him one of the very few people in her life she could totally trust.

She stopped in mid-twirl, suddenly realizing something. “Oh shit.”

“What’s wrong?” He lurched over to her. “Did you hit the wood stove? Got a burn?”

“No. I just realized that I can’t tell anyone about this. *You* can’t tell anyone. I don’t want anyone at school to know.”

“Why the hell not?” His eyes blazed with outrage. “You should be proud. Everyone should know.”

“But it’s about a porn ring. I’m an elementary school teacher. If parents find out, they might freak out.”

“Why? The kids aren’t going to be reading it. They’ll be reading, I don’t know, whatever kids read at that age. *Goodnight Moon?*”

She had to laugh at his sketchy memory of his school years. He’d told her that he’d mostly read comic books and adventure stories as a kid. “I don’t want to take a chance. The only people who can know are you and Granny.”

He put his hand over his heart. “I’m fucking honored. I will keep your secret to the grave.”

“If it’s a life or death situation, you can say something.” Amused, she pictured her students’ parents tying up Galen and tickling him until he spilled her secret.

Catching her up in his arms, he swung her around. “Don’t worry about all that. Right now we have to celebrate. This is a huge accomplishment, yeah?”

“Yeah. It is.” She couldn’t keep an enormous smile from spreading across her face. “You’re right, I should just enjoy the moment. I sold a book! I really did it! After all these years!”

“Congratulations, Brenda Storm.”

## *twenty-one*

For Galen, one of the best parts of autumn in Lake Bittersweet was that the baseball season ended and Billy came back to town. During the season, Billy visited when he could, but he spent all his spare time with his two boys and barely saw his brothers. Jenna also brought the kids to Minneapolis for as many games as they could handle. Galen had never understood why he and Jenna had divorced. Jenna was a sweetheart and an excellent coparent, lucky for Billy.

But after the season was over, Billy had more time for his brothers. In mid-November, the three of them got together for their traditional “welcome back” fishing trip. Only the hardcore locals fished the lake in November, so they had all the walleye and Northern Pike to themselves. Dressed in winter fishing gear, thick sweaters under Helly Hansen oilskins, they went out in Thomas’ motorboat because it had a small cabin that gave them some respite from the frigid wind that ruffled the lake’s surface and reddened their cheeks.

“We need a new goddamn tradition,” Billy grumbled as he retied a lure onto his fishing rod. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“The professional athlete is crying about a little wind?” Galen already had his line in the water. “I took a hunting group out the other day and we got a foot of snow.”

Billy flipped him off. “It snowed during our last game. I fell on my ass trying to catch a long fly. You know what I thought?”

“Huh?”



“I’m getting too old for this shit.”

They all laughed, then Thomas gave a long yawn. “I sometimes think that when Teddy wakes up crying in the middle of the night. When I went through it with Danny, I used to think, ‘I’m too young for this,’ so go figure.”

“That kid could really scream.” Billy finally got his lure tied and pulled his gloves back on with a shiver.

The older he got, the more he looked like their father, with that classic square-jawed cowboy look and easy charm. He was three years younger than Galen, which put him in his early thirties. Galen could never remember how old anyone was. It usually seemed irrelevant to him.

“Remember when we used to take turns walking Danny up and down the lake trail in the middle of the night? It was the only thing that calmed him down.” Thomas smiled in reminiscence. “I’ll never forget that rotation schedule I made.”

Galen snorted. “You’re the only one who paid attention to that schedule. Billy and I ignored it.”

Thomas had only been eighteen when Danny had been born, and he’d had to fight the Kendall family for custody after Brooke, Danny’s mother, died at the hospital. It had been a crash course in diapering and burping for all three brothers, because Thomas had needed plenty of help. Since Galen and Billy were barely teenagers—Billy was only twelve—they’d complained their asses off at first. But they’d gotten used to it, and Danny had grown up with two very loving and rambunctious uncles.

“Is he coming back for Thanksgiving? I haven’t seen him since the wedding,” said Billy, casting his line. The lure dropped into the water with a comforting little *plop*, one of Galen’s favorite sounds in the world.

“I hope so. He might be bringing a girl with him.”

That news dropped like a two hundred pound marlin—the kind of thing you didn’t catch in a lake. “Who? Why?” Galen demanded. “He’s too young. He’s just a kid.”

“Calm down, I think she’s a friend who’s having trouble with her family. But she might be a girlfriend,” Thomas admitted sheepishly. “I don’t want to pry. But Carly says she’ll know as soon as she sees them together. Same as she did with you and Brenda, Galen.”

Galen ignored that blatant attempt to pry. Brenda was busy with her book, which she didn’t want anyone to know about. He also had no intention of talking about their sex-saturated nights at his house.

Best not to say much about her at all.

Thomas changed the subject. “How was the season, Billy? Not just the stats, but the inside shit.”

Billy shrugged his wide shoulders. “It’s over. Kinda want to forget about it.”

Galen exchanged a glance with Thomas, and he knew they were thinking the same thing. Something was going on that Billy wasn’t ready to talk about.

“Injuries?”

“Nothing major. You’d know if I did.”

“Trade rumors?”

“Not rumors, but my agent’s worried,” he said reluctantly. “He thinks they want to trade me to the Rays. Tampa Bay,” he added when Galen looked blank. Galen paid almost no attention to sports, other than baseball when Billy was playing. Otherwise, he tended to zone out and forget what the hell everyone was doing.

“And?” Thomas prodded. “You into that or not?”

“It’s really far. It’s hard enough to see the boys during the season when I’m here in Minnesota. I don’t want to think about it.” Gloomily, he reeled his line in.

“They have warm water fishing down there.” Galen tried to find silver linings to cheer him up. “Swamps. Alligators. Manatees.” And there he reached the end of his knowledge about Florida. Ask him anything about Minnesota, and he’d be

able to answer. Other states, not so much. Maybe he was a little too rooted to this place.

“Disney World,” added Thomas. “The boys would love that. White sand beaches. Lots of sun.”

Galen shuddered. Lying on a beach with nothing to do but stare up at the sun and hope you didn’t burn sounded nightmarish to him.

Billy groaned. “Can we please change the subject? Galen. You’re up.”

“Up to what?”

“That’s the question.”

“Nothing. I’m up to nothing.” He said it so quickly that his two brothers both did a double-take. A double double-take, in other words.

“That’s fucking bullshit. You cut your hair and shaved your beard. I’d call that something.”

“Okay, yeah. I finally did the deed. Beard’s growing out. I don’t know how you raw-skins do it. My skin was crying.” He rubbed his jaw, wincing at the memory. By now his beard was an inch thick, even more lush and black than before. Brenda loved it. She said it added an extra element of tactile sensuality—or something like that. She had the big words and she wasn’t afraid to use them.

“Raw-skins?” Billy snorted. “You make it sound so nasty.”

“It was for me. Never doing that again.”

“Why not? You looked pretty good without the beard.” The first time Thomas had seen him without the beard, he’d almost walked right past him. “A little like...him.”

They all knew who he was talking about. They always got cryptic when they talked about their father.

“Is that why you didn’t like it?” Bill looked at him curiously. “I look more like him than you do.”

“I’m just not used to it,” Galen muttered. A fish was tugging on his line, so he paused the conversation and reeled it

in. The Northern Pike went right into the cooler, still twisting and arcing.

They all focused on fishing for a moment, quietly twitching their lines, watching the few remaining winter birds cruise overhead. A rising breeze turned the surface choppy and made the boat rock back and forth.

Then Billy spoke. “Since we’re on the topic of Dad...”

The atmosphere changed instantly, as if Billy had set off a grenade in the boat. From his tone of voice, he had something important to say. Galen braced himself.

“The last time I played in Anaheim, I was watching some late-night TV and I caught this weird reality show about people who’d gotten out of prison and were trying to get their lives back on track. One of the men they followed...well, he looked like Dad. He was in Hollywood trying to be an actor, auditioning for commercials and shit.”

Both Thomas and Galen looked at him blankly. Galen was having trouble putting the words together. Reality show? Actor?

“Did they say his name?” Thomas finally asked.

“They just used first names, and they called him John.”

“That’s Dad’s middle name,” said Galen numbly.

“I know. It sure looked like him. I kept looking in the mirror and comparing. I tried one of those aging filters and it matched up. Here.”

He set down his fishing rod and pulled his phone from his jacket pocket. After scrolling through his photos, he held it up for them. “I took a picture of the TV.”

Damn. It really did look like him. Galen felt sick to his stomach. The sight of his face brought back such intense emotions—fear, love, dread.

“Anyway,” said Billy, tucking his phone back in his pocket, “that’s it. Just thought I’d see if you know anything about it.”

Thomas shook his head. Billy picked up his fishing rod and cast again. Fishing resumed.

Galen looked back and forth between the two of them. “That’s it?”

“What do you mean?” Billy jigged his rod.

“Don’t you want to know more?”

“That’s why I showed it to you.”

“And then you went back to fishing. Did you look up his name when you were in LA? Did you try to find him?”

“No. Why would I? He could have tried to find us when he got out of prison. He fucking didn’t. I don’t give a shit about him anymore.” He jigged the line with so much force that he nearly hit his own head.

Galen knew how he felt. He got it. Except...that blurry TV image of his father swam back into focus. He missed him. That was the goddamn truth. He missed him.

“How come we never talk about him?” Galen asked abruptly.

Billy growled his answer. “What’s to say?”

“I don’t know. Seems like there ought to be something, even if it’s bad.”

For some reason, they both looked at Thomas. As the oldest, he seemed the most likely to have answers to that sort of question. “Because we’re...men?”

Galen scoffed at that. “That’s no excuse. We have brains and mouths. We have emotions.”

Billy squinted at him. “Did your brain chemistry change when you cut your hair? It’s like you’re a different guy.”

“No, but I have been going to therapy. That might have changed it.”

He definitely had his brothers’ full attention now. They both peppered him with questions.

“Where? Since when? Why? Why didn’t you say something?”

Overwhelmed with the flurry of reaction, he flung up a hand. “I started going because...” He pressed his lips together. This was the red line. Telling someone in his family was different from telling his therapist or Brenda. It felt more dangerous, more off-limits.

His brothers waited patiently. The three of them had been through so much together, but those ordeals and challenges had been outward rather than inward. They didn’t talk about stuff going on inside.

“I was having bad dreams. About Dad. But they weren’t really dreams. It was stuff I...I’d blocked out.”

They absorbed that, while he stole a look at their faces. Billy was frowning furiously at the surface of the lake. Thomas gazed thoughtfully across the lake toward the cabin where they’d lived that first winter.

“Maybe it’s better that way,” Billy growled. “Fucker deserves to be blocked out.”

“It’s not better.” His brothers both looked his way again. He focused on the intersection of his fishing line and the water, the ripples it made as he jerked the rod.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Billy asked impatiently. “What kind of dreams?”

Galen swallowed through the tightness in his throat. “It was something that happened before Dad went to prison. I was the only one who saw it.”

Thomas abandoned his fishing rod altogether and set it on the deck of the boat. He fixed Galen with the stern gaze that had served him so well when he was fire chief...and when he was raising two younger brothers. Galen knew that look well. “Go on, tell us what you saw.”

“Dad came to the apartment, all bloody. I was in the bathroom getting him the first-aid kit when someone showed up and took him away.”

He described the whole scene, moment by moment. More details came back as he recounted it to his brothers. The blood on the slip cover on the armchair. He'd had to take it to the dumpster and hope no one missed it. The fact that his father never even put his shoes on as he was dragged out the door.

His brothers listened in stunned silence.

Billy was so upset he dropped his fishing rod into the lake. Galen watched it drift away. He knew the currents so well that he'd be able to find it, unless it got snagged somewhere on the bottom. Whatever. Fishing rods weren't hard to come by in Lake Bittersweet.

"You never told anyone?" Thomas finally asked.

"He said not to! I was afraid." That suffocating fear came back to him and he nearly choked on his next words. "I thought he might be held captive and that they'd kill him if I told anyone. Then after a while I was afraid they had killed and it was my fault because I hadn't said anything. I didn't fucking know what to do. When Mom said he was in prison, I was relieved because at least he was alive. But I know people get killed in prison, so I still didn't say anything."

Thomas' hand settled on his shoulder, and he realized with a shock that he was crying.

"Fuck." He blotted the tears with his gloves. Good thing he was wearing his lined waterproof fishing gloves.

"Who was it that took him away?" Thomas asked. "Did you recognize him?"

"No. But he looked like a criminal. He had those dead eyes. Scary dude. Was Dad involved with criminals?"

"I mean, he must have been. I always thought it was small-time stuff, but he went to prison for armed robbery."

"Armed robbery?" That just didn't sound like the Marshall John Cooper that Galen had idolized. And how strange, now that he thought about it, that he'd never known the charge against his father until now. He really had blurred out everything to do with him.

“Jesus, Galen, I can’t believe you had to carry that all this time.” Thomas squeezed his shoulder. “They shouldn’t have put that on you.”

Galen nodded numbly. That was true. They shouldn’t have. But that man hadn’t cared about a little kid, and his father... well, what had he been thinking? Would Galen ever know?

“For a while I got scared every time the phone rang. Then they cut our service off and that was a relief. After a while I just stopped thinking about it. My brain wouldn’t go there. Anything about Dad, it would start moving really slowly. And then I forgot that night completely.”

Billy spoke up for the first time since Galen’s revelation. “I used to tell myself he was dead. It was easier that way.”

Galen’s heart ached for his younger brother. That must have been his survival strategy.

“I was little when he left,” Billy went on. “I hardly remember anything about him. By the time I was born he was bored with the whole kid thing. I just remember him yelling at Mom because she smoked all the weed, or whatever. I was glad when he left for prison.”

“I was too, at first.” Thomas unscrewed the top of his Thermos and took a swig. “I thought it would be easier without him coming around and getting Mom upset. But I was wrong. She really spiraled after he left. None of the men she got involved with were any good for her.”

Galen remembered that spiraling. A few years later, the force of it had sent the three of them to Lake Bittersweet. “I wonder if she knows he’s on a reality show.”

“She hasn’t mentioned it to me. Part of her personal addiction program is that she knows they have a toxic relationship and she needs to keep her distance. Also I’m pretty sure there are legal issues. I don’t think she’s seen him in person.”

In person.

Those two words reverberated through Galen like a gunshot. His father was out there, in the flesh, not in a dream.



In Hollywood. Living a new life. Good for him, he supposed. But this wasn't about Marshall Cooper.

Thomas had his hands full with his new family. Billy didn't really seem to care. But Galen, the one in the middle, the one who'd longed for his father's attention, the one who'd knitted that yellow and black beer cozy, the one who'd kept that secret for so many years...Galen finally knew what he needed.

“I'm going to go see Dad.”

## *twenty-two*

Brenda had always heard that the publishing industry moved slowly, but apparently things worked differently in the digital world. The publishing company wanted to jump on the current trend of shocking-suburban-secrets domestic thrillers, so they put her book on an accelerated schedule. All of a sudden, she was knee deep in copy edits and cover design questions and...gulp...social media promotion.

It was all new to her, and so different from her ordinary life. It was surreal to go from teaching her fourth-graders multiplication to creating a website. On top of that, her editor wanted her to rework her other books to fit into the same mold so they could make them a series.

“They’re completely different,” she ranted to Galen over a glass of wine one evening in November. This was her favorite part of the day, when her school prep was done, her book tasks for the day were complete, and she could snuggle with Galen on his extra-large couch, wine glass in hand. “Different main characters, different settings, and none of them have sex scenes like this one does. It’d be easier to write an entirely new book.”

“Can you do that instead?”

“Oh sure, I’ll just whip a new book out of my ass. It’s so easy. That’s why it only took me five years to write this one.”

“Well, now you know what you’re doing. Should go faster.” One of his hands was on her neck, rubbing out knots and draining the aggravation from her mood.

“Do I, though? I don’t feel like I do. I feel like I’m fumbling around in a maze, blindfolded. And the book hasn’t even come out yet! What’s going to happen when people read it?”

“I guess you’ll find out soon enough.”

That cheerful answer didn’t do much to reassure her, but his hands on her neck did a lot. So soothing, so relaxing, so blissful.

“What was it like on your first day of teaching?” he asked. Oddly, his rough-edged voice added to the ambiance of deep comfort. She always felt safe with Galen. He could protect her from bears and from worries with equal ease. Thank God he was here during this surprisingly stressful time. What would she do without Galen to snuggle up with? What had she done before him? She couldn’t quite remember.

Back to his question about teaching.

“I was scared out of my mind. But excited too. The kids made it easy. They were running around playing tag, and they all froze when I walked in and played innocent. It was so hard not to laugh.”

“What did you do?”

“I covered my eyes and said, ‘on the count of five, freeze.’ So we played freeze tag for about five minutes. On the last go-round, I said ‘on the count of five, find your seat.’ And they did! I couldn’t believe they actually did what I said. We got along great after that. We almost always started the day with a game of freeze tag just to get their energy focused. Unless there was something big happening like a test, of course. But it’s fourth grade so that doesn’t happen a lot. I love my kids. Every year I think, there’s no way I’m going to love the next class the way I do this one. And every year I’m wrong.”

His hands explored the tendons at the back of her neck, where so much of her tension lived. “You really love teaching.”

“I do. I just wish they paid me a little more. And that’s only because of Granny. I’d be fine if not for her bills.” She

sighed at the thought of Granny's terrible budget-planning. "She's a very impulsive spender. On the other hand, every single exciting adventure in my life came from her. That's what she spent her money on—traveling to Egypt on a whim, or renting a beach house for the summer so I could learn to swim in the ocean and not just in the country club pool."

She felt his chest move as he chuckled. "Looks like you get your wild streak from her."

"I guess so. If my mother could get it surgically removed, I'm sure she would."

"She'd have to get through me first." Galen's arms tightened around her. "Ain't no one messing with that wild streak, it's a beautiful thing."

If anyone knew about wild things, it was Galen. His beard was now a full inch thick and had begun occasionally collecting twigs again. She reached up and plucked a pine needle from his hair. "Have you been chopping firewood?"

"Felled a tree this morning, a standing dead at the back of the property."

For some reason, it turned her on when he talked about things like chopping down trees. Watching him was even more fascinating. He was a master with that chainsaw, cutting wedges on one side, just so, so the tree fell exactly where he wanted it to.

She nibbled at his neck, where soft skin met the beginnings of bristle. "Tell me more."

He glanced down at her, amusement glinting in his eyes. "Want me to show you?"

"Can you leave your shirt off while you do it?"

"Sure, but the pants are staying on. Safety issue."

She ran her hands down the front of his jeans and felt a soft bulge already swelling. His desire for her was so consistent. So many other things about him were, too. He didn't hide anything, didn't pretend to be something he wasn't. She'd come to know him so well in a pretty short time.

For instance, he had a short tolerance for inside spaces, except for his own home. Whenever they ate somewhere, she could tell the very moment he got antsy. He'd take a quick break, a kind of cigarette break without the cigarette, then come back refreshed. Another thing—when Galen cared about someone, he went all the way. He had the heart of a grizzly, said Redbull. Apparently that was a compliment, even though grizzlies were so rare.

Maybe *because* they were so rare.

He shifted under her touch and hummed deep in his throat. “Before you get too far, there’s something I want to tell you.”

“Something more important than a blow job? More important than my mouth around your thick cock?” The aforementioned cock jumped at her words. Galen sure loved it when she talked dirty. Maybe it was the contrast between her girl-next-door appearance, as she thought of it, although he always described her as angelic.

“No.” He growled as she unzipped his pants. “Yes. Stop. Don’t. Stop. I mean, yes, stop. Pause. Can we pause?”

She laughed and zipped his pants back up. “Pausing the pawing.”

He whooshed out a breath. “Temporary pause, yah?”

“So what is it you want to tell me?” She reached for the wine and splashed a little more in her glass.

“I need to leave for a little while.”

“*What?*” With a hard *clunk*, she set the bottle down on the steamer truck he used as a coffee table. The idea of Galen leaving was not only shocking but panic-inducing. Galen was always here, as if his roots had dug deep into Lake Bittersweet soil. “Where? How long is a little while?”

“I don’t know how long. I’m going to go find my father. Billy learned that he’s in California.”

All her selfish worries—what was she going to do without Galen—fled her mind. This was a big deal, she knew. He still

had dreams about the last time he'd seen his father. She knew the mystery had taunted and haunted him ever since.

“When did you find that out?”

“A few days ago, fishing with my brothers. They think it's a waste of time. They tried to talk me out of it. But when I get an idea about something, it doesn't let go. I have to see him.”

She asked her next question carefully. “Do you want to have a relationship with him?”

He didn't answer for a long time. Then he said, “I doubt it. He doesn't want one with me, or any of us, or that's what it seems like. There's all these blanks. Unless I see him, I don't know what to think about anything. I'm just hoping that'll change. I have questions. A lot of them. I kept his secret for a long fucking time. I think he owes me answers.”

Her heart ached for him, for the confused kid who'd tried to make sense of a trauma, all alone. The scene he'd witnessed, and the way he'd described it, was so vivid that she'd wondered if she could use it in a book.

“That seems fair. I just...” She paused, biting her lip.

“What?”

“I hope you get what you need from him. It might not go the way you want it to. I know every time I try to work things out with my mother, it takes a left turn.”

He got up to add another log to the wood stove. “I don't know what I want. I just know I need to go.”

As he crouched down to open the glass door, his jeans rode down and his sweater pulled up, giving her a glimpse of the hard muscles along his spine and the flat plateau of his sacrum. It flashed through her mind that she might love this man.

The thought was so shocking that she couldn't breathe for a moment. Was it love, or was she just worried for him? Yes, that must be it. The idea of him traveling to a city as big as Los Angeles in search of the man who had traumatized his childhood wrenched her heart.

“I’ll go with you,” she said suddenly.

He glanced at her over his shoulder, his slashing eyebrows pulling together in a frown of surprise. “You have school. And your book is about to come out.”

“Then wait until Thanksgiving break. I have four days off then. We can go together. You might need backup.”

“This isn’t *Law and Order*. I’m not arresting him.” He tossed the log on the fire and closed the stove window. As he rose to his feet, she allowed her eyes to feast on the unfurling of his big body.

“Emotional backup.”

“If I need that, I’ll call you.”

She scrambled for another option. “What about your brothers? Can either of them go with you?”

“I don’t want them to. They’re both busy. And they don’t want to see him anyway. Don’t worry so much. I already have a flight booked. I’m leaving tomorrow. I’ll be back by Thanksgiving.”

“Galen...” She swallowed back her disappointment. Some instinct was telling her that he shouldn’t do this alone. He wasn’t used to cities. She was. “Remember how I hired you to take me to LadyBird Rock because I didn’t know the territory?”

“Of course I remember. Changed my life.” He moved toward her, and she saw the hot intent in his eyes.

“This is the same thing. I’ve been to LA. I have a friend who lives there. I can be your guide.”

“Do you think I can’t handle a big city? I used to live in Minneapolis.”

“That was a long time ago. And LA is much bigger and more sprawling.”

He shook his head firmly as he reached the couch. “I need to go alone. I don’t know what I’m going to find. I don’t even know *if* I’ll find him.” Bracing his powerful arms on either

side of her, he brushed his lips against hers. The scent of pine needles and sap flooded her senses. “But there’s something else I can’t do alone.”

Liquid heat rose within her. “Technically, you can,” she murmured.

“Not the things I’m planning.”



## *twenty-three*

Brenda insisted on driving him to the regional airport, which was an hour and a half drive. She also helped him pack, making sure he brought the new clothes he'd picked up at the thrift store in Braddock. She even lent him her own rolling suitcase, much better than the grungy, stained duffel bag he'd planned to bring.

She gave him her friend's phone number, booked him a room in a hotel with a pool—which apparently in LA didn't mean expensive, necessarily. It was called the Safari Inn, located not far from some of the studios. If he couldn't find his father's address, he'd try to track him down during one of his auditions.

“Call any time,” she kept emphasizing as he hugged her goodbye at the curb. “Day, night, school hours. Just leave a message and I'll call as soon as I can.”

“You're such an angel. I'll be fine.”

He had no idea if he was going to be fine. All he knew was that he was going, and that for some reason, it had to do with her. He needed to settle some scores with his past before he could truly have a future.

He would have loved to have her with him, but he refused to let her shift her focus from her own stuff. Her book release was a big deal, and she needed to give all the pre-release promotion her full attention. Besides, he didn't intend to stay long. In and out, bing and boom.

Still, he soaked in every bit of her sweetness during those last moments at the airport. Her tartness, too, which was every bit as much of her as the angelic side.

On the plane, he fell asleep dreaming of her, watching her float across the water like the lady of the lake, until a shark surfaced and dragged her underwater with his teeth against her neck.

He woke up, gasping, to find the plane cruising in for a landing over an endless expanse of buildings. So many buildings. Covering so much territory, as far as he could see.

Jesus. Maybe he was in over his head.

Since he'd spent the first fifteen years of his life in the Twin Cities, he considered himself savvy to city ways. But he'd lived in one particular neighborhood in South Minneapolis and never strayed far. Coming into a new city the size of LA...that was a very different story.

*Okay, Brenda, maybe you were right.*

After landing, he remembered just in time that she'd downloaded the Lyft app onto his phone so he could catch a ride to his hotel. Which she'd booked for him.

*Thank you, Brenda.*

So far he'd communicated more with the Brenda in his head than he had with anyone in LA. That changed when he reached the Safari Inn and got checked in by a bored teenager with one side of her head shaved and the other bright pink. And was that a tattoo on her scalp?

She scowled at him. "What are you looking at?"

"Your tattoo. It looks like a coyote."

"It is a coyote. How'd you know?"

"I know a lot of coyotes."

"Like, the animals?"

He blinked at her, confused. "Yes?"

“A coyote brought me and *mi papi* here and stole all our money. The tat is for revenge, so I never forget.”

More confused than ever, he handed over his credit card and took the key.

“Nice beard,” she called after him. “I like that it’s non-ironic.”

He holed himself up in his room for a while after that, looking things up on his phone. What did an “ironic” beard look like? And what was going on with the coyotes around here?

He sent Brenda a text. “Arrived safely. Mission about to start.” She was in school, so he didn’t get an immediate answer. But it felt good to pull up her name on his contact list and see the little photo of her bright smiling face.

Before conking out, he did a little research on all the Marshall Coopers in the area. He found several, but most of them lived in expensive or outlying neighborhoods that seemed unlikely to be his father’s. He zeroed in on one possibility, Studio City, which was only six miles away.

The next morning, before the heat of the day, he packed the small backpack he’d brought—water and sunscreen, wallet and sunglasses—and set out on the cross-city hike to Studio City.

Over the course of six miles, he got a lot of odd looks from people in cars. Didn’t people walk around here? The city didn’t seem to be built for pedestrians, that was for sure. He thought about giving in and calling for a Lyft, but he needed the exercise. His body wasn’t used to airplanes and cramped hotel rooms.

Under a freeway overpass, he encountered a group of homeless people and handed out half the money in his wallet. Maybe it was a bad idea, but he didn’t care. Growing up, he’d been briefly homeless himself after one of their evictions. All four of them—his father had been off somewhere so it was just Mom and the three boys—had slept in the car for nearly a week before she found them another place.

“Hang in there,” he told them. “Hope this helps.”

If anyone had any thought of robbing him of the rest of the money in his wallet, maybe his non-ironic black beard scared them off.

When he finally reached the neighborhood where a Marshall Cooper lived, he was sweating. Even the morning sun was hot here. This was a desert climate, blazing hot during the day, chilly at night, or at least chillier. Brenda had warned him to pack clothes that would protect him from the sun, and once again she'd been right.

*Brenda.* He missed her already and he hadn't even been gone twenty-four hours. He had it *bad*. It wasn't a question of whether he was in love with her. As far as he was concerned, his crush *was* being in love with her. She was everything to him. He couldn't imagine a future without her. The problem was, he couldn't imagine a future with her either. It didn't feel safe to hope and dream. He didn't know how seeing his father would change that, but damn it, he was going to try.

When he arrived at the apartment complex where Marshall Cooper lived, he discovered that he needed to be buzzed in, or know the code that residents used to enter. But no one seemed especially concerned about it, and a girl talking on her phone allowed him past the gate. The complex was built around a courtyard that contained a swimming pool and some lounge chairs, along with a profusion of purple bougainvillea and ficus plants. No one was using the pool, giving him the impression that it was a feature used to advertise the place, but no one ended up actually wanting to swim with their neighbors.

He found apartment number fifteen, on the second level, and tapped on the door, but got no answer. So he trotted back down to the courtyard and settled into a lounge chair, orienting it toward the gate. As the sun set further, he watched the residents come and go. Did any of them know his father? He considered asking around, but didn't want to tip off his dad to his presence—just in case he wanted to avoid Galen the way he had since that night.

Brenda texted.

*How's it going?*

*Stakeout.* He sent her a photo of the lounge chair and the pool, and his leather hiking boots, which looked very much out of place on the plastic webbing of the lounge chair.

*No luck yet?*

*No. I don't even know if it's the right place. If he doesn't show up tonight, I'll come back first thing in the morning. How are you?*

*I'm an official published author.*

She sent him a link to her book.

*Woohoo!!!!* He ordered ten paperback copies and ten ebook copies right then and there.

*I just ordered copies for everyone I know. Wait. Redbull's family needs some on the rez. BRB.*

*Ooh, you've been paying attention in text class. Smiley face. Lately she'd been getting a kick out of explaining current texting lingo to him. But don't spend all your money on my books. I'll give you one of my author copies.*

*Too late. Already ordered. I passed a bookstore on the way here. I'll ask if they carry it. Then they'll have to order it, right?*

*You're sweet, but you should worry about your dad and everything going on there. I'm fine.*

*I miss you.*

*I miss you too and I wish I was there with you right now. There's a Covid outbreak at school so we started Thanksgiving break early.*

His heart gave a pulse of longing. And worry. *Did you test?*

*Yes, I'm fine. Olaf's excited to have me home. Granny says I've been neglecting him with everything going on*

*Give him some snuggles for me. I'll see you both soon.*

For a crazy moment, he imagined that instead of talking about her dog, they were talking about their child. Instead of calling from a courtyard in Studio City, he was calling from the highest ridge in the Sawtooth Range.

And then it went blank.

That was the problem, right there. Part of him didn't believe in the future. Any future. How could he be a full partner to Brenda if he always ran into that blank hazy nothingness?

In his mind, he focused on that foggy gray haze. An outline of something appeared, the dark shape of a man, and he knew what would happen next. The father he idolized would get snatched away, back into the haze.

But that didn't happen. Instead, the figure came closer, became clearer, more distinct.

He blinked and the haze disappeared. But his father was still there.

As if hypnotized, he rose to his feet, somehow collapsing the lounge chair in the process. The noise made Marshall Cooper look his way, smirk, then go back to what he'd been doing, which was dictating something into his phone.

He didn't recognize Galen.

Why would he, after all this time? Galen had been a scrawny eleven-year-old the last time his father had seen him. He certainly hadn't sported a thick beard and a six-foot-three frame.

Good. That gave Galen a chance to scrutinize this man and make sure it was his father. Time had taken a toll on Marshall Cooper as well. His hair was cut short and silver at the temples. In the reality show, he always auditioned for "father" roles, and sometimes grandfathers or corporate CEOs, or tough hardened military types.

Where was the camera crew? Maybe they weren't shooting right now? Galen hadn't even thought to check. He'd prefer to confront his father without cameras around. But he'd forge ahead either way.

Marshall Cooper finished his dictation and strode down the walkway toward the stairs that led to the second level. And that stride was all it took for Galen to confirm his identity. He could have been Billy heading to first base after taking ball four. He could have been Thomas striding into a town meeting.

“Hey,” he called, his voice hitting a note like a rusty hinge. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Marshall Cooper?”

His father paused and looked back toward Galen. This time, something struck him, some bit of recognition. “Do I know you?”

“It’s, uh, Galen.”

That sounded almost pathetic, as if he was eleven all over again. He spoke again. “Galen. Don’t you remember?”

That sounded almost hostile. Oh well. It was what it was. He waited and watched. A quick moment of panic shivered across his father’s face, then it went blank. He gave a darting look around the courtyard, then gestured with his head. “Galen. Come on up.”

Galen didn’t want to go inside. That last nightmarish incident had happened inside, and generally speaking, he always felt safer outside than inside. “Can we talk here?”

His father glanced around the courtyard again, then shrugged. The few people around were paying no attention to them at all. A hip young couple was holding hands at the other end of the pool. A man in a straw hat was watering the bougainvillea. And that was about it, except for Galen and Marshall Cooper.

Reunited. And it felt so weird.

At first they shook hands, but then Marshall pulled him in for an awkward hug. This close, Galen thought he looked different from before, not just older, but more refined, somehow. Less rough around the edges. Less wild.

“What are you, thirty-something now?”

“Thirty-five.”

“Married? Kids?”

Galen shook his head. “Thomas does. And Billy. Except Billy’s divorced. You have four grandkids. All boys, how about that.”

“Coopers throw boys, always did.” His father sounded almost proud of that. Why would you be proud of fathering three boys and then abandoning them? “So you’re all doing good?”

“Yeah.” More or less. And no thanks to him.

“You aren’t here for money?”

“*What?* Why would I need money from you?”

Marshall shrugged. “You must have seen my show. I finally booked a solid part.”

“I don’t watch your show, Marshall. But Billy saw you on it.” Although it felt strange to call his father by his name, it seemed even more so to call him “Dad.”

“Oh.” Oddly, he seemed deflated. “I always hoped you did. I thought you boys would be proud.”

Galen frowned at him. This conversation was so surreal it confused him. “That’s why you did the show?”

“No, but it seemed like a good bonus. I wanted you to see I’d started fresh. Away from all that...” He glanced around again, then pulled Galen down to the lounge chair. “I’m not into anything criminal anymore.”

Then why was he being so weird? So surreptitious? Galen wasn’t sure he believed him. “Okay.”

“You have to believe me.”

Marshall seemed almost desperate for his agreement. “Okay,” he said again. “I mean, I’m sure you don’t want to go back to prison.”

“Shh. No one here knows about that. I have a new life now. I’m a different person. Legit.”



Slowly, it was starting to make sense. “So you’re a person without sons now.”

Marshall winced at his bluntness. “It’s better for everyone that way. Back then, I was fucking everything up and people were coming for me. After I got out, I stayed away to protect you all.”

Before Galen could stop himself, he blurted, “Bullshit.”

“Hey. Watch it.” That frown...Galen remembered that frown. It used to make him rush to obey. Not anymore.

“Then why didn’t you tell us that was what you were doing? Instead of just ignoring us?”

“Because...” He could see his father casting around for an easy answer, one that Galen would accept. “It wasn’t safe.”

“Why wasn’t it safe?” That explanation could possibly fly. Nothing had been safe back then, after all.

“I didn’t want them using you guys for leverage.”

“Who is ‘them’? Is it the one...the man I saw that night? With the knife? The one who threatened me?” His voice sounded rough as pine bark. He met his father’s eyes—blue like Billy’s—and the memory flashed between them.

And finally he caught something real in his father’s expression.

“Yeah, it was him. His people. I...”

“Just tell me. Please.”

Marshall dropped his head in his hands with a groan. “Fuck. I thought all this was behind me. I was going to testify against them. They had a drug operation, and I was stupid enough to get involved. Low level, but I saw things. They found out and ambushed me, but I got away. I went home and that’s when you saw me. They probably would have killed me except for you. Instead they told me to take the fall for someone higher up. I went to prison instead of testifying. I didn’t want anyone else mixed up in it, so I cut off all ties. Clean break. As if I died. I thought it would be best.”

Galen's hackles rose at the way Marshall so casually referred to a "clean break." "What if I'd told someone?"

"Then you would have been in danger. That's why I told you to stay quiet."

"I kept it secret."

"I knew you would. Good boy." He gave Galen that special smile that he'd always longed to see from him. But it felt empty now. Manipulative? *Good boy?*

"But I never understood it. Any of it. All I did was block it out."

"Well, sometimes that's best. You do what you have to do to survive, right?"

He shifted on the plastic lounge chair, clearly preparing to get up and leave. "Wait. These people. Are they still watching you?"

"No." He snorted. "They can watch me on TV if they want. I did my time. It's over."

"Then why don't you want to see us?" He sounded like a damn child, asking that question. But he had to know. Had to see how his father would react.

His head dropped and he rubbed his forehead. Galen got the impression it was a gesture designed for invisible cameras. "That's a tough one. Thing is, I got some therapy after I got out. He helped me see that I deserve to be happy. He helped me forgive myself."

"Forgive yourself?" Galen felt cold all over. That sick feeling in his stomach was still there.

"Yeah. I deserve a life. I was never really happy with Trish. Your mother," he added, almost as an afterthought. "We had what you'd call a toxic relationship. Sid and Nancy vibe. I didn't want to get tangled up with her again. I'm focused on me now, and that's all I can handle. Gotta have boundaries."

It was like a looking glass world version of therapy that left out the three children he'd brought into the world, and it confused Galen even more.

With a smile, Marshall reached forward to squeeze his arm, as if they were on the same team. Then he rose to his feet. “Man, it’s good to see you. I’m glad you found me. I wondered if I’d see you again. I even practiced what I’d say. Want to hear?”

Galen got to his feet as well. His mouth felt as if it was full of marbles. He had more questions. No, he had things he wanted to say. But it was all a jumble of chaos inside him and none of it came out in words.

Marshall cleared his throat. “Here it is. Galen, my son, I hope you can forgive me for being a teenage father with no decent role models.”

Just like Thomas, Galen thought. He’d been a teenage father, too. But Thomas had fought hard to raise Danny. He never would have disappeared on him.

“I hope you can forgive me for the terrible choices I made,” Marshall continued. “The drugs, the fighting, the small-time criminality. I take responsibility.”

He paused, as if waiting for Galen’s reaction. He had none.

“How was that?” he prompted.

“That’s it?”

“Well, when I workshopped it in acting class, they said less is more.”

Less was also easier, Galen thought. And what the fuck, *acting class?*

“Do you forgive me?” Marshall prodded. “It’s for your sake more than mine. Forgiveness takes a big load off your soul. I felt so much lighter after I forgave myself and moved on.”

Lighter? *Lighter?*

And it hit him. Marshall Cooper was a selfish, narcissistic man who really only cared about himself. He’d allowed his eleven-year-old son to twist in the wind, eating his heart out with worry.

Galen felt as if he was outside of his body, watching what happened next. There went his fist. It thrust through the air. His fist went directly toward his father's nose. Which, he saw at the very last second, was new. A nose job. How much did those cost? Too late now. *Bam.*

## *twenty-four*

At the LA County Jail, Brenda handed over the paperwork she'd been given at the bail bond office. The bondsman had told her they wouldn't hold him more than a night anyway, since it was a simple assault case, and it wasn't clear yet if the victim was going to press charges. But she refused to let Galen spend even a single night in jail. She knew what inside spaces were like for him.

As soon as she'd gotten the call from Marshall Cooper, she'd driven to the airport and hopped on the next flight. It was now past midnight, and she could only imagine that Galen must be going out of his mind.

"I'd bail him out, but I don't have the liquidity," Marshall had told her, after introducing himself. "Besides, it's better for me not to be in contact with the legal system."

"How'd you get my number?"

"From Galen's phone. He lost it in the chaos after he attacked me. I managed to grab it before the cops showed up. You were the last person he texted. They confiscated his phone, but I memorized your number. Make sure you get it back when you bail him out. He needs someone in his corner. But it can't be me."

He didn't say anything more about the incident, and she didn't ask any more questions. She'd skipped to her travel app and booked a ticket.

After she handed in the paperwork, it took about an hour until the bureaucratic wheels turned enough for Galen to be

released. In the meantime, she called the lawyer that her father had located. As she jotted down notes, she caught glimpses of him on the other side of the buzz-in door. Getting his backpack, listening to a guard and nodding, taking a swig from his water bottle.

Then the door buzzed and he pushed through. After one look at his bruised face, she flew into his arms like a swallow into its nest. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

With his arms tight around her, she felt him nod, then shake his head, but wasn’t entirely sure which questions he was answering.

She tilted her head to look up at him. One of his eye sockets was turning a deep purple. His nose looked swollen, and a Band-Aid covered a scrape on his cheekbone.

“I’m okay. Stupid as fuck, but okay.” The note of humor in his voice was more reassuring than his actual words. “I lost it with my dad. Marshall. I punched first, then he fought back and it turned into a real brawl. How are you here? How’d you know? Did the jail call you?”

“Your father did. He had your phone, but he said to make sure you get it back from the guards.”

“Yeah, I got it.” He lifted the plastic bag that held his belongings.

“Why didn’t he get arrested too? He hit you!” She traced a finger over his bruise.

“I said it was all me. He has a parole issue. He’s still my father,” he added when he saw her expression.

*Heart of a grizzly*, she thought. Always protecting.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here. I want a shower. I smell like pissed-out liquor.”

She took his hand as they hurried toward the exit.

Once they were outside in the city air, he stopped and turned to her. His eyes were shadowed. “You should have sent one of my brothers. I hate to see you caught up in this.”

“I wanted to come. Besides, caught up in what? You fought with your father, and I bet you had good reason. Is he pressing charges? Is that why you’re in jail?”

“The fuck if I know.”

“Well, I think he must be, because I had to post bail to get you out.”

He plunged a hand into his thick hair and groaned. “I should have never come here.”

“Let’s not worry about it tonight. Let’s just go back to your hotel and get you a shower, and some sleep. Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“It’s a good thing there are cabs waiting outside the jail. I guess they do good business here.” She waved to the first one in line, and the driver stepped out. He was a young Black man with beads woven into his hair.

“I don’t give rides to pimps,” he said with a Caribbean accent. “And no murderers.”

“All he did was punch out his father because he abandoned him twenty years ago,” Brenda explained.

“Get in, then, you. The father-son relationship, that be a tough one. Where are you going?”

“What’s the nearest drive-through? We’re hungry,” Brenda said when they’d both put their seat belts on, and joined their hands together again.

“Are you vegetarian? Vegan? Gluten-free?”

“No, we eat everything.”

“We have a Micky D’s, a Carl’s Junior and a Del Taco right on this street.”

“Those all sound good,” said Galen. “Whichever one we pass first as long as the line isn’t too long.”

They wound up at a Carl’s Junior, where Galen bought dinner for all of them. The chatty driver told them about

moving to the U.S. so his four-year-old son could see the snow.

“Snow in LA?” Brenda asked, puzzled.

“You got to drive to see it, and that’s close enough for me.”

When they told him they lived in Minnesota and had snow for six months out of the year, he was fascinated. By the time he dropped them at the Safari Inn, they’d exchanged numbers with him and he’d offered to be their personal driver for the rest of their stay in California.

That driver must have been some kind of angel, because Galen looked much more cheerful by the time they reached their hotel. It was built around a swimming pool, with palm trees lit by lights embedded in the ground. He led her into the room and disappeared into the shower, while she inspected the bed and all its bedding to make sure it was acceptable. In some ways, she absolutely was her mother’s daughter.

Then she collapsed onto it, still fully clothed, and looked at the time. Three in the morning. Her grandmother must be home by now. She’d been visiting Bryce at the home for seniors when Brenda had gotten the call from Marshall. She’d asked Kendra to pick her granny up, throw some clothes into a bag, and hit the road. She hadn’t even called either of Galen’s brothers. She figured that he could call them if he wanted, once she got him out of jail.

Her eyes drifted shut, and when she opened them, Galen stood at the foot of the bed. He was naked except for a towel fastened around his hips, and his black hair was absolutely wild. His expression was one of utmost gravity.

“You got me out of that place. I’ll owe you forever.”

His intensity flustered her. “Oh stop. All I did was bail you out. I was lucky the bail bond office was still open. It wasn’t even that much money. Simple assault and battery, your first offense, blah blah.”

The thing she didn’t tell him, couldn’t tell him, was that she’d had to borrow the money from her parents. She’d asked



for enough to bail him out and to hire the best defense lawyer she could find.

They'd struck a hard bargain, one she didn't want to tell Galen about yet.

His frown deepened with each word she spoke. "I really fucked up."

"What happened?" She beckoned for him to join her on the bed, but instead he wheeled away and paced around the room, past the TV cabinet, to the window, then back.

"He 'took responsibility,'" he spat. She could hear the air quotes crystal clear. "Forgave himself. Moved on. Made some boundaries between him and us. The way he talked, it made me sick. Like he'd seen the light and moved beyond any kind of guilt over the shit he did. 'I forgave myself.' Well, good for him, but what about me? What about that kid whose world you fucking blew to bits? Doesn't he count for anything?"

Brenda knew it was a rhetorical question, and held her tongue. Galen linked his hands behind his head, his back to her, tension screaming from every line of his body.

"It was the therapy shit that really got me. Like all he did was go to therapy and learn a bunch of words he could use to let himself off the hook. And maybe fool some people too."

"He didn't fool you."

"Fuck no, but only because I know that's not what therapy is. It's about being real with yourself, not letting yourself off easy." He turned around and faced her, looking thunderous. "I don't regret punching him in the face. I just wish I hadn't broken his nose. He paid a lot of money for it. On second thought, maybe I don't mind after all."

She laughed despite herself, and slowly a wide grin broke through his stormy mood. "Don't laugh, I'm up a creek if he decides to press charges. How many wilderness trips does it take to pay for one nose job?"

"I bet he'll want to move on." Brenda wasn't quite as confident as she sounded, but close.

“How do you know that?”

She didn't want to tell him yet that she'd talked to a lawyer and paid him a retainer. He might ask where the money came from, and she wasn't ready to share that information.

“Have you forgotten that I write crime thrillers? He's a former criminal who's got a new gig in the legit world. Above all else, he won't want to mess that up. If he goes through with a trial, all kinds of information will come out. Maybe his reality show knows about all that, but he still won't want to stir it up. My prediction is that he'll drop it, or maybe try to get some money from you.”

“I'm not giving him a fucking cent. I'll punch him again if he asks.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him.

“He deserved it.”

“Why do I feel like I'm with my fourth graders right now? Of course he deserved it. But there's a reason we don't hit other people. Because we might go to jail and jail is a very scary place.” She smiled brightly at him, hoping her teacher persona would cheer him up.

“Are you trying to say that civilized people use our words to settle conflicts?”

“Exactly.”

“You know I'm not civilized.” A flash of heat in his whisky eyes. “I'm a barbarian.”

“Can we go with civilized in the streets, barbarian in the sheets? And sometimes the two get mixed up?”

He threw his head back in a laugh, and finally, the last vestiges of the traumatic night seemed to roll off his shoulders. “I can live with that. Speaking of sheets...”

He advanced toward the bed. “Woman. Good. Mine.”

She made a show of scuttling back toward the headboard like a heroine in a monster movie. “Oh my! What kind of beast are you?”

“A horny beast.” He ripped at the knot holding his towel up, then winced. “Ow. Also a clumsy beast. Hang on.”

She laughed as he worked the knot. Galen could always make her laugh because he was always, purely, authentically himself. In her eyes, that made him like gold. It was worth sifting through gravel, like a gold-panner, to find someone as true-hearted as Galen.

Finally the towel dropped. He lifted his arms in pure barbarian triumph. “Yahhh,” he growled. “Towel weak. Me strong.”

She gave a playful shriek and pointed at the penis rising between his legs. “I’m just an innocent virgin, what’s that strange piece of flesh?”

“Magic wand. When it sees you, it grows.”

“I don’t have a magic wand. How do you get a magic wand?”

He came alongside the bed, close to her, and dropped the persona. “You have one. It’s right here, baby. All yours. At your service.”

Within minutes, she was stark naked and he was deep inside her. His primal groan seemed to come from the depths of his being, from a time before words. She had a vision of the two of them walking from very long distances, across wastelands and prairies, before finally meeting where their roads crossed. The image brought piercing tears to her eyes. Was this destiny at work? Lucky chance? Or some deep movement of the universe flinging them together? And what next? Where did their paths go from here? After they left this odd little hotel room with the painting of a palm tree and the acoustic ceiling tiles and...

Her thoughts blurred as he shifted their position so they were both kneeling on the bed, his cock still deep inside her, finding a spot that made her cry out. She lost herself in that rhythm, in the interlocking sway of their bodies, until things shifted again. Like a kaleidoscope of sex, she thought, dazed, as she found herself on her elbows and knees. He pulled her

ass up, putting an arch in her back and finding yet another trigger spot she hadn't known about.

*Bang* against his powerful thighs. *Moan* into the crook of her elbow. Pleasure pierced through her, with a bittersweet edge to it. *Let it go. Let it all go.* Because this might be it, her last chance to...bite those words. Focus on that strong spear impaling her from behind. She was going, she was gone...off on a rocket ride to somewhere new and incredible and filled with stars.

After she came once, he clamped a hot hand onto her clit and worked her into another frenzied orgasm. She bucked hard against him as she screamed into her own hand, clenched on the bedspread.

When he exploded into her, he howled like a wolf. With her eyes closed, pleasure still swirling around her, she imagined the forests unfurling in all directions, the pinprick stars scattering diamonds across the night sky, the pure air pulling deep into her lungs.

Did it come from him, that image? Had they joined so closely that her mind saw his thoughts, and vice versa? She sent him an image, the two of them curled on his couch next to his cozy wood stove. Fire glow and afterglow.

He stirred against her, breathing hard. "I wish we were already home."

Holy shit. Had that...worked? Or did he just happen to be feeling the same thing she was? Maybe it was coincidence. As the transcendent pleasure of her climax faded, she decided to go with coincidence. Anything else was too weird.

"When can you go home?"

"I don't know. I guess it depends on what my father does." He laid a warm hand on her belly. "But I'm not worried about it and you shouldn't be either. If you have to go back, I'll understand."

She didn't answer right away. Her deal with her parents didn't specify how long she had to deal with this situation. "Have you thought about getting a lawyer?"

“No. Don’t want one. Anyway, don’t you think he’s going to drop the charges?”

“It’s better to have representation. And if you ask me how I know this, it’s because of all the crime writing I’ve done.” She’d have to talk him into hiring the lawyer she’d already talked to.

“Well, now you have some real life experience too.” He lay next to her, gazing up at the ceiling. “Did you call my brothers?”

“No. The only person in Lake Bittersweet who knows is Granny. Well, Kendra, because I asked her to pick Granny up. But I didn’t say why.” She chose her words carefully, hoping Galen wouldn’t notice that people outside Lake Bittersweet might know. For instance, her parents.

A moment later, she heard the soft snuffle of his snores drift through the conditioned air of the hotel room.

*I love you, Galen.*

Even though she didn’t say it out loud, the thought seemed to thunder through the room. She loved him with all the buried tenderness of her heart. She was pretty sure he loved her too, even though he’d never said those actual words. How was she going to manage to hold up her end of the deal without breaking both their hearts?

She was going to put it off as long as possible, that was how.

## *twenty-five*

Galen woke up to the sound of pounding on the door of the hotel room. He and Brenda had somehow entangled themselves into a pretzel, with his head buried in her armpit and the lower half of her body splayed across his legs.

As hard as he tried, he couldn't extract himself without waking her up. So he gave up, and shook her awake. "Someone's at the door," he whispered. "Better get dressed."

She sat bolt upright, her head knocking him on the chin. He unwound himself from their pretzel and pulled on his long underwear. It seemed absurd, but the air conditioning was so cold he actually needed it.

"Who's there?" he called as he rummaged for a clean shirt.

Another knock.

"Fine," he grumbled, and flung open the door, still rubbing his chin from that head-butt from Brenda.

His brothers stood in the hallway, both glowering at him. Thomas's arms were folded across his chest, while Billy was caught in mid-knock. "Jesus," Billy exclaimed. "You look like shit."

"I'd say you should see the other guy, but I don't want to say who it was."

"We know you got into it with Dad. Why do you think we're here?"

Galen looked from Billy to Thomas. Neither showed much expression. Were they angry that he'd punched out their

father? “I’m sorry, I fucked up. I didn’t plan it that—”

He was interrupted by Thomas, who shouldered his way forward and grabbed him in a hug. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay,” he mumbled against his big brother’s chest. “How...why...”

Thomas drew back and scanned him. “He gave you a black eye? Nearly broke your nose? And your chin?”

“No, that was...” Remembering that Brenda was still in bed, he glanced behind him in alarm. The bed was empty; she must have fled to the bathroom. Whew. “That was different. How’d you know I was here?”

“CeCe McMurray called me,” said Thomas. “She had all the info, down to the hotel room.”

Did Brenda know that her grandmother had apparently complete access to her laptop? That woman ought to work for the FBI.

He heard the sound of the toilet flushing, and then Brenda appeared. She wore soft pink cotton pajama pants and a hoodie from the Lake Bittersweet Farmer’s Market that depicted a loon munching on a carrot. Even though she’d combed her hair, she still had that unmistakable look of sexual satisfaction.

“Hi, Cooper brothers.” She smiled at them, seemingly unfazed by their arrival. “Let me guess. Granny sent you.”

Billy sent Galen a surreptitious wink of approval. Galen scowled back at him. He didn’t need his brothers’ opinion about him and Brenda, positive or otherwise.

“She did. She thought you might need some backup.”

“Well, she did the right thing. I think I know exactly how you can help. Galen, I didn’t tell you this yesterday, but I already consulted with one of the best defense lawyers in LA.”

He blinked. It was a good thing someone was thinking ahead, but how was he going to afford a top lawyer?

“I got some tips that I think you can use.” In her bright, intelligent, reassuring way, that manner that somehow made

you feel that everything was going to be okay, she outlined her suggestions. “The fact that the three of you are united makes it even better.”

“Solid.” Thomas nodded. “Whenever you’re ready, let’s go, Galen.”

“I haven’t even had breakfast.”

Billy reached down and picked up a cardboard drink holder loaded with six giant to-go cups of coffee. “Two cups each.” Then he held up a Thermos. “Tea for Brenda. With oat milk, just like Granny said.”

Thomas produced a grocery bag as well. “Bagels, lox and cream cheese. Come on, we can eat on the way. Brenda, are you coming?”

Brenda folded her lips together, then shook her head. “You boys go on. I have some work to do.”

“Right, I heard that your book came out. Congratulations,” Billy said.

Brenda turned white. But before Galen could reassure her and insist that he hadn’t told a single soul, and wouldn’t on pain of death, his brothers were hustling him out of the room.

“Wait! Pants!”

Brenda tossed a pair of pants out the door. Billy, showing off his outfielder skills, grabbed them with a grin. “Nice throw. This won’t take long. How about we all go check out the beach after this.”

She nodded, then caught Galen’s eye. He couldn’t tell exactly what she was trying to communicate, but he got the gist. *You got this. I’ll see you soon. I love you.*

Okay, maybe he was imagining that last part, or projecting his own feelings onto her, but he didn’t think so. It was love they’d created together, or stumbled into together, however you wanted to put it. Deep, forever love.

It was brotherly love that he felt surround him as the three of them climbed into the red convertible they’d rented.



“They gave us a discount,” explained Thomas. “They said since it was our first time in LA, we had to go for the convertible. It’s like a rite of passage.”

“I’ve been to LA before,” Billy corrected. “We’re not all small town hicks.”

“I noticed you didn’t speak up while he upgraded us to the convertible.”

“Hell no. Nothing like getting stuck in traffic with the top down, breathing in fumes. Talk about a rite of passage.”

Which was exactly where they found themselves in short order. Galen realized they were driving on the freeway he’d walked under yesterday—was it only yesterday? “It might be faster to walk. It only took me an hour and a half yesterday.”

From the driver’s seat, Thomas shot him a look, then both he and Billy burst out laughing. “Never change, Galen. Never change.”

“Well, too late for that. I have changed. I’m...I’m in love.” That wasn’t the only change, but it would do for now.

“Yeah, we noticed. Happy for you.” Thomas delivered one of his rare, brilliant grins. He was generally on the stern, thoughtful side, which made his smiles all the more meaningful.

“How does she feel?” Billy asked. “Any dates we should save?”

“I haven’t told her how I feel yet. I wanted to come find Dad first. Banish some ghosts.”

Neither of his brothers responded to that, which made him a little nervous. “Is that a mistake?”

Thomas shrugged. “Who’s to say what’s a mistake? If you two want it to work out, it will work out. Eventually. One way or another. At least that’s my experience. But it took me and Carly seventeen years to figure out our shit.”

“I have no advice,” said Billy. “Except maybe do the opposite of anything I’ve ever done.”

But Galen could tell they both thought he'd possibly made a mistake by not telling Brenda how he felt. "I bet she knows how I feel." She must, right? She knew about his crush, knew that he was always eager to be with her, that he supported her one hundred percent in whatever she did. He loved her through and through, all the way to her tiniest mitochondria—something he'd learned about from her. She had to know how much he loved her. There was no other woman for him and never would be.

After they confronted his father, the next thing he did would be to tell Brenda how he felt.

He directed Thomas to the Studio City apartment complex. A girl who couldn't keep her eyes off Billy let them past the gate. He thanked her with a grin and a wink. She flashed him numbers on her fingers, probably her apartment number.

"Does that happen everywhere you go?" Galen grumbled.

"Everywhere except Lake Bittersweet. There I'm just a little brother." He slung an arm over Galen's shoulder. "Just kidding, it happens there too. Perks of being a ballplayer. Or a curse, depending on how you look at it."

All things considered, Galen thought it was probably a curse for Billy, broken marriage and all. Since he and Jenna had split up, Billy had never again attempted a serious relationship.

The three of them stood in formation outside Marshall Cooper's apartment, then Thomas gave Billy a nod. He pounded on the door, over and over, until they heard loud grumbling from inside. "Here we go," Billy murmured.

The door swung open. His father, wearing a splint bandage on his nose, glared at them. Behind him, Galen got a vague impression of a sparsely furnished studio apartment with a gray carpet and neutral walls. A place designed for a transient.

As soon as he recognized them, Marshall dropped the frown and stared at the three brothers, mouth agape.

"Yup, it's all of us. Your three sons. You never thought you'd see us again, did you?" Thomas, half a head taller than

Marshall, frowned down at him.

“Not really, no,” Marshall managed. “Damn. You all look...good.”

“You know, when you left, we had to manage shit on our own. Want to know how we did that?”

Marshall didn't answer, so Thomas went on.

“We survived by sticking together. Which means that if you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us.”

Marshall scanned them one by one. The family resemblance among them all was clear. Galen and Thomas had more of their mother's dark coloring, while Billy was very close to the spitting image of their father, although it was hard to tell with that bandage on his nose.

“You have to understand, I wasn't trying to hurt you boys.” His voice sounded more nasally than it had yesterday, no doubt thanks to his broken nose. Now that he was facing his father with his brothers at his side, Galen couldn't believe he'd lost his cool to the extent of punching him. “I had to save myself. It's called self-care.”

On the other hand, if he kept talking bullshit, Galen couldn't guarantee he wouldn't do it again.

“That's not self-care. That's selfish behavior. But we're not here about that.” Thomas gestured at Galen. “Drop all charges against Galen and we'll get out of your hair and you can do all the self-care you want.”

“He hit me. His own father.” The whiny note in Marshall's voice made Galen think of Brenda's mention of her fourth-graders. Maybe in some ways his father had never developed past the fourth grade level.

But he had.

“I shouldn't have done that. I'm sorry.”

His father looked at him suspiciously. “Are you just saying that so I don't sue you for damages?”

Billy shouldered close to Marshall so they stood nose to broken nose. “Galen doesn’t say things he doesn’t mean. You probably don’t understand that because you’re a liar and a con man and you think everyone lies. Galen doesn’t. If he says he’s sorry, he’s sorry.”

Marshall’s eyes went wide as he took a step back. Then a speculative expression crossed his face. “Pro baseball player, yeah? I read about you.”

Billy froze.

But before Marshall could go any further, Thomas pulled Billy back to their little posse. “If you’re thinking that Billy or any of us is going to pay you to drop the charges, forget it. None of us are paying you shit to do the decent thing. You either do it or you don’t.”

“You think I’d try to extort my own children?”

Galen nearly laughed at the fake outrage. Marshall Cooper really wasn’t a very good actor.

“But I could talk to the producers of that show I’m on and see if we could do a storyline about me and my baseball player son. It’d give me more screen time. Some more exposure for you, Billy-boy.”

The sound of that old nickname made Billy flinch. “That’s a pass.”

“Come on, man. It’d help us both. I’ll even drop the charges.”

Galen could see that Billy was fighting with himself over whether it was worth it so he could help Galen. The fuck if he was going to allow that.

He stepped forward. “No. We aren’t doing any deals. None of us. If you want to have a whole trial about whether I was justified in punching you when you abandoned us, let’s do it. I’ve been told that after I hire a lawyer, the first thing they’ll do is bring on an investigator.”

Brenda was the one who’d told the brothers to make sure to emphasize that point. What ex-con wanted an investigator

digging up more dirt?

“I bet there’s plenty of stuff that’ll come out. Maybe we’ll finally find out what you were doing all those years when you couldn’t be bothered to contact us.”

“I told you, it wasn’t safe. I had a duty to protect you.” Marshall planted his hands on his hips in a gesture Galen remembered from childhood. Back then, it had sent fear through his bones. Now, he saw it for the empty threat it was. Dad had never been violent with his kids. It was more about emotional manipulation with him. Only now could Galen see that for what it was.

“Safe for who? You and your new life?”

The bravado drained out of him and he looked tired. “Fuck, I did my best. You don’t know what I was up against. Always trying to take care of you boys. Your mom was no help. She couldn’t keep a job. After I got out, I couldn’t go back to that stress.”

“You didn’t want to go back to that stress,” Thomas corrected.

He gave a grudging nod and gingerly scratched a spot near his nose. It made Galen remember a time when he’d gotten poison ivy, and his father had spent an hour dotting him with baking soda to “draw out the itch.”

Despite everything, his heart softened.

Despite everything, this man was his father.

Maybe he was just a weak and selfish man not up to the challenges of a family.

“Listen, Dad. Here’s the only deal we’re going to make. You take the L on that punch, and decline to file charges. We’ll go away and your life will go back to normal. If your normal is a reality show and a gray apartment and a pool that no one swims in, then that’s what it is. You’re welcome to it. So how do you want this to go?”

Galen held his father’s gaze for a long moment, as various expressions of resentment, anger and sadness flickered across

his face. Finally he dropped his head and Galen knew he had won.

“Okay. No charges.”

Galen felt hands squeeze his shoulders, his brothers silently congratulating him.

“But wait.” Marshall spoke in an entirely different tone. “We’re all grown men now. It’s all in the past. Why don’t we start over? You all come in and we can catch up. I’ll crack open some beers. You can ask any question you want.”

Galen glanced at each brother in turn. He himself was itching to get out of here, and the thought of stepping inside that prison of an apartment gave him the willies. But if they wanted answers, what better time to get them?

“I don’t have any questions,” Thomas said softly. “Not right now. Maybe later.”

Billy’s hands were clenched deep in his pockets. “Yeah, we should probably quit while things are peaceful.”

Marshall’s mouth twisted. Maybe he’d been able to forget he had kids for a lot of years, but now that they were all standing in front of him, it must hit different.

“Thanks for the offer, Dad.” Galen saw his use of the word “dad” registered with Marshall. “Maybe some other time. I... uh...I do forgive you. I’m not angry. I don’t know if I ever was. I was hurt. I looked up to you. I loved you, and you didn’t care about that.”

He felt Thomas’ hand settle on his shoulder. His brothers right behind him, supporting him.

“At least you gave us each other. That’s everything, right there.” Billy squeezed his other shoulder in silent agreement. Galen paused, working out his thoughts. Part of him actually longed to feel his father’s embrace again, something he hadn’t experienced in so many years. But there was no going back to those innocent days. All he wanted now was to shake hands with the past and throw himself fully into his future.

“Maybe we can try to start fresh after we’ve all healed up.” He gestured to his dad’s broken nose, and stuck out his hand. “But we should be real about it. There’s hurt feelings, there’s betrayal. But that doesn’t mean there isn’t love.”

Slowly, Marshall accepted his offered hand, and they shook. The physical connection with his father felt good, much better than the sensation of punching him in the nose. Although at the time, that had been pretty satisfactory.

“You’re a good man, Galen,” Marshall said. “Maybe I did you a favor letting you grow up without me.”

“Stop talking,” Galen told him sternly. “You always make it worse when you talk.”

Marshall shut up after that. Neither Thomas nor Billy showed any interest in shaking their father’s hand, but they nodded politely enough. As they all trooped down the stairs, Galen wondered if any of them would ever see Marshall again. For himself, he’d always leave the door open. Once he loved someone, he didn’t stop.

That had been his problem all along, he realized in a blinding flash of understanding. He’d loved his father at such a deep level that his disappearance and ultimate betrayal had left him so gutted, he’d lost all faith in humanity, including himself. That was why he’d escaped into the wilderness. That was why he’d crushed on Brenda for so long before attempting a relationship.

Not because people sucked, although sometimes they did. But because when he loved, he loved deeply and irrevocably.

He needed to get to Brenda. Right away. He needed to tell her everything that was in his heart, bare it all to her, throw himself at her mercy.

When they got stuck in traffic on the way back to the Safari Inn, he thought he’d lose his mind. He considered jumping out of the car and rappelling off the freeway to the surface streets below. It might not be faster, but at least he’d be propelling himself forward.

As they drove, his brothers discussed things like Billy's future in baseball and Thomas and Carly's debates about having another baby. Thanksgiving plans came up. Big feast at Thomas' house. Bliss and Granger and their babies were coming. So were Conor and Emmaline, but only for dessert, since they had a Curtis family dinner earlier in the afternoon.

Finally the excruciating drive was over and Galen was racing up the stairs to the second level of the Safari Inn and jamming his key in the door. His brothers lagged behind to give him time. He wouldn't need much. "I love you" didn't take but a microsecond to say. And yet it had taken him so long.

His mouth was already open on the words when he burst through the door. The room was empty. No Brenda. He rushed through the entire suite. She was gone, her suitcases were gone, her cosmetics bag was gone from the bathroom. A stray red hair on the sink was the only proof she'd ever been there.

And a note on the nightstand next to the bed.

*"I got an emergency call from Granny, had to get back home. She says it's not medical but won't say any more. I'll see you in Lake Bittersweet. When you get back, we need to talk."*

She'd signed it with a heart and her name. But that last line...ouch. *We need to talk*. He didn't need to read *Cosmo* to know what that implied. Something was up, something more than her granny's call. Something that already felt like a punch in the gut.



## *twenty-six*

“**W**hat the bejeezus did you do?” Granny demanded the second Brenda walked through the front door. She was holding a trembling Olaf in her arms.

Brenda knew what that meant. Her mother was here. No one terrified Olaf quite as much as Laney Abercrombie did.

“*Sorry, little guy,*” she whispered to her dog as Granny thrust him into her arms. “I did what I had to. I wasn’t going to let Galen rot in jail. Why did you call me back from LA?”

Her grandmother ignored that question. “Don’t you know anything about the prison system? It was only going to be a night at most. Now your mother is here saying you promised all kinds of impossible things to her in exchange for a loan.”

“It’s not a loan. They’re paying. Is that why you called, because Mom’s here?”

Again, Granny didn’t answer that question. “Well, I’m sure it’s even worse then. They don’t give out free money without asking for the moon in exchange.”

That was very much true. It had been quite a negotiation, with both her parents pulling out all the stops. But she’d held her own.

“I had to, Granny. I just couldn’t stand by and let Galen be trapped inside against his will. You don’t know what that’s like for him. I do.”

Granny threw up her hands and turned on her heel. “Okay, let’s hear it then. What did you give up so Galen could get out

of jail? Laney said you agreed to stop seeing him.”

“No, that’s not right. I agreed to *pause* our relationship *temporarily* while my mother recovers from the news that he might be charged with assault.”

“But that’s when he needs you the most!”

Her stomach twisting from that truth bomb, Brenda tried to change the subject to the good news. “You’ll love this part, Granny. I made Mom commit to resuming payments to the Home for Seniors. That was good negotiating, wasn’t it?”

Granny whirled on her. “Do you think I want my happiness to come at the expense of yours? No. Never. The whole point of my living there was to give you some space to find a man. You found one, and now you’re letting him go so that I can go back there? It makes no sense!”

Brenda bit her lip. When her grandmother put it that way, it sure didn’t. She’d panicked when she’d gotten that phone call from Marshall Cooper. The thought of Galen in jail so far away had gutted her. Had she fallen back on old habits, turning to her parents?

“I was scared,” she admitted. “It wasn’t just the bail, they’re giving me money for a top defense lawyer too. That kind of legal help is outrageously expensive. And it helped. I talked to a fantastic attorney on the phone and she told us what to say to Galen’s father.”

She hadn’t heard yet how it had gone with Marshall Cooper. Galen hadn’t called or texted, and she couldn’t blame him a bit. He must be pretty furious with her.

“Well, I wish you’d left me out of it,” Granny snapped. “I don’t want your mother’s blood money. It’s a moot point now.”

She marched toward the living room, with Brenda at her heels. Brenda noticed a new streak of hot pink in her hair, which meant she must have gone back to the home on the day the stylist visited.

“Moot point? What are you talking about?”

As Brenda followed her grandmother into the living room, she spotted Laney by the mantelpiece, examining her lineup of framed photos, crystals, beach rocks, and other keepsakes.

“I’m getting married,” Granny announced. “Bryce and I are moving in together. We’ll be living in a bigger suite at the home, one meant for couples, and he is going to pay for it because we don’t need anyone else’s money.”

“You’re marrying Bryce? That’s wonderful!”

“It’s ridiculous,” said Laney. “But she has her heart set on it, so what can we do.”

“It’s not ridiculous.” Brenda faced off with her mother, who was wearing an elegant rose and silver boucle skirt and matching blazer, along with a smug expression. “They’re in love and they make each other happy.”

Her mother was obviously feeling too good about things in general to get too hung up on CeCe’s life. “I suppose it could be worse,” she said grudgingly. “He seems like a lovely man.”

“He is. And we’re going to throw them a wonderful wedding. Or we’ll simply show up and throw rice, whatever Granny wants.”

“I want the big wedding,” Granny said promptly. “Pull out all the stops. I want to invite the whole town. We’ll have it at the Blue Drake.”

Laney sighed and put a hand to her forehead. “And you’re telling me it’s not ridiculous?”

All Brenda wanted to do was close herself in her bedroom with a carton of ice cream and a spoon, and not come out until the pain in her heart had eased. The last thing she wanted right now was to be trapped in the middle of a McMurray family smackdown. “Why are you here, Mom? If you’re planning to hover over me and make sure I keep up my end of the bargain —”

“Of course not.”

“And you’re not here to pick up Granny and take her to Connecticut. She’s staying in Lake Bittersweet now. We both

are.”

“I don’t know if that’s what you’re going to want.”

Her mother’s expression shifted, to something Brenda didn’t see very often—or at least it didn’t seem that way. Actual, genuine concern.

“What do you mean?” When her mother didn’t answer right away, Brenda swung her gaze toward her grandmother. Granny looked up, down, away, any direction except toward Brenda. “What’s going on, Granny? Is this why you called me back?”

CeCe mumbled something, still refusing to meet Brenda’s gaze.

She tried her mother again. “Want to tell me what’s up?”

“Your grandmother has never been very good at keeping secrets, and apparently you had one.”

Brenda felt the color drain from her face. Everything wavered around her—the familiar fluffy carpet, her sapphire-blue couch, the framed photograph of a lotus blossom above her mantel.

*Best Kept Secrets.*

She remembered now that Billy had mentioned her book release. If he knew about it, he probably wasn’t the only one.

“You told?” Somehow, her numb lips managed to form the words.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” CeCe said woefully. “I let my pride and excitement go to my head. I told them not to spread it around, but...”

“Them?”

“Oh, just a few friends at the home. Bryce, of course, but he didn’t say anything. I’m not sure who it was, but the responsibility is mine. I should have been more careful.”

Her grandmother looked so unhappy that Brenda couldn’t stand it. She put her arms around her and squeezed. “Don’t beat yourself up, Granny. It’ll be fine. I’m not mad.”

“You might lose your job!” Granny wailed. “And it’s all my fault.”

“What?”

“Your school knows.” Her mother spoke more gently than Brenda would have expected. “As soon as CeCe called me, I came to do what I could. I’ve already reached out to a PR crisis manager. I have a lawyer on standby. I’ve come up with a plan B and C and D.”

Brenda straightened up and put a hand to her forehead. This was her mother in full take-charge mode. “Why so quickly? We’re on Thanksgiving break.”

“I’ve been told the school board is having a meeting about it.”

“About...”

“About whether they can continue to employ a fourth grade teacher who publishes erotic thrillers. Some parents have been posting about it on Facebook. It’s blowing up everywhere.”

Oh God. Her worst nightmare was actually coming to pass. Using a pen name hadn’t been enough separation. She should have chosen a different one, ditched the Brenda, been more careful.

Not told her grandmother.

A sick ball formed in her stomach. She might well lose her job. No school board welcomed controversy, and parents could get riled up about all kinds of things. She’d already had to defend a few of her choices to the principal after a parent complained. So far, the school had always had her back, but this might be the opening for an unhappy parent to exploit.

Was she on the verge of losing both the man she loved and the job she loved?

“If they try to fire her, they’ll have to go through me first,” Granny declared.

“No need to be so dramatic, CeCe. Brenda doesn’t need that job and never did.” Her mother brushed her hands

together as if that was that. “That’s why I have a plan A that will take care of everything.”

“If you’re thinking I can make book-writing pay my bills, that’s a ways off.”

“God no, that’s not at all what I’m thinking. Come home to Connecticut. That’s the best plan. If you insist on teaching, you can find a job there. You can make a fresh start.”

Because clearly, her mother thought she’d made a mess of this one. And she might have a point. Just when she was really beginning to feel part of Lake Bittersweet, she’d screwed everything up. Maybe she *should* leave town.

She could handle getting fired. But she’d made that horrible agreement with her mother to put her relationship with Galen on pause. Would he understand? Would he hate her for it? What if he didn’t want her back? Seeing Galen around town, knowing that she’d blown it, that she’d never even told him what he meant to her, and that they might never again sit by the fire sipping wine, or run outside naked under the stars, or spend a snowy morning in bed, that she might never again get to watch Galen wield a chainsaw or pick twigs from his hair...it broke her heart. She’d be better off living somewhere without constant reminders of the most pure soul she’d ever fallen in love with.

Galen would probably prefer it if she left. It wouldn’t be easy on him if she stayed. If his crush had been painful, a breakup would be even worse. For his sake alone, she should leave with her mother.

*You’re being dramatic. It’s just a pause. He’ll understand. I did it for him, to bail him out.*

She wheeled around to face the front windows, hiding the tears springing to her eyes.

Goddamn. She should have figured out another way, anything but allowing her mother to control her love life.

She couldn’t think about Galen right now, it was too painful. What about Granny? If she was married and living at the home, she wouldn’t be needing Brenda as much anymore.

If she had no job here, and no Galen, there wasn't much keeping her in Lake Bittersweet.

Except...she thought about Rick at the SweetBitter Café, who pulled extra shots for her on Mondays. Then there was Kendra Carter, with whom she'd just started to form a real friendship. Would that friendship survive her and Galen's potential breakup? It probably would; Kendra was cool like that. But what about Carly and the others, Gina and Bliss and Emmaline? She was going to miss them if she left. Friends were worth sticking around for. No one knew that more than her.

And her students... Even if she wasn't teaching anymore, she knew so many of the kids in town. She loved running into them at the skate park or by the lake while she was walking Olaf.

*Olaf.*

It was silly, but her little dog loved Lake Bittersweet. He had a big yard here, and there were so many options for walks. He knew the neighbors and got along with all their dogs. And there was fish, so much fish around here. Olaf loved his occasional trout treat.

*You're projecting again. Or Olaf is. You're the one who loves Lake Bittersweet.*

"I'm not leaving," she said. Slow but firm. "I'm going to stay in Lake Bittersweet."

"But honey—" her mother protested.

"I'll take my chances with the school board. I'm going to fight for my job. I don't think I've broken any rules. I have faith that they'll be fair."

Granny gave a wide smile and clapped her hands together. "Oh good! I was so afraid you would leave, my darling." They hugged for a happy moment. "Lake Bittersweet is your home. Once this place gets under your skin, you don't want to leave. Why do you think I came back after so many years away?"

So many years away...In the back of Brenda's mind, that phrase sparked a reminder. Something she'd wanted to ask

Granny about, but never had. Brenda drew away from their embrace.

“Granny, before I forget again, when I was at LadyBird Rock, I saw Rosalind’s initials painted onto the rock, along with someone else’s. I think it was E.K. Do you know that story?”

Before Granny could answer, Laney stepped between them. “Brenda, you aren’t thinking this through. This is a small town. They aren’t going to accept your spicy secret career. Once word gets out, things could get very unpleasant for you. I’m not sure my PR firm can save you from that. You’ll be much better off simply moving elsewhere. I’m offering you an escape ramp. And quite honestly, I’m offended that you aren’t jumping at it.”

“Mom, why do you assume that just because Lake Bittersweet is a small town, the people here can’t be openminded and tolerant? It’s like anywhere else. Some are, some aren’t. Except it’s a lot harder to look someone in the face and tell them you hate them.”

“Is it? Are you sure about that?” She wheeled on CeCe. “Tell her about those initials. Tell her what that was all about and then we’ll see if Brenda still thinks this is where she wants to live.”

Granny’s eyes popped wide open. “You know about that?”

“Of course I do. You told me the story a long time ago and I never forgot it. Now you’re trying to act like it didn’t happen, that Lake Bittersweet is such a welcoming and accepting kind of place. You think they won’t shun my daughter when they find out who she really is?”

*Who she really is?* That phrase made Brenda’s jaw fall open. It was almost as if...

Her mother shot her a sidelong glance that said it all. Those wild times in high school, that sneaking out and meeting up with boys, her mother had known about it all along.

And judged her for it. And worried over it.



But worry was one thing. Controlling was another. It hadn't worked back then, and it wasn't going to work now.

"Listen, Mom. We need to talk about our arrangement."

"Let me guess. You want to renegotiate our deal." Her mother pressed her lips together.

But before Brenda could confirm that yes, that was exactly what she wanted to do, because it was a very fucked-up deal that would never hold up, a knock came on the door.

They all exchanged a glance. Brenda's stomach dropped. Had the school board made a decision, and sent someone to give her the bad news in person?

"Do you think it's the school?" Granny whispered.

"I don't know," Brenda whispered back. "But we don't have to whisper. It's my house."

"Then why are you whispering?"

Brenda smothered a nervous laugh behind her hand. She *was* whispering. How silly. She tidied her hair and smoothed out the wrinkles on the tailored blouse she'd worn on the plane. Time to face the music, whatever it was.

Granny took her hand and gave it a squeeze. Then, after a moment's pause, Laney did the same with her other hand. How unusual. All three McMurray women on the same page, ready to confront the enemy, whoever it was.

"You got this," Laney whispered. "Isn't that what you said before?"

"I did." With a nervous smile, Brenda squared her shoulders. "And I do."

She strode to the door and flung it open.

Galen barreled inside, brandishing the note she'd left in the hotel room. "I know something's going on. If you want to break up, I just need to say something first." He was all tangled hair and disheveled beard. Wild to the core, more wild than she'd ever seen him. A wild beast ready to fight for his survival. Fight for their relationship.

She'd never been more happy to see another human being in her life. *Thank God.* Thank God he still wanted her. She never should have written that note. Never let her mother—and her own panic—manipulate her.

“Listen, Galen—”

“No, let me go first.” He waved the note in the air. “Before you make any decisions, let me say this. I love you.” For the first time, he noticed that her mother and grandmother were there too. “I love her,” he explained to them. “I didn’t tell her that before she wrote this. I was going to, but then my brothers showed up while we were still in bed, and we had to go get my father to drop the assault charges against me, but that’s all good now and—”

Brenda’s phone buzzed. Good timing, considering Galen was apparently about to tell all their business to her wide-eyed family. She snatched it up and saw it was a text from the school principal.

*Can you come to my office right now? We have a situation.*

## *twenty-seven*

Galen had been rehearsing his speech ever since he'd checked out of the Safari Inn. He'd barely said a word to his brothers during the flight back, or the ride home. They'd dropped him at his house, where he'd given them each a hard but speedy hug. Then he'd tossed his bag in his truck and headed straight for Brenda's house.

That note was burned into his memory. He knew every word of it by now. *When we get back to Lake Bittersweet, we need to talk.*

How could she make love to him the way she had just last night and leave a note like this in the morning? Why go to the trouble of flying all the way to LA to spring him from jail, fuck his brains out in a hotel room, only to hint at dumping him the very next day?

It didn't make any sense. If she really wanted to end things, she could have used him being thrown in jail as an excuse. She could have sent him a text ending things. Or she could have bailed him out, put him in a taxi and said goodbye.

No, the only thing that made sense was that she'd been coerced somehow into dumping him. And he had a good idea of who had done that, and why. Going to jail probably wouldn't go over very well with the country club crowd.

As soon as Brenda opened the door, her lips parting in surprise at the sight of him, he knew he was right. Beyond her, he saw CeCe and a blur of pink that he knew must be her mother.

Words kept coming out of his mouth in a rush, even after the beep of Brenda's phone interrupted his flow.

"Maybe I'm not the kind of man you imagined for your daughter, Mrs. Abercrombie, but no one on this planet will ever love her like I do. I would do anything for her. I'd die for her, literally. If a bear was coming for her, I'd run in between them. I'd let that bear maul me before I let it touch a hair on her head."

Bears. Where had bears come from? His prepared speech hadn't mentioned a bear.

It was Brenda's mother, he realized. She was just like a mama bear protecting her cub. Except she didn't live in the wilderness. The dangers she feared were different. Social ostracism, shunning, that kind of thing. Things he couldn't do anything about.

Deflated, he stared down at the floor of Brenda's foyer. Where did that leave him? Someone tapped on his shoulder, but he couldn't get distracted, not now, even if it was Brenda. He needed to make his case.

He lifted his gaze and fixed it on Laney's elegant face and narrowed eyes.

"Mrs. Abercrombie, I know we come from different worlds. I don't know if I could survive in yours. But I respect you and I see why you're worried. All I can say is that I love Brenda with everything I am and I'm going to do whatever I can to win your trust."

Was that a nod? Had she nodded?

"My daughter and I have a deal." She said it like someone clinging to an overhanging tree so she wouldn't slide down a bluff. In other words, someone desperate to maintain control over her world.

"Does that deal involve me disappearing from her life? Because I didn't agree to that. And deals like that don't work anyway. People want what they want. I want Brenda and I think she wants me too."

Another tap on his shoulder. He turned to find Brenda right next to him. He was still angry about that note, but also he fucking loved her, so he offered her a confused, twisted grimace of a smile.

“If I’m wrong about you wanting me, tell me now. You didn’t say it in your letter.”

“Of course you’re not wrong. I told my Mom we’d take a pause, that’s it. And I was about to renegotiate.”

*He wasn’t wrong. That meant she wanted him too.* The joy of it made the room spin around him. He reached for her, but she held up a hand to stop him.

“Can we do this later, Galen? The principal needs to see me at the school.”

He froze, finally taking in the details of her appearance. She was pale, and the hand holding her phone trembled. Something was wrong. All other worries and considerations fled from his mind. “Why?”

“They know about my book.”

“So?”

“So some people might think she shouldn’t be teaching fourth-graders,” her mother said, as if that made total sense to her.

Brenda’s color came and went, and she ran her tongue across dry lips. She nodded in confirmation of Laney’s comment.

“They’re wrong,” Galen said flatly. “I’m coming with you.”

“That’s not—”

“Please. Let me come with you.”

“But my note...you looked so angry...” She wrung her hands together, looking so miserable he wanted to sweep her into his arms. He resisted the urge, because then he’d never want to let her go.

“We can talk about all that later.” He took her hand in a firm grasp. “Come on. I got you. I got your back. Let’s go.”

The flush of gratitude that flooded over her face clinched it in his mind. She loved him too, and not only that, she needed him.

As long as that was true—but only if that was true—he’d be here for her, like a burr stuck on her coat.

## *twenty-eight*

Somehow word had gotten out, and a small crowd had gathered in the hallway outside the principal's office at Lake Bittersweet Elementary. Once Galen had declared he was coming with her, Brenda's mother and grandmother had followed suit. So Brenda arrived at the school with her own little entourage.

Galen's instant and unquestioning declaration of support had galvanized her family into doing the same. No one would ever guess that CeCe and Laney were at odds, or that her mother had tried to bribe her to ditch Galen.

God, she loved that man. If only she could find a moment to tell him so. But that wasn't so easy to come by in a packed car or a crowded hallway.

Principal Roscoe poked his head out the door and blinked at the crowd. He was a mild-mannered former teacher in his seventies who planned to retire soon. He abhorred controversy above all else. He caught Brenda's eye and beckoned to her. She eyed the group that filled the space between her and the principal. Were they with her or against her? She couldn't tell.

She took one last look at Galen, who gave her an encouraging nod and a squeeze of her hand. "Go ahead, we'll be here."

But before she could go any farther, shouts broke out among the crowd.

"Are you going to fire her?" called one woman.

“We don’t need that kind of crap around here!” yelled an older man.

Brenda didn’t recognize either of them. She knew all the parents of her own students, and many of the others. These particular angry people looked old to be parents; maybe they were concerned grandparents?

“No decision has been made,” said Principal Roscoe. But the nervous tone of his voice told her that might not be true. He was just trying to work out the least controversial way to handle this situation.

A flurry of shouts shot through the air like bullets.

“Fire her or we’ll picket!”

“Boycott!”

“Get rid of her!”

“We’ll shut this place down!”

Good lord. Had she really done something that bad, that the whole school would get shut down? Tears sprang to her eyes. She’d never seen people around here act like this. Their hostile glares felt like daggers being thrown at her. All her brave words about fighting for her job seemed stupid now. This wasn’t just about her. It was about the school, the community. If her presence did anything to damage the school and its ability to educate the kids, she couldn’t live with that.

She’d resign. Or withdraw her book, if that would make a difference. But maybe it was too late for that, judging by the angry faces around her. Yes, she’d have to give up her job, for the good of the school.

“Hey!” A deep, familiar voice rang through the hallway.

*Galen.*

Galen climbed onto a chair and waved his arms at the crowd to get them to quiet down. He still hadn’t combed his hair since he’d burst through her door, so he looked as wild as ever. “What the hell is this? What is wrong with you people?”



The crowd didn't exactly go silent—there were still angry mutters—but the noise level went down a notch.

“You all know me, I'm Galen Cooper, and I've loved this town ever since I came here at fifteen. Remember that? Me and my brothers? Three kids with no parents?”

Now they started to quiet—as if story time had begun, thought Brenda. She held her breath, wondering what Galen could possibly say to make a difference.

“We were city kids with no idea how to do things like hook up a propane tank.”

A murmur of laughter from the crowd.

“But we survived. And it was because of you.” He pointed to the gathered residents. “Because of this community. People here took care of us. They didn't reject us because we were different, or because we had no parents, or because we were poor. They didn't judge us. They helped us. *You* helped us. With open arms.”

The crowd shuffled their feet. Galen had their attention. Brenda's heart raced and she put a hand to her throat.

“Where are those open arms now? How about some open minds? Brenda has given back to this community every day since she got here. She could be anywhere, doing anything, but she's here teaching kids who love her and we're lucky she's here. What she needs from you is little damn open-mindedness. Is that too much to fucking ask?”

He caught a couple gasps from the crowd.

“Yeah, my language is salty sometimes. So the fuck what? I'd never hurt anyone here and you know it. Neither would Brenda. What does it matter what she does outside of school? She's a great teacher and a kind soul. Stop acting like a bunch of puritanical babies.” He directed a stern frown around the crowd, then stopped short. “Hold on. How many people here even live in Lake Bittersweet? You.” He pointed at someone. “You aren't from here, are you?”

“Braddock, but that's not the point,” the man said aggressively.

“Yeah it is. You don’t live here. Mind your own business.” He caught someone else’s eye. “Burton, you live here. What are you doing here, pestering the school? You’re retired. Shouldn’t you be in your woodworking shop enjoying your golden years?”

“Sure, Galen, and I respect you and all, but I got to stand up for our way of life.”

“Our way of...” Galen just goggled at him, as if he could barely believe what he was hearing. “I thought handcrafting toys next to a cooler of beer was your way of life. What does Brenda and her book have to do with that? Have you even read it?”

Burton turned beet red, and stammered out a non-answer that got interrupted by Granny pulling at Galen’s sleeve and hollering, “Get me up there. I have something to say.”

Galen hopped down from the chair and lifted Granny up to take his place. She twitched her skirt into place, making sure she was decent. Then patted her white hair back to its proper shape.

Next to Brenda, Laney murmured a prayer under her breath. “Don’t let her embarrass me, dear lord. I won’t ask for anything else, ever again.”

Brenda felt a bubble of hysterical laughter swell from her heart. If she was going out, at least it would be in a blaze of absurdity.

Then Galen was coming toward her, fire still in his eyes. She opened her arms and stepped into his, two sparks joining above a fire.

“I love you,” she sobbed into his neck. “Forget that stupid letter. That was the biggest mistake I’ve ever made. I panicked, I wasn’t thinking clearly. I love you so much. All I want is to be with you.”

“I love you too.” The words whispered into her ear traveled right to her soul. “From the moment I saw you walking into this very building.”

The sweet rush of joy nearly obliterated everything else going on. His warm solid body against hers, the familiar scent of pine sap and fresh forest air, the brush of his beard against her cheek—it was everything she wanted and needed. And she'd nearly lost it.

Never again, she vowed. Never again would she let her fears or anyone else's keep her from truth and love. Without those things, what did anything matter?

Her grandmother's voice caught her attention. In the thrill of the moment, she'd nearly forgotten that Granny had commandeered the chair and was now addressing the crowd. Story time was continuing.

“For whoever doesn't know me, I'm Cecilia McMurray and I was born here in Lake Bittersweet, in the kitchen of my grandparents' house, one of the first two-story houses ever built around here. I go way back in this town and I have an excellent memory. From when I was young, I kept a journal. Every couple years I read some of that journal so I can remember how things used to be. That's what the kids call receipts these days.”

Her sassy tone made the crowd laugh.

“When the Senior Home nearly burned down, my journals were the only thing I cared about losing. Anyway, back to my story, which is really Rosalind Stanley's story. Her last name used to be Kleech, anyone remember that name?”

It seemed to stir up something; Brenda noticed some shuffling feet in the crowd.

“That's right. The Kleech family used to be big around here. They owned the general store, a lot of lakefront property. They had a couple of kids. All of them boys. One of them was called Everett.”

E.K. The initials on LadyBird Rock. Brenda caught Galen's glance, making sure it rang a bell for him too.

“Everett never acted like the other boys. We all knew something was different about him. For one thing, he was a

wonderful artist. The watercolors he made of the lake would make you cry.”

Watercolors. Was she talking about Rosalind’s artwork? Had Everett left his work to Rosalind?

“Everett was a kind soul, too. Dreamy. He’d give you the last penny in his pocket if you needed something.”

The hallway was so still Brenda could hear the thump of Galen’s heart. His arms were wrapped around her as she leaned her back against his chest.

“One day Everett went to his mother and told her a secret. Something didn’t feel right, and he couldn’t keep it to himself anymore. His mother kicked him out of the house. The whole family turned against him. Wouldn’t allow him back in for nothing. Threatened to shoot him if he set foot on their property. After that, Everett slept where he could. Sometimes it was a fishing shack, sometimes a friend’s floor. He became very depressed. He decided this life wasn’t worth living anymore. So he made his plans.”

Brenda could hardly breathe. Had Everett thrown himself off LadyBird Rock? Where did Rosalind come into this story?

“He left a watercolor behind as a kind of last gift to the world. It showed all of Lake Bittersweet and it radiated pure love for this place. It was beautiful, a masterpiece. Off to one side, you could see some mountain ridges and a halo around one particular spot.”

LadyBird Rock. Brenda knew it before her grandmother even said the words.

“He’d been staying with a friend who figured out what he was up to. That friend put together a tracking party. They tracked him all the way to LadyBird Rock, where he’d planned to throw himself off a cliff. But for an artist like him, it turned out not to be so easy. Thing is, it’s spectacular up there.”

Murmurs of agreement rose from the listeners. That was what they’d all become—listeners. Spellbound by CeCe’s simple storytelling. *The healing power of storytelling*, thought

Brenda. Whether it's a cave, a campfire, or a principal's hallway. Never fails.

“He couldn't do it, at least not until he'd absorbed every color in the sunrise sky, and mapped out every curve of the valley. He sat and looked and listened and became one with nature up there. That was how the tracking party caught up with him. His friends cried with him, told him they loved him and didn't want to lose him. He said, but that's the thing. There is no him. I'm a her.”

Someone gasped. Someone else coughed. No one moved.

“A tribal elder happened to be part of the tracking party. Everett's friend had brought him along because he'd suspected the truth. Now in their community, they didn't see things the way we did. This elder told stories of how it used to be before the Europeans came, how there were several shades of man and woman and in-between and crossover. Everett listened and decided to live. And that was how Everett became Rosalind. When she came down that mountain, she was a girl, although in her heart, she always had been. She told me she painted something on the rock up there that was meant to be an epitaph. But it turned into a kind of birth announcement instead. E.K., then an arrow, then R.S. So you're probably wondering why I'm telling you this story. It has nothing to do with Brenda, right?”

A few people cleared their throats, as if waking from a trance.

“That's right,” someone said.

“No, that's wrong.” Granny gave him the scolding finger. “Lake Bittersweet learned a lesson that day. We almost lost one of our own. It opened our eyes. Opened our hearts. Rosalind never lacked for a place to stay again. She finished high school and went off to art school. She sold that amazing watercolor to a collector and donated all the funds to our library. Over the years, she sent more donations. Until she died, she was one of Lake Bittersweet's biggest philanthropists. She gave away all her money, leaving only enough for end-of-life care. Sadly, the rest of the Kleech

family decided to move away. This wasn't the right place for them."

An absolute hush had fallen over the crowd.

"So that's why I'm telling you this, because you might not remember Rosalind's story, and how it changed this town. Or maybe you aren't even from here, and you're just trying to make trouble. Maybe you don't see what Rosalind has to do with Brenda. Here it is. This town stands by the people who are part of it. My granddaughter Brenda is part of Lake Bittersweet. She's been teaching kids for nearly two years now. She's a kind-hearted soul who also has an imagination she likes to express in books that are meant for adults. *For adults*. Doesn't everyone here do things that are adults-only? How do you think your kids got here?"

Someone snorted out a laugh. Brenda glanced cautiously around the crowd, and saw that most of them were smiling now. A few were checking the time because they probably had other things to do besides worry about her pen name. A few people had already left; the crowd had thinned.

"I'm almost done," CeCe announced. "I just want to say this. Sometimes we are called upon to open our hearts just a little bit more. That's a good thing. Now I have a question." She spread her arms wide. "How does a mosh pit work?"

"Mama, don't you dare!" Laney darted forward to catch her, ready to be CeCe's landing pad in case she actually launched herself into the air.

And that was the thing about her mom, Brenda realized with a start. She rarely got the joke, and she always tried to boss her family around. But she'd also—always—try to save them, whether or not they needed it.

That must be why her mother always tried to keep her close, like a mother duck corralling her duckling. Fear, that was what it came down to.

In that moment, Brenda made a decision. She, for one, wasn't going to let her life be ruled by fear. Including fear of her mother. Not anymore.

Through the thinning crowd, she caught the eye of Principal Roscoe. He shook his head at her and mouthed something. She cupped her ear to show she couldn't hear. In the next moment, her phone buzzed.

"See you after the break. Bright and early Monday morning."

She looked up to see him giving her a thumb's up before disappearing into his office.

"Everything all right?" Galen was peering over her shoulder at her phone.

"Looks like. It's back to work on Monday. Hey...you want to get out of here?"

She tilted her head back to gaze up at him. Mostly all she could see was his bearded chin, all that black hair bursting with pure unadulterated Galen-ness.

"I do, but I also want to talk to your mother. I want to make sure she's okay with us being together. I want to pay her back for bailing me out."

"How did you know she did that?"

"I figured it out. I knew you didn't have enough for bail. My brothers said it wasn't them. But you *could* have gone to them. Billy has plenty of cash."

"I didn't think of that. I panicked and did what I always do."

"Run to Mom, who's always happy to help you out, for a price?"

Brenda jumped at the sound of her mother's voice. She turned to face Laney, who had a firm grip on her wayward mother's hand.

"Pretty much, yes. It was a mistake."

Their eyes met and held. Her mother had been so much to her—dominating influence, thorn in her side, dictator, safety net. But above and beyond everything else, Brenda loved her.

“Mom, thank you for jumping in, like you always do. But I got this. I don’t want you to worry about me. Can you do that? Not worry?”

Laney murmured. “I’m a mother. We always worry.”

“Okay, fair enough. I can understand that. Does worry *have* to mean ‘try to control’?”

“You think I try to control you?” Her mother looked wounded.

“Haven’t I been telling you that for the past twenty years?” said CeCe.

Brenda shot her grandmother a look. This was between her and her mother. She didn’t need another McMurray weighing in.

“I suppose I do,” Laney finally said. “I’ll...that is, I’ll try...” She cleared her throat. “I’ll try to work on that.”

“That’s all I ask.” Brenda wrapped her arms around her mother for a hug. Her mother had never been much of a hugger. She showed her love in other ways. But this time she allowed the hug to go on longer than Brenda expected before drawing away. Laney smoothed her suit jacket back to its proper folds.

“I’m choosing for myself from now on,” Brenda told her. “Starting with Galen.”

“You’ve been choosing for yourself for a while, Brenda. You think I wanted all this?” Laney waved at the crowded school hallway. “I just wanted to help.”

Galen stepped forward. “About that bail money, I’m going to pay you back. The lawyer fees, too. Every penny.”

Laney dismissed that offer with a wave of her hand. “There’s no need for that. I’m glad I sprung you from jail in time to stand up for my daughter. It was money well spent. Consider us even.”

She put out her hand to shake Galen’s. As they shook, she pinned him with an eagle eye. “I’m particular about who joins my family. I’m probably more like the Kleeches in CeCe’s



story. You might be many things that I don't understand, but you obviously love Brenda and I guess that will have to be enough."

"I love him too," Brenda pointed out.

Laney gave a reluctant nod of acknowledgement.

Good lord. Was that really as gracious as her mother could be? Brenda wanted to protest, but CeCe caught her eye and shook her head. After all, she'd gone from extorting Brenda over Galen to shaking his hand. Best to consider that a breakthrough.

It certainly didn't bother Galen. He broke out in an enormous grin, white teeth flashing through his black beard. "Yeehaw! I'm in!" he howled to those still gathered in the hallway.

They all broke out in applause. Brenda caught smiles and winks tossed their way. The weird tension had disappeared, thank God. Lake Bittersweet was back to being Lake Bittersweet.

## *twenty-nine*

“I still can’t believe you actually won over my mother.” For some reason, Brenda couldn’t get over that accomplishment. Galen didn’t understand why.

“Why are you so surprised? People usually end up liking me. It just takes a while to stop being scared of all this.” Galen pointed at his head, which was just about back to its former bushy state.

“For the record, I was never scared of you.” Brenda squeezed his hand as they walked down Main Street, through twirling flecks of snow. The flakes were like tiny cold confetti being tossed from heaven on the occasion of CeCe and Bryce’s wedding.

It was being held at the Blue Drake Club, which seemed pretty random until CeCe had confessed that she’d lost her virginity there, back when it was a dive, before Steve Gault had bought it.

“It’s like coming full circle,” she’d confided to Brenda and Galen. “Because Bryce will be my last lover. He says that’s a lot of extra pressure, but he has a Viagra prescription and he seems to be up to the challenge.”

Galen made a mental note to congratulate Bryce on landing a McMurray woman. They were really something. He himself intended to be making Brenda happy until they were both ready for senior homes and prescriptions.

“Maybe you should have been more scared,” Galen told Brenda. “You had no idea I was going to end up in jail.”

She cocked her head. “Not a huge surprise. You’re a barbarian and always will be.”

“At least I’m a one-woman barbarian.”

She laughed and rubbed her cheek against his wool hunter’s jacket. “You better be. Or I’ll bring out my own personal inner barbarian.”

He dropped his voice to a low growl. “I love it when your inner barbarian comes out to play. Want to make a quick stop in the alley behind the office?”

He caught her shiver, and knew it was only partly because it was barely ten degrees above zero. He and Brenda were consistently hot for each other, unless she was worn out from teaching, or he’d been out in the cold all day long, in which case they were consistently happy to simply cuddle together.

“Actually, we probably should stop by the office. I have to pick up the wedding present I got your granny.”

“You got her something all on your own?” Brenda sounded so touched that he dropped a kiss on her wool hat.

“I owe her. She accepted me right away. I’ll love her forever for that. Come on.” He tugged her hand and they crossed the street, waving at Redbull, who was just leaving the office. He basically used it as a town house in the winter. Half his wardrobe was stuffed into desk drawers. He wore tall mud boots and had recently put beads in his black braids.

“Coming to the Blue Drake?” Brenda called to him. Basically the entire town was invited to the reception.

“Not a big wedding guy,” he called back. “But wake me up when it’s you guys, I’ll make an exception.”

He winked, making Brenda turn pink.

This was a topic that Galen had been thinking a lot about. Seeing his father again hadn’t magically erased all the wounds he carried from the past. He still sometimes panicked when he thought about the future. But he was able to get through those moments better now. All the therapy work he’d been doing helped. And if it didn’t, all he had to do was think about

Brenda and how she'd dropped everything to come bail him out. No scar from the past could outshine her and her love.

As they walked along the alley next to the Lake Bittersweet Wilderness Adventures building, Brenda glanced up at him. "What are you thinking about?"

He'd learned that she loved his directness. "I'm wondering what you think about marriage."

"Do you mean us? You and me? Or in general?"

His nerve failed. This was too soon. She wasn't ready. He was rushing her.

"Because you'd be lucky to marry an almost bestselling author like me," she teased. Her first book had done fairly well, enough for the publishing company to give her a small advance on a second one. The money came in handy, although she no longer needed it for her grandmother. Now she was saving money to expand the creative arts program at the elementary school. She intended to name it after Rosalind Stanley.

He loved her so fucking much.

"Brenda." Galen stopped walking and turned her to face him. Snow swirled around them. "I'd marry you right this second if you wanted. I'm giving you time. That's what Billy said I should do. Redbull, too. But Jason said I should just dive right in and propose to you."

Her lips parted in surprise. "You've been talking about it with your friends?"

"And my therapist."

"What does she say?"

"Can you say more about that?" He mimicked his therapist's voice, then made a face. He wasn't making fun of her, not at all, and Brenda knew that. She kept saying she hoped to get a chance to thank Theresa Billingsley for her role in making Galen the man he was today.

"Okay, well, can you say more about the thought of marriage?"

“To you?” He cupped her face in his hands. Her sea-green eyes engulfed him in their light and love. “Ecstatic. Drunk with joy. But for me, it doesn’t matter. In my heart, I am married to you already. I love you.”

What a luxury to know he could spill all the love in his heart to her. In the early days of his crush, that was all he’d wanted. Just to tell her how he felt. These days, he knew he had all the wealth he could ever wish for—love in abundance, endless wells of it. What could be better?

“I feel the same way,” she whispered. “I love you so much. Maybe we should hike up to LadyBird Rock and make it official in front of the forest and the wilderness.”

“We can do that.” Moved beyond words, he pulled her into his arms. For a moment, he imagined the valley below, the snow-covered forests, the sharply cut granite cliffs. As if they were there right now, just the two of them and the wild beauty of the Sawtooth Range.

A noise from inside the office caught his attention. It came from the back, the unheated storage area where Galen had left his present for CeCe.

He put a finger to his lips and stepped quietly toward the corner. Brenda followed right behind and peered past him. He caught her sharp intake of breath, then felt her tug his jacket to pull him away. He stepped backward, still reeling from what he’d just witnessed.

Billy and Jenna. *Kissing*. Jenna’s small form pressed against Billy’s chest, lost in his arms. Holy mother of God.

The two of them hurried back down the alleyway toward the main street. “Did we really just see that?” He still couldn’t believe it.

“That’s Jenna, right? His ex-wife?”

“Yes. This can’t be good. Damn. This is a problem.” He knew it hadn’t been easy for Billy and Jenna to find a good co-parenting rhythm. But they’d both worked hard at it and now they got along great.

Maybe a little too great?

“Galen.” Brenda touched his jaw, running her hand across his beard. “It’s okay. Don’t worry.”

“I do worry. Kisses change things.”

“Yes, they do.” She lifted on tiptoe and fastened her lips to his. Warm and loving, her kiss worked like dopamine on his brain. He relaxed and surrendered himself to the comfort and arousal of her taste. “Better now?” she whispered when they’d reluctantly ended the kiss.

“Better. It’s their business. But if something goes wrong...”

“If something goes wrong, you’ll be there for him and for your nephews just like you always are. Right?”

“Right.”

Life was just like the wilderness, after all. You planned as best you could, then adapted to the wild and unexpected. And sometimes those unexpected things were the very best.

“Shall we go watch a couple of seventy-year-olds take a chance on love?” Brenda murmured.

“Let’s do it.” He took her hand and they hurried through the snow along with the other guests making their way toward the club.

“What about your wedding gift? What is it, anyway?”

“Oh, just a cooler full of walleye I caught ice-fishing the other day. They’re on ice. They’ll keep.”

He didn’t entirely understand why she burst out laughing and didn’t stop until they reached the Blue Drake. Were fish a strange kind of wedding present? Oh well. Who cared?

As far as he was concerned, the best present—the only one he’d ever need—was the joy and freedom he heard in Brenda’s laughter. For that, he’d take on the world, both the civilized and the not-at-all.

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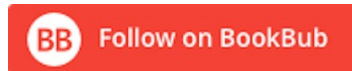
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## *about the author*

**Jennifer Bernard** is a *USA Today* bestselling author of contemporary romance. Her books have been called “an irresistible reading experience” full of “quick wit and sizzling love scenes.” A graduate of Harvard and former news promo producer, she left big city life in Los Angeles for true love in Alaska, where she now lives with her husband and stepdaughters. She still hasn’t adjusted to the cold, so most often she can be found cuddling with her laptop and a cup of tea. No stranger to book success, she also writes erotic novellas under a naughty secret name that she’s happy to share with the curious. You can learn more about Jennifer and her books at [JenniferBernard.net](http://JenniferBernard.net). Make sure to sign up for [her newsletter](#) for new releases, fresh exclusive content, sales alerts and giveaways.



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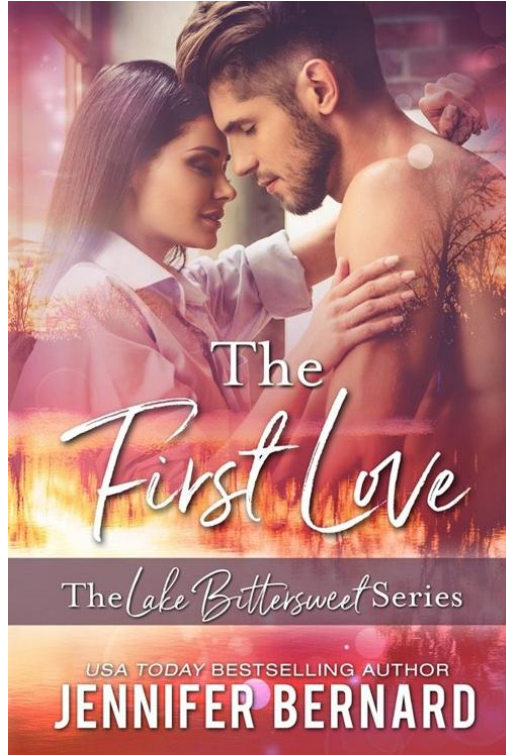




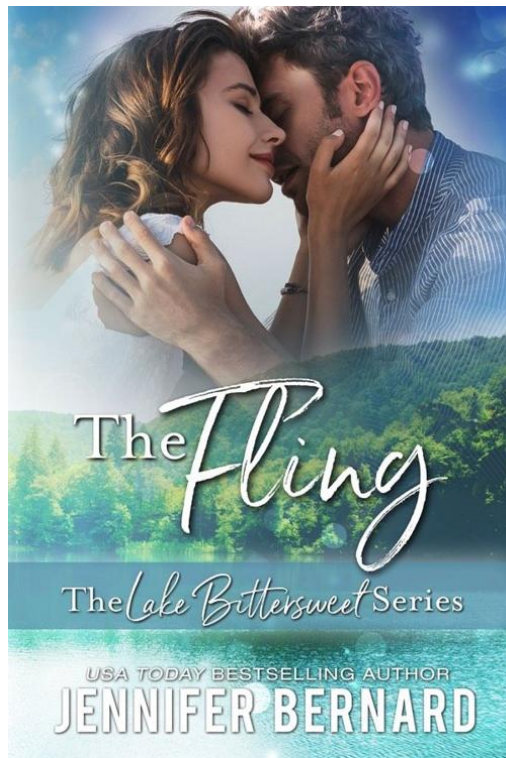
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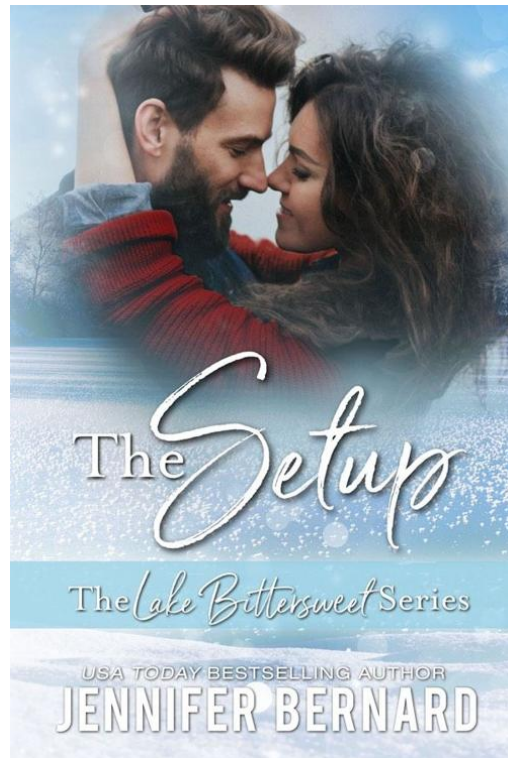
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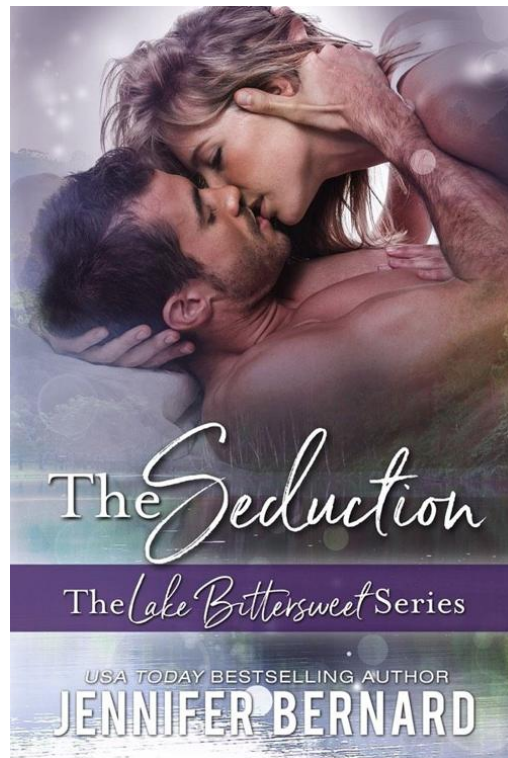
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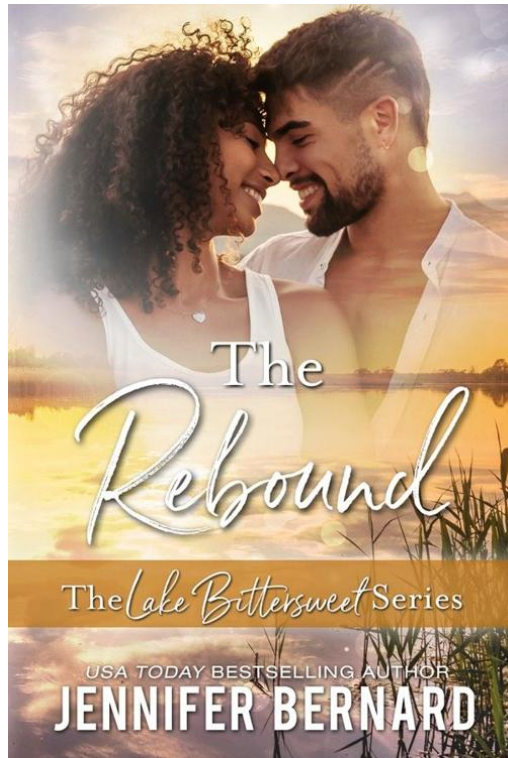
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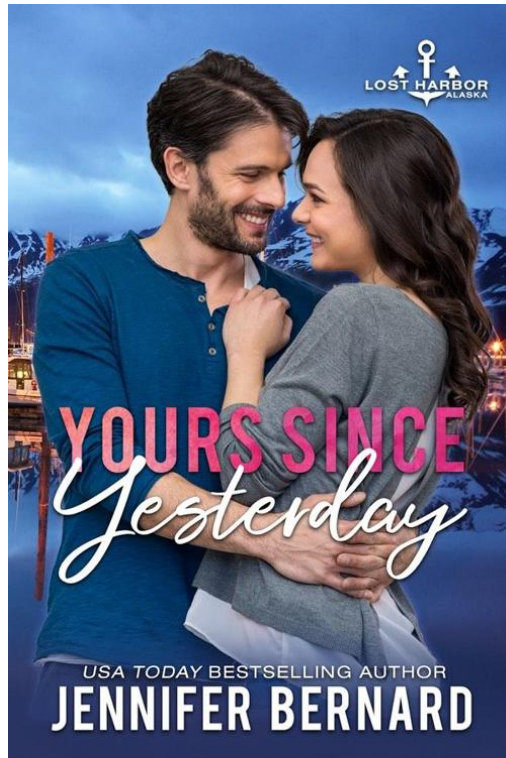


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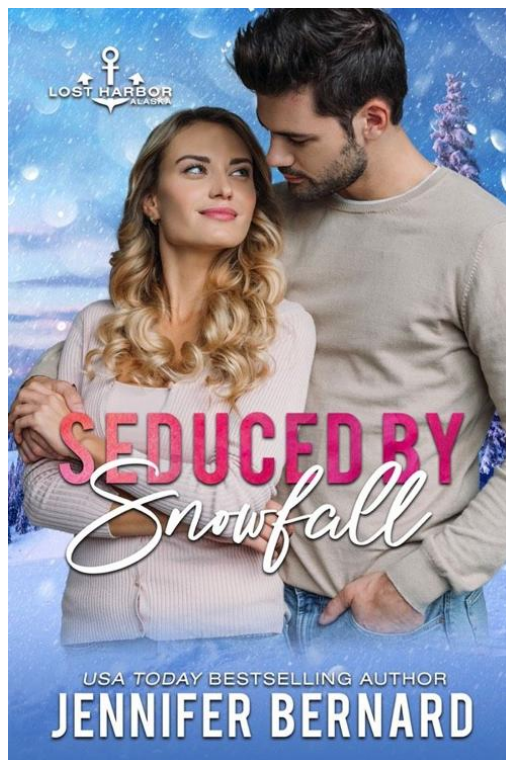
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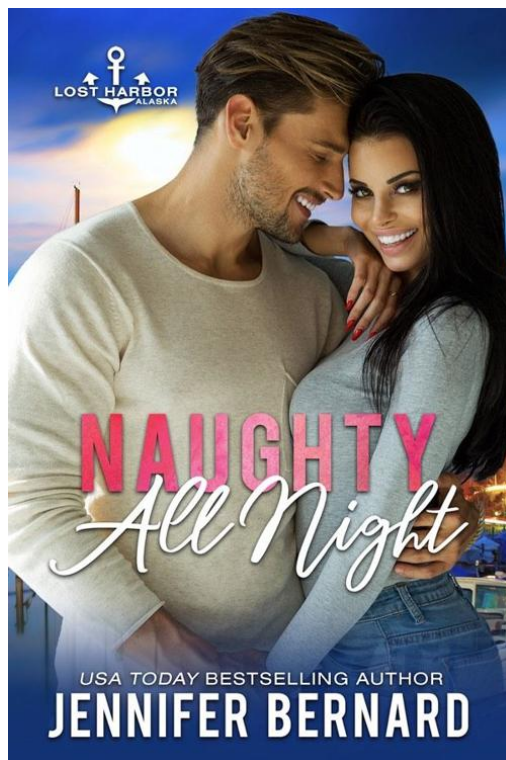
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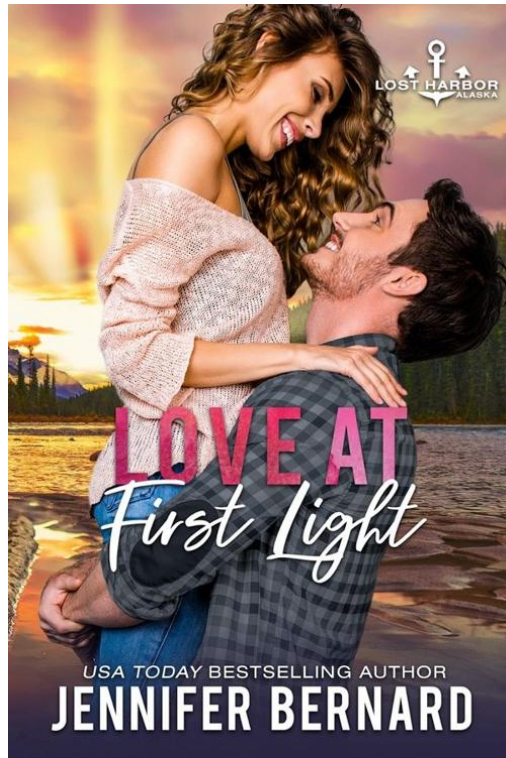
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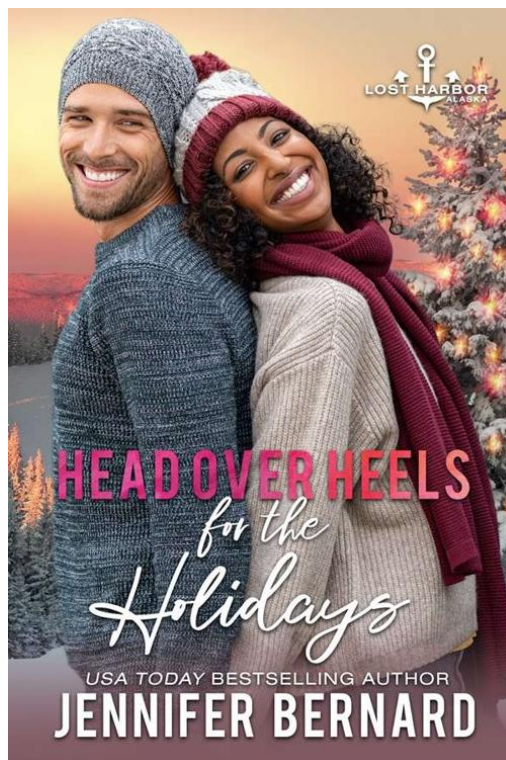
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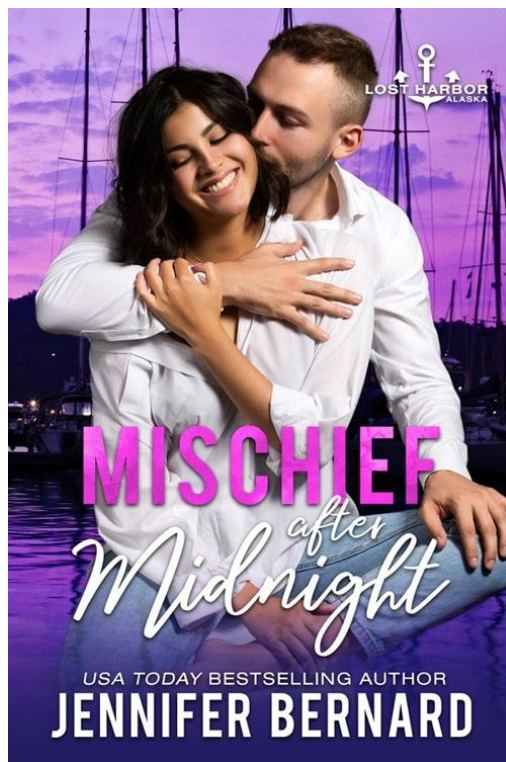
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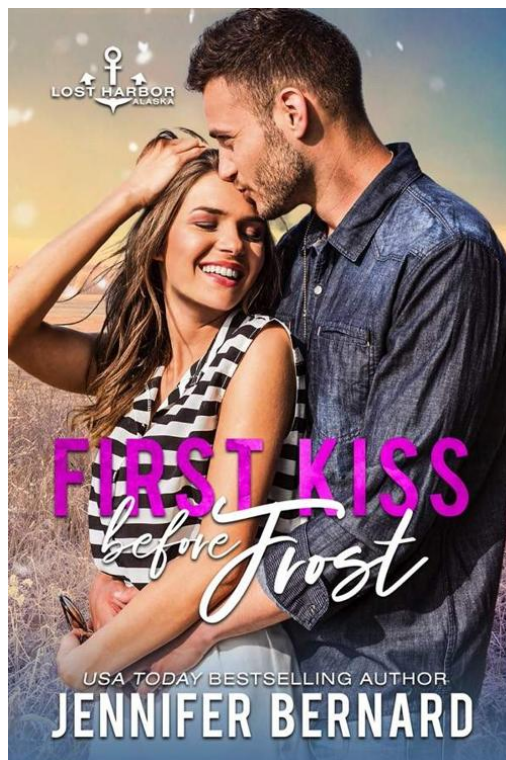
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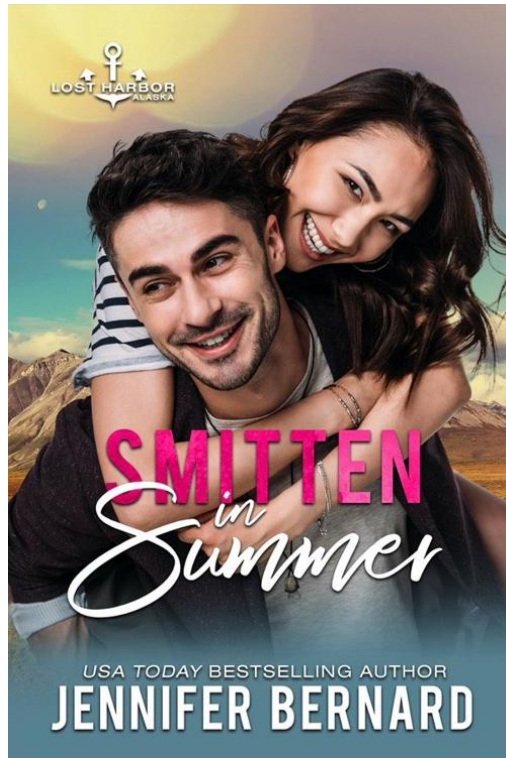


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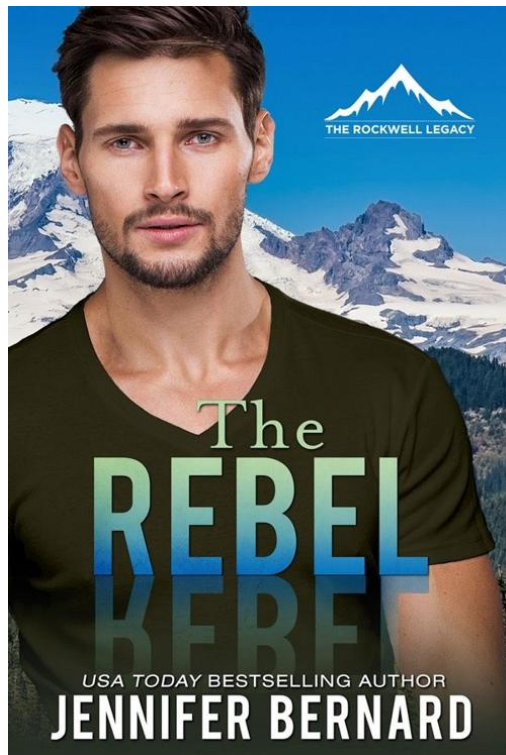
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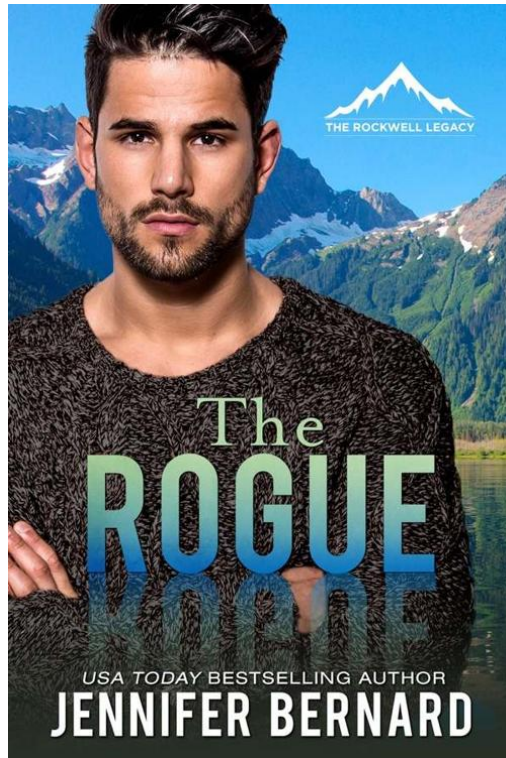


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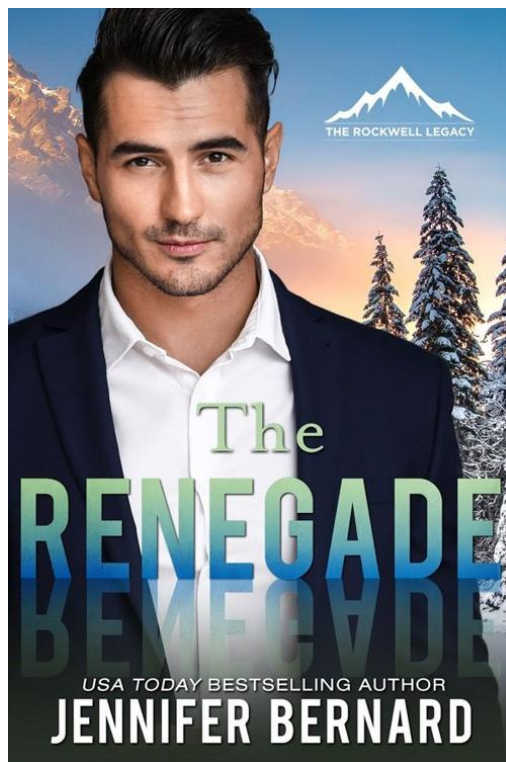
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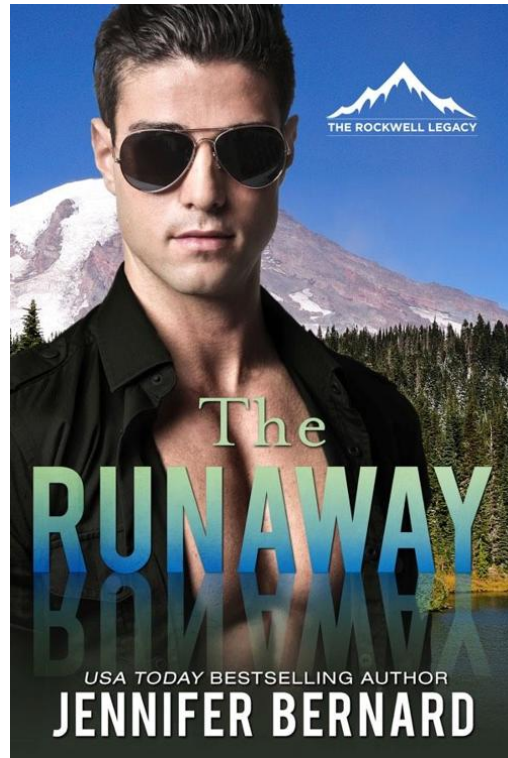
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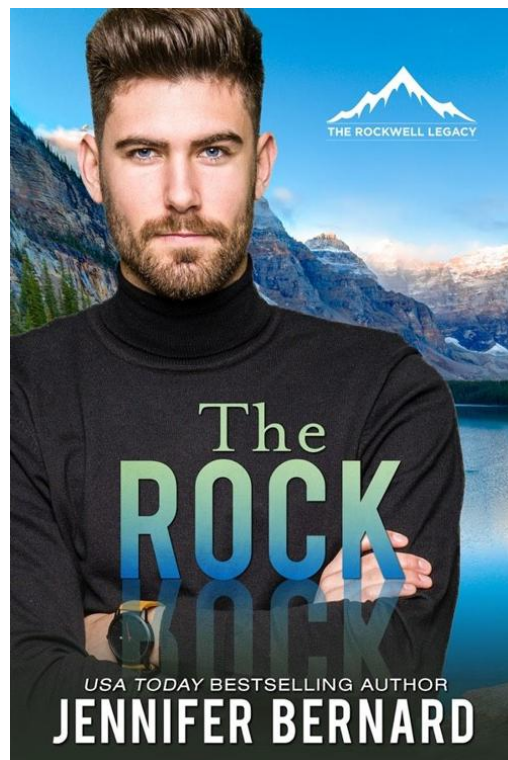
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