



## Grin and Beard It

(Winston Brothers, #2)

by Penny Reid

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Caped Publishing

Made in the United States of America

eBook Edition: May 2016

eBook ISBN: 978-1-942874-19-5

**DEDICATION**

To the very capable engineers responsible for  
Microsoft Windows 10.

Bless your hearts.

Bless. Your. Hearts.

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## Extra Scene – Sometime Later . . .

Other books by Penny Reid

### **CHAPTER 1**

*“Not all those who wander are lost.”*

— J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

~Sienna~

### **I WAS LOST.**

I was *lost* lost. My throat was tight with how lost I was. A desperate lost, half wondering if I'd crossed over into a new dimension and would never be found *lost*. I hadn't seen another car, let alone a pedestrian, in over an hour.

Perhaps I was now the last person left on the face of the earth. Perhaps everyone else had been abducted by aliens. I was so lost not even aliens could find me.

Whatever. Alternate reality, body-snatching aliens or not, I was now beyond frustrated. And when I'm extremely frustrated, I cry.

At present, I was very close to crying. I hate this

about myself.

Which is why I pulled my tiny rental car off the side of the mountain road as soon as I spotted an overlook. Driving while crying is like eating while crying, or having sex while crying: weird, wet (not in a good way), and dangerous.

I tried to ignore that this overlook felt suspiciously familiar. I was fairly certain I'd pulled off at this exact spot an hour ago in a futile attempt to consult the paper map now crumpled on my passenger seat. This was the same paper map I would again have to consult, and likely with the same outcome—another two hours spent driving up and down this godforsaken mountain road.

Calming breaths were coming out as slightly hysterical huffs as I snatched the map from the passenger's seat. I shook out the map. I enjoyed the violent sound of the paper rumpling in my hands. I cleared my throat. I glared at the map. I continued glaring at the map.

I decided the map was clearly written by masochistic-doodling ancient Egyptians because everything was hieroglyphics and unreadable doodads.

I cursed the map.

“BY MOTHRA’S NIPPLES! I FUCKING HATE THIS MAP!”

Irrational anger bubbled to the surface and all I could think about was murdering the map. I would show the map who was boss.

I was boss.

Not some evil, wrong map from hell. I had no choice but to hit the map against the steering wheel several times, grunting and releasing a string of curses that would have made my sailor father proud. And maybe blush.

Then I opened my driver’s side door, still grunting and raging, and slammed the map against the car, threw it on the ground, stomped on it, kicked it, and just generally assaulted it in every

way I could think of. I'm a little embarrassed to admit, in my mindlessness I was also taunting the map, questioning its virility, flipping it the bird, and cursing now in Spanish as well as English.

It was the most cardio I'd done in over twelve months.

*Stupid map, making me do cardio. I'll kill you!*

Awareness I was no longer alone didn't occur all at once. I kind of realized a truck had driven past my map-assault-breakdance but had ignored it. If it had been twenty minutes ago I would have flagged down the truck or followed it. But I was now red-faced, snot-nosed, and sweaty. The last thing I needed were red-faced, snot-nosed, sweaty pictures of me all over the Internet . . . again.

But then the truck returned. The sound of tires crunching over gravel pulled me out of my fit of violence.

“Oh, crap.”

I inhaled a large, steadying breath, leaned against



my car, and closed my eyes. I needed to piece together my wherewithal as soon as possible, prepare to flash my dimples, unleash the charm. It was at this point I almost wished I'd agreed to let my sister—who was also my extremely capable manager—accompany me. But, no. I'd wanted some time away. Some quiet and peace. The world had grown too loud, the studios too demanding, the paparazzi cameras too suffocating.

My house in LA had been broken into four times in the last month; three had been over-exuberant fans. But one of the break-ins had been a reporter. She'd gone through my stuff, digging for dirt. I had no dirt. I didn't even have sand or dust. My life was an open book.

So, no. I hadn't wanted my sister to come. And I'd left my security team in Knoxville. And now I was lost. I'd wanted a break from being Sienna Diaz. Maybe if I'd had a proper map—or any innate sense of direction—then a break might have

been possible, but now . . .

Sliding my eyes to the side and glaring through the curtain my dark brown hair provided, I tried to sneak a peek at the newcomer through the truck's windshield—specifically, I wanted to determine whether I was being filmed—and that's when I spied the lights on the roof and the emblem on the hood and side of the car.

This car was official. And the man in it—now getting out of it and removing his sunglasses—was also official, wearing a uniform complete with a hat and a tool belt. A public servant.

THANK YOU, UNIVERSE.

I flipped my hair away from my face, wiped the backs of my hands across my slick cheeks and forehead, relieved I didn't need to gather my charm or wherewithal. Law enforcement didn't typically use phones to shoot amateur videos. If they did they were usually fired for misconduct. I could leave all my figurative masks on the ground, along

with Satan's torn and tattered map to hell.

As I straightened from the car and faced him I saw his steps falter. He was clearly surprised and I was pretty sure he recognized me because abrupt interest tempered his surprise. I pressed my lips together and gave him a quick smile, allowing him time for the shock to pass. But he didn't need the time; he quickly covered his surprise with a swaggery brand of attentive amusement. His left eyebrow cocked just a hint as his eyes swept over my body, and his mouth a suspicious looking line, like he was fighting a smile.

Eventually he abandoned the fight and grinned.

"Evening, ma'am," he said, his accent just as sweet and thick as his voice was low. The man even tipped his hat.

And that's when I noticed Officer Grins-a-lot was adorable.

Six foot something; smiling eyes framed by thick lashes; brown beard covering a strong, angular jaw.

Maybe most people wouldn't describe him as adorable. In fact, I'm pretty sure most women would call him a hot piece of ass. But after working for the last five years in Hollywood, all good-looking men were regulated to benignly adorable in my headspace.

In my early acting days, I'd dated a lot of hot guys—short hot guys, tall hot guys, muscular hot guys, thin hot guys, voluptuous hot guys—I'd tapped all manner of hot guys. But over the years I'd found the hotter the guy, the more the guy behaved like an entitled and incapable child.

Plus, I just couldn't afford to date. My career had to come first. As my sister Marta frequently reminded me, if I wanted success, I didn't have much time for hot guys. Orr any guys.

I nodded once at this hot guy's polite greeting, as a new gust of wind meant I was again forced to push my long hair away from my face. "Howdy, partner."

I cringed, because that wasn't at all charming.

That was unintentionally awkward. But I really needed any help he was capable of providing, and based on his hotness, my expectations were low. I sent up a prayer that he wasn't my least favorite kind of hot guy: the hot guy asshole.

In my defense, at least I didn't follow up my earlier statement with, "*Someone has poisoned the waterhole.*"

His lips compressed like he was wrestling laughter.

I braced. I never knew what or how people would react. Sometimes they'd ask me to quote one of my more famous movie lines. And that was usually fine. But right now I was lost and I was hungry and I desperately needed a shower and he was too freaking cute for me to repeat one of my most popular catchphrases—which included:

*"I'll make you a sandwich if you make me a woman,"* and *"Fat chicks love fat dicks."*

But instead of asking me for my autograph or telling me how much he enjoyed my latest film role as Frankenstein's accident-prone, chubby younger sister, he surprised me by clearing his throat, tipping his cowboy hat back, and asking, "Ma'am, do you require assistance?"

"Yes." I reached out automatically, rushing forward and grabbing his arm. Hot guy or not, he was a life preserver in this sea of mountain road sameness. His eyes followed my movements and focused on my hand where I gripped his sleeve. I was also perfectly fine that my voice betrayed my level of desperation. "Please. Yes. I am totally lost. The GPS failed me three hours ago. I've been up and down this road a few dozen times. My phone has no reception. I have hardly any gas. I am so fucking lost. You are my hero."

At that he stood a little straighter. When he spoke his voice was calm and soothing, and he covered my hand with his, patted it; the warmth, size,

roughness, and solid weight of him felt wonderfully reassuring.

I'd never been successfully reassured by a hot guy before.

It was actually really nice.

And weird.

"Where are you headed?" he asked gently.

"I'm trying to get to a place called Bandit Lake, and if you can get me there I will give you anything you want, including but not limited to a map written in hieroglyphics."

I noticed his eyes narrow when I mentioned my destination. "Bandit Lake?"

I nodded. "That's right."

"You have a place up there?"

"No, it's not my place. It belongs to a friend, Hank Weller. I'm just borrowing it for a few weeks."

"Hank? You know Hank?"

I nodded again. "Yes, officer. We went to college

together.”

“I’m not the law, miss. I’m a national park ranger.”

I took in his uniform again. It was green and not blue. I shrugged, not caring what kind of official he was just as long as he helped me get out of this Twilight Zone episode before the banjo music started

to

play

and

the

flannel-wearing

bloodhounds arrived.

“Oh. Okay. Then, what should I call you? Mr. Ranger?”

He bit his lip, again fighting laughter, and squeezed my hand. “You can call me Jethro, miss. You say you’re out of gas?”

“Your name is Jethro?”



“That’s right.”

I stared at him, feeling like his name wasn’t quite right, didn’t match his hot-guy status. If he were in the movie business he’d have to pick a new name. Something like Cain, or a Dean, or a Cain Dean. Four letters each, easy to remember, monosyllabic to ensure he didn’t forget how to spell or pronounce them.

Because, in my experience, that kind of hot guy didn’t usually know how to spell . . . or pronounce.

“How much gas did you say?” he asked again.

“The red light is flashing. I think I’m running on fumes.”

“That’s all right.” A warm, interested smile remained behind his eyes. “I can drive you up to the lake, and we’ll get this car filled up and towed.”

“As in Jethro Tull?”

“Pardon me?”

“Your name? Jethro as in Jethro Tull?”

His friendly gaze traveled over my face as he

grinned. Again. Wider. “As in Jethro, father-in-law of Moses in the Old Testament. Do you have any bags, miss?” He gave my hand one more reassuring squeeze then released me, moving to the driver’s side door—which was still open—and plucked the keys from the ignition.

“Bags?”

“Yes. Luggage.”

I snorted, saying, “Yes. Lots. But don’t worry, I’m in therapy,” and then chuckled at my own joke. Meanwhile, cutie-pie Jethro straightened from the car and lifted his eyebrows at me in expectation.

“Pardon?”

Seeing he hadn’t heard—or possibly hadn’t understood—my attempt at humor, my chuckling tapered, and I cleared my throat.

When I’m nervous, or uncomfortable, or faced with heavy feelings, I make jokes. It’s my thing. It’s what I do. Some might even call it a compulsion.

*It's like, Hey! Look at the funny! Focus on that, not on my pit stains or the disturbing way my nostrils are flaring . . .*

Which was how I realized Ranger Jethro was making me nervous. Which was completely bizarre because I was pretty sure I'd been inoculated against hot guys after my last boyfriend.

*So. Weird.*

I blamed the cardio.

Being funny is entirely dependent on timing. I'd learned early in my career to move on instead of repeating a joke, though I mourned those unheard jokes. They were the comedy equivalent of throwing seeds on rocks.

Stupid rocks.

"Sorry. Yes. Bags. In the trunk." I tossed my thumb over my shoulder and tucked my hair behind my ears, resolving to speak as little as possible.

His eyes lingered on my face, still warm and interested. We stared at each other. And then we

stared some more. So I waited.

A bird chirped.

The wind rustled the trees.

And still he stared.

The way he was looking at me, all dreamy-eyed and flirty, I wondered if I had a super-fan on my hands. Or maybe he'd never met anyone famous before. Whatever it was, I needed him to get a move on, because I had to use the bathroom. I refused to pee behind the big tree at the end of the gravel patch because I'd already peed behind that tree over an hour ago, the first time I pulled onto this overlook.

I was just about to make another joke when he blinked and the moment was broken. He nodded once, bent at the waist, and popped the trunk. I turned and moved to the back of the car to retrieve my bags.

But he was right next to me, reaching into the trunk before I had it all the way open, grabbing my

suitcase and overnight bag.

“Allow me,” he said, shooting me another of his wide grins.

“Really, Ranger Jethro, I can carry my own bags.”

“This is a full-service rescue, miss.” He stood straight, placing my eighty-pound oversized suitcase on the gravel, then slung my overnight bag on his shoulder. Instead of rolling the suitcase, he lifted it by the handle and carried it to the bed of his truck.

I frowned at his retreating form. “It has wheels, Ranger.”

“Don’t want to ruin them. This gravel’ll tear them up,” he explained on a grunt.

I lifted an eyebrow at his retreating back, completely caught off guard by his thoughtful observation and helpfulness.

Narrowing my eyes in suspicion, I moved to the back seat to grab my backpack. This really was a

Twilight Zone episode. A hot guy who was also capable?

Does not compute.

*Unless he's gay. Yeah, he's probably gay.*

In my experience, most hot guys who were both friendly and capable were gay. These were my favorite kind of hot guys. I hoped Ranger Jethro was gay.

When I straightened I saw him standing at the passenger side of his truck, watching me. He'd opened the door and was waiting, his flirty smile still in place. Now it was smaller and his eyes were just visible beneath the rim of his hat. His gaze moved up then down my body.

*Yeah . . . no. Ranger Jethro isn't gay.*

I faltered, my steps slowing, because I felt a little flutter of something unusual just under my ribcage, a quick intake of breath. It might have been attraction . . .

More likely, it was hunger and the fear of being

murdered.

I wished my cell phone had reception. Though he was official, I'd feel a lot better about getting into a stranger's car if I had the ability to tell someone else about it. Or at least tweet the details in one hundred forty characters or less: *If I'm found dead, it was the cute park ranger named after Moses's father-in-law.*

I drew even with him and the open door to the truck. Glancing inside, I asked, "So, Moses's father-in-law was named Jethro?"

"That's right." He tilted his head to the side and took my backpack from my shoulder.

My stomach fluttered again. I swallowed to combat the sensation. "How come I didn't know this?"

His eyes followed the line of my hair past my shoulders. "You must've missed the memo when it was sent."

Taking a deep breath for bravery, I climbed into

the truck. “Next thing you’re going to tell me that Moses’s uncle was named Darnel or Cletus.”

“Nope. His uncles’ names were Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel.” And with that, he placed my backpack at my feet and shut the door.

I watched him walk around the front of the truck, his steps unhurried, his hands resting on the tool belt around his narrow waist. I liked his tool belt; it made him look even more capable. Plus he had a nice walk. Not at all the sort of walk a murderer would employ.

As soon as he opened the driver’s side door, he said, “But Moses’s mother was also his father’s aunt. Seatbelt.”

I stared at his profile as he shut his door. “His mother’s name was Seatbelt?”

“No.” He flirty chuckled, his hazel eyes all twinkly as they moved over me, like he thought *I* was adorable. “Put on your seatbelt, miss.”

I did as instructed while I sorted through his



earlier statement rather than allow myself to be flustered by his capable and reassuring attention.

“So, Moses’s mother was also his father’s aunt?”

“That’s right.” He nodded once, starting the ignition and checking his mirrors. “Moses’s mother was named Jochebed, and her nephew, Amram, was Moses’s father.”

My mouth opened, then closed, then opened. I was finally able to manage, “So that would make his mother his great aunt?”

“And his grandfather was also his uncle, and his father was his cousin.”

The ranger made a U-turn, heading in the opposite direction I’d been going, and we were off.

“Huh . . .” I thought about this fact and not necessarily my words as I mumbled, “Well, you know what they say.”

“What’s that?”

“If you can’t keep it in your pants, keep it in the family.”

His eyes bulged, and he choked on his  
astonishment, throwing me a shocked glance.

Poor adorable Ranger Jethro. He looked like he  
didn't know whether to laugh or shriek in horror.

I'd shocked his delicate man-sensibilities.

He coughed out a strangled response, "I've never  
heard that before."

"Really? I would have thought—well, you know.  
Being up here, in the backwoods of Appalachia . .  
."

*Oh. Shit.*

"Did I just say that out loud?" I groaned and shut  
my eyes.

"Yes. You certainly did." Now he was laughing, a  
robust belly laugh. It sounded nice.

"Well, I thought, you know, I thought you people,  
um . . ." Now my face was red again, and this time  
it wasn't due to my cardio-map-assault workout.

But the fact he was laughing actually helped ease  
my mortification.

I honestly didn't care if people laughed with or at me. It was the laughter I was after, by any means necessary.

*"You people what?"* he pushed, his chuckle deep and wonderful.

Still, I was embarrassed because the words betrayed the narrow-minded direction of my thoughts. "Wow. That really came out wrong, garbled."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You're an eloquent speaker, and it sounded very clear to me," he teased.

*Did he just say eloquent?*

Rather than respond, *That's an awfully big word for a hot guy*, I said, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know what I'm saying. Please accept my apology. I've been driving around for hours and I haven't eaten since . . . I don't know when. In fact, what is my name? Where am I? I have no idea."

"You haven't told me your name, so I can't help

you there. But you're in Green Valley, Tennessee, on Moth Run Road."

*Wait . . . what?*

I peeked at Ranger Jethro. "You don't know my name?"

"I suppose you could always look in your wallet if you're desperate." He indicated with his chin toward my backpack, a smile still hovering on his features. "Once you figure it out, and if you're inclined to share, I'd like to know it as well."

I straightened and twisted in my seat, gaping at his profile. "You really don't know who I am?" I'm sure my tone betrayed my surprise because Ranger Jethro's smile fell away.

He stopped at a red light, switching his blinker on even though we were the only vehicle on the road.

His gaze flickered over my expression, and his was unmistakably anxious.

"Should I?" he asked warily.

I blinked once, downright dumbfounded by his

response.

Slowly, the wheels turned and the curtain was lifted, exposing the truth of my present situation. The flirty smiles, the lingering gazes, the gallant rescue—Ranger Jethro fancied me.

Me.

He'd been flirting with *me*.

Not Sienna Diaz, the movie star, comedian, millionaire, Oscar winner, America's sweetheart.

By Rodan's nostrils, I couldn't remember the last time I hadn't been recognized.

Plus, judging by the way he was looking at me now, I surmised he was worried we'd met before and he'd forgotten my name. Perhaps he even thought we'd slept together and he'd forgotten that, too.

And I finally realized what kind of hot guy he was. He was the serial-dating hot guy, the most dangerous of all. Because they're smart, they're funny, they're capable, and they're typically

charming.

Also, they're easy to fall for, because who doesn't want a hot, smart, funny, capable guy?

The problem is, they're not very nice. They're dangerous because they only want one thing—hot ladies. Lots of them. All the time.

And good for Ranger Jethro.

He should have his hot ladies. A year ago I would have gladly been one of his hot ladies. But just as I had no current interest in dating, I had no interest in losing my heart to a serial dater.

He swallowed thickly, looking acutely worried and bracing. And I couldn't help it, I honestly couldn't.

I threw my head back and laughed.

## **CHAPTER 2**

*"I'm not lost for I know where I am. But however, where I am may be lost."*

— A.A. Milne, *Winnie-the-Pooh*

~Jethro~

**I'D LOST MY** touch.

Instead of giving me her number—or even, you know, her name—this pretty lady was laughing at me. It was difficult not taking it to heart. Her loss of composure was clearly at my expense.

Except her laugh was as artless as it was contagious. So I laughed, too.

“Oh, Ranger Jethro.” She wiped at her big brown eyes; tears had darkened her lashes. I stared at them. She had the longest lashes I’d ever seen.

“You are so adorable. I just want to take you home and put you in my pocket.”

I’d prefer her pants, but I guess I’d settle for her pocket.

*For now . . .*

I flexed my fingers on the steering wheel, this last thought unsettling. Five years of self-imposed celibacy had me questioning what the hell was happening. What the hell was I doing? Why now and why—apart from the obvious—her?

Also, “adorable”? I successfully fought to keep a grimace off my face.

“You have a real nice laugh,” I remarked instead, because she did.

She gave me the side-eye and a flash of white teeth. My breath caught. Her smile was unreal.

And those dimples.

Wow.

She was speaking again, so I forced myself to look away from the dimples and listen. “Thank you, Ranger.

I

don’t

think

anyone

has

ever

complimented my laugh before.”

I reluctantly put my eyeballs back in my head and made a left onto The Parkway, clearing my



throat before remarking, “Then everyone you’ve met prior to me must be deaf.”

It wasn’t just her laugh, it was her voice. It was melodic. Plus there was something else . . . an intangible, magnetic quality. Natural and unforced. She laughed again, not as loud this time. “I’m not usually the one laughing,” she muttered. I glanced at her and saw her eyes were focused on the road beyond the windshield. “I guess I should pay attention to where we’re going if I’m going to be driving around up here and not be abducted by aliens or locals. Or local aliens.”

She may not have realized, but we were close to the turnoff for Bandit Lake. I debated whether or not to drive around the mountain once, keep her in the truck talking to me, because—though I’d sworn off women, stealing cars, and hurting people half a decade ago—this woman was all kinds of my type. Long hair, dark eyes, tall, more curves than straight lines. And she had lips that could only be

described as luscious. Yep. I had a physical type, and this woman checked all the boxes. This made her dangerous, a temptation.

I didn't miss that she'd yet to tell me her name.

Her reluctance, given the way I was instinctively responding to her, might've been a good thing.

I cleared my throat, oddly anxious. I couldn't remember the last time anyone made me nervous.

Maybe the female sheriff two towns away who'd booked me for suspected grand theft auto six years ago. She was real pretty. Strong. But she'd also carried a firearm.

Despite all the warning bells, the good, excited kind of nerves had me wracking my brain for a way to ask eyelashes and dimples for her name again without coming across as eager.

"Would you like a tour?" I drawled. "I make an excellent tour guide," I continued, purposefully layering on the charm. Man, I was rusty.

She glanced at me, her eyebrows raised in

question.

“Of the mountain?” I clarified, keeping my tone easy, gesturing to the road in front of us. “I could drive you around, show you where everything is so you don’t get lost anymore.” Then I added with a wink. “Though I wouldn’t mind rescuing you again.”

“What? Now?” She was inspecting me like I was unhinged, apparently immune to the charisma I was throwing her way. Or maybe it was going over her head.

“Sure.” I shrugged. “The loop isn’t too big.”

“Um . . .” She squirmed. “See, I would. But right now I have to pee like a hooker with a UTI. So if we could go directly to the lake house, that would be ideal,” she explained, her tone conversational.

I firmed my mouth, schooling my expression so I wouldn’t smile again. I didn’t think she was trying to be funny. She just said funny things. Funny and charming. Likely, they wouldn’t be so charming if

she weren't so goddamn gorgeous.

"If there's no food at Weller's place, I have a cooler behind your seat with a sandwich." I slowed and turned on my blinker. We'd arrived at the gravel road circling the lake.

"No. No, thank you. I can't take your lunch."

"I already had lunch, that sandwich is for emergencies."

She turned in her seat, giving me her full attention. "See, now I should carry an emergency sandwich. Good job. What a great idea."

I cocked an eyebrow at her tone and set my jaw, my defensive hackles rising unexpectedly. Her voice gave me the impression she was surprised I was capable of good ideas. It was the kind of tone city people used down here when they ordered a large coffee and called it a "Venti Americano . " I milled this over, plus her earlier words about backwoods Appalachia, and came to the conclusion she thought I was a hick.

Now, I admit, we have our fair share of hicks in Green Valley, Tennessee. We have hicks, hillbillies, rednecks, bumpkins, and the occasional reclusive yokel. But I was none of these things. Usually people making assumptions didn't bother me. I wasn't one to get needlessly twisted over the little things.

But coming from Miss Dimples, the unflattering assumption bothered me plenty. I didn't much like being dismissed or patronized.

"Yes, ma'am. Real genius idea. And I thought of it all by myself," I deadpanned, lowering my eyelids so I could squint at her. "And I dressed myself this morning, too." I paired my last statement with a smirk so she'd think I wasn't irritated, though I was irritated.

She hesitated for a moment, studying me, clearly not sure whether or not I was serious. I saw the wheels turn and her wince when she put two and two together. She heaved a great sigh and buried

her face in her hands. “I promise I’m not usually this awful. I’m just tired and hungry and have to pee.”

I chuckled, rubbing my chin as I pulled into Hank Weller’s drive. “I guess I’ll have to take your word for it, since you won’t even tell me your name.”

*Real smooth. Guilt her into it. Nice.* I shook my head at myself. I’d never had such trouble with a woman before, especially not when I was trying. Even nowadays they were offering their number before I’d offered my name.

“It’s Sarah.” She spoke from behind her fingers, so her words were a little garbled.

“Sarah? Nice to meet you, Sarah.” I cut the engine.

“No, it’s—” She lifted her head, her attention snagging on the building in front of us. “Where are we? Why did you stop?”

“We’re here.”

“We’re where?”

“At Hank’s place, at the lake.” I tilted my chin

toward the cabin. Well, it used to be a cabin.

Hank’s parents made some serious improvements over the years. Now it more closely resembled what my brother Cletus called “a McMansion.”

Her mouth opened and closed as she sputtered incoherently for a few seconds, finally asking, “You knew how to get here based on a person’s name?

You know which cabin belongs to Hank? Does everybody know everybody here? How do you know Hank?”

I hesitated, her deluge of questions requiring some strategic thought, debating my options regarding how honest I should be.

She seemed astonished by my familiarity with Hank’s address, not worried by it. I reckoned she wasn’t used to the dynamics of a small town.

Everybody knew Hank Weller. Everybody knew he went to Harvard, knew he was a troublemaker, and knew he’d been a source of disappointment to his

parents.

Just like everybody knew me, Jethro Winston, my younger five brothers, my beauty queen sister, my con-artist daddy, and my librarian heart-of-gold mother. There were no secrets in Green Valley.

Now, to the issue at present, I knew Hank

because he and Beau were good friends. Also,

Hank, Beau, and I went fishing together.

Additionally, I knew him because I'd stolen his daddy's Mercedes when I was sixteen.

But mostly, I knew Hank as a business partner.

He'd bought The Pink Pony, a local strip club,

some years ago. I did the carpentry and general

contracting work around the place in return for

being a silent partner. I'd built the bar, installed the stage,

and—more

recently—managed

the

expansion of the main building. He wanted to add a



champagne room, only he'd serve his home brew instead of champagne. Hank was also a microbrewer.

Hence, I had lots of options regarding how I could answer her questions and still be truthful.

I turned to face her, bracing my hand on the back of her seat, and addressed her questions at a leisurely pace. "Now, let's see." I scratched my chin. "Yes, I knew how to get here based on Hank's name. There are a few Hanks in this town, but only one Hank with a cabin on Bandit Lake. That's because there's only about fifteen lots up here that don't belong to the government. The land can't be sold; it can only be inherited."

"Really?" She turned to face me again, angling her shoulders this time. Her temple fell to the headrest as her eyes moved over my face, clearly fascinated.

Now I felt the weight of her full attention, I had to concentrate. "To your other question, most

everybody knows most everybody here, except there's a few reclusive families up in the hills who live off the grid. We're not quite sure how many or what their first names are, but we see them about town every so often, coming in for supplies or wanting to barter at the Sunday market. They're called the Hills."

"Because they live in the hills?"

"No. Because that's their last name. Hill."

Her pretty mouth formed a silent *Oh*, her eyebrows jumping a half-inch. She nodded thoughtfully, absorbing this information.

"I've known Hank for a long time, since he and my brother used to run around naked in the backyard of my momma's house."

She grinned at this, her mahogany eyes warming and dancing. "He used to do the same thing in the dorms, so I'm not terribly surprised."

That made me chuckle. "Yeah, well he's never been a fan of clothes, on himself or others."

“He runs a strip club now, right?” she asked, the friendliness and lack of judgment in her tone catching me unawares.

“That’s right.” I nodded slowly, assessing her with renewed interest. “The Pink Pony.”

In my experience, there were three kinds of women: those that stripped at strip clubs, those that liked going to strip clubs, and those that disliked strip clubs. I understood all three perspectives and now I wondered which of the three she belonged to.

Damn if I didn’t hope it was the first one.

We stared at each other for a protracted moment and I noted her gaze narrow, sharpen as she lifted a single eyebrow and grinned. “Ranger Jethro, are you wondering whether I’m a stripper?”

I was surprised by the suddenness and bluntness of the question, but recovered quickly. It was the closest she’d come to flirting with me, so I mirrored her sharp look and her grin, and shrugged. “Can’t

say it didn't cross my mind."

"Well, I'm not. But I have taken lessons." Her voice dropped a half octave, the curve of her mouth growing less friendly and more seductive, playful.

"Oh?" I tried to contain my own smile, adopting a mock serious expression though I couldn't quite fill my lungs with enough air. Now this was more like it. "Tell me more."

"I had to take them last year for research."

"Research?" I nodded thoughtfully, encouraging her to continue.

"That's right." Her gaze dropped to my mouth, a subtle shift that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention.

My pulse quickened. Christ, she was pretty. I admit, now that she was no longer talking to me like I was a simpleton, I was having a lot of trouble focusing on the conversation. Got to love the irony.

"Really? Care to share what you learned?"

She shook her head, her long hair bouncing around her shoulders and settling on her chest along the swell of her breasts, her lips saying, “No,” with an enchanting velvet cadence, making it sound like a *yes*.

I blinked.

*Well, hell.*

She was good at this.

*Really* good at this.

Like recognizes like, and what I had on my hands here was a professional charmer. This revelation was as shocking as finding moonshine in Reverend Seymour’s Sunday punchbowl, because her earlier appearance of honesty and awkwardness had been downright disarming. Whereas now she had me wondering if it had been an act.

Impossibly long eyelashes lowered to half mast.

An alluring smirk that hinted at devilish dimples played over her lips. Her eyes had changed from a rich mahogany to a dark Peruvian walnut . . .

Excuse the clumsy comparison, but I'm a man who knows and loves my wood.

I waited to see what she'd do next, enjoying the building and thickening tension, impressed with her game. Yeah, this girl had game in spades.

At length, her smile grew and she sighed. It sounded whimsical. "This is fun."

"What's that?"

"Flirting with a national park ranger."

My eyes widened because I was both surprised and delighted by her candor. Perhaps the honesty hadn't been an act after all.

Hell . . . I *liked* this girl.

"Is that what we're doing, Miss Sarah?" I was sure to say her name in a low rumble, making it sound like a dirty word.

She gave me a teasingly reproachful look and unfastened her seatbelt. "Come now, Ranger. None of that. We're all adults here. Plus, I can't sit in this car all day with a full bladder, otherwise I'm going

to pee on your upholstery. And just think of the headlines.”

She gripped the handle and was moving to disembark. Remembering myself, I quickly popped open my door and jumped out, jogging around to her side just as she’d pushed her door open. I held it and reached a hand out to help her out.

Her attention darted between my offered hand and my face with a quizzical look. Shooting me a suspicious stare, she accepted help down from the cab.

Now, something odd happened just then. Odd because she’d grabbed my arm back on the mountain road and I’d felt nothing in particular.

Perhaps it was merely a residual after-effect of our recent flirting, or perhaps it was the dry mountain air—or perhaps it was the five years flying solo—but an unexpected shock of warmth traveled up my arm as her palm slid against mine. Her expression didn’t change. Whereas for me, the earth tilted,

time slowed, and I was momentarily caught.

When I didn't release her straight away, she gazed up at me with round eyes. "What? What is it?"

I held her stare and her fingers for another beat, searching. She seemed oblivious, so I dropped her hand.

"Uh, nothing." I couldn't quite swallow. "Look for a key under the rug. Let me grab your bags."

My words coming out gruff, I stepped around her and moved to the bed of the truck.

Combating the lingering and uncomfortable sense that something significant just happened, I shook my head to clear it and lifted her luggage from the truck. Just as I had all the bags lowered to the ground, my phone buzzed in my back pocket.

I glanced at the screen before accepting the call and raising it to my ear. "Hello, Cletus."

"Jethro," came his typical greeting. Cletus was number three in the family, by far the smartest, and



the oddest. “You need to head over to Jeanie’s right now.”

“I do?” I glanced at the phone again, making note of the time and returning it to my ear; it was just past four, too early for beer and line dancing at Jeanie’s place. “Why’s that?”

“Claire needs rescuing.”

My head cleared at the mention of Claire and habit had me mapping out the quickest route to Jeanie’s. Claire McClure was my former best friend’s widow. For the last five years her welfare had been my primary focus, the reason for every good decision I’d made.

“Claire never needs rescuing,” I responded.

And she didn’t. As much as I’d felt it my place to see to her well-being since Ben McClure’s death in Afghanistan, she saw things differently. Recently—and more and more—I got the sense she was merely putting up with my meddling. I did my best to look after her, stop by her house to see if

anything required attention, but that woman was tough as nails and as capable as a honey badger. More often than not, she'd give me a beer, let me hang a picture or fiddle with her gutters, then send me on my way.

"Well, she needs rescuing now."

I sighed, peering through Hank Weller's open door where the charming and mysterious Sarah had disappeared. "What's going on?"

"Come to Jeanie's," Cletus whispered ominously, then promptly hung up.

I glanced at the screen of my phone and cursed quietly. I knew Cletus wouldn't answer if I tried to call back. His custom of undersharing and treating everything as top secret was usually funny. But sometimes it was just plain irritating.

Slipping my cell into the back pocket of my uniform pants, I grabbed Sarah's bags and carried them over the gravel and stone pavers of the driveway. I mounted the steps and rolled the largest