

CHAPTER TWO



Leslie waved to her cousin Max across the restaurant. Good ole reliable Max. Thank goodness for his generosity. Otherwise, she'd never eat out. She'd been swallowing her pride to accept his dinner offers ever since her rough patch four years ago. The rift that kept on giving.

Max sidled over to Leslie's booth. "What's the verdict, cuz?"

"I got the job!"

He offered a high-five as the waitress appeared. "Hey, Maisie." His noting of her name tag prefaced a wink. "What specials do you recommend for a special cousin celebrating a new job?"

Of course, he confirmed Leslie as a cousin. *You flirt*. Yet a small price to pay for free meals. She loved Kipp's Diner for the adorable decor. Max loved it for the adorable waitresses.

Maisie smiled. "I can offer a complimentary dessert." She took orders and left.

Max leaned forward. "Tell me all about it, Les. No surprise you're a shoo-in."

“Besides managing grant proposals, I’m helping with social media.”

“What? The antiquated university’s going all modern and high-tech?” He spread his fingers like an opening sea anemone and made a sizzling sound. “That’s you, Les. Hot stuff. Leading them into the twenty-first century.”

She smirked. “We’ll see. But if I get Greg Stafford onboard, it’ll prove I can work with anybody.”

“*The Greg Stafford? Mr. I-can’t-be-bothered-with-trifling-women’s-magazines?*”

“The very one who blew me off like dandelion fluff.”

“The planets are aligned, finally. Hey, this is your chance to pick his brain.”

“If he lets me do the picking.”

“Isn’t that why you applied there?”

“Partially. He’s still the best source of Buckwalter intel.” She needed details about his interviews with Fritz’s heirs for her own project. “Working there gives me opportunities to approach him, but I didn’t expect to be hired as the burr in his saddle.”

“You’ll win him over. You’ve never run from a challenge.”

“At least I won’t be begging for a job at Klipton’s.”

“You’ll be in your element, Les. College atmosphere. Closer to the source. More inspiration for finishing your novel.”

Leslie sipped water. “Dr. Stafford’s got hard-won nuggets he’s saving for his Buckwalter biography. He’d sooner go joyriding on *Moby Dick* than share them with me.”

“So, what’s your angle?”

“My only leverage is *my* hard-won nuggets. And anything Oma tells me. If she changes her mind.”

“How’s the novel going?”

“I finished the second draft.” Thank goodness for her

critique group. "It's shaping up, but I'm stuck. I'm missing details."

"Ones only Greg knows."

"Okay, I know we've both done it, but don't refer to him as Greg anymore, or I'll accidentally call him that to his face."

Max chuckled. "That I'd like to see."

"Besides, I'd be crazy to mention my historical fiction to him. Me, the peon."

"At least he won't see you as competition."

"Right, that's laughable. Like a slug racing an antelope."

"You're no slug, Les. At least compare yourself to something higher up the food chain."

"Okay, a squirrel."

"Give yourself some credit."

"Okay, a hound dog."

"All right, all right. Did you meet the guy yet?"

"Briefly. He was friendly until Dr. Martin mentioned social media." She drank more water. "He probably only respects women with capital letters after their names, the more the better. I have a BA. Plus, we're both starting with mutual distrust."

"Yours is well grounded." He pressed his thumb and twisted it on the table as if squashing a bug, his usual gesture whenever mentioning her ex. "Any Vic updates?"

"He got a new number and texted me today. I blocked him again."

"What he'd say?"

She winced, not wanting to reveal Vic's threats. "Wishing me well, as usual. Asking about your well-being."

"Yeah, right. In defense of my half of the human race, not all of us men are pond scum."

"You're the exception." Despite harmless flirting with pretty-faced waitresses. "I ended up with the frog anyhow. Not

one who turns into a prince.” She fingered her teacup. “At least Greg’s not pretending to charm me. That was my downfall with Vic.” Three years of sweet-talking led to marriage, then being duped. Despite a year of therapy, that nightmare still needed her self-esteem.

“With Greg, what you see is what you get. That’s the safe way.”

“Look who’s talking, Romeo.”

He offered a lopsided grin. “I only charm the girls who like the attention. It doesn’t go beyond the surface.”

Leslie squinted. “If we weren’t cousins, I would *not* be hanging out with you, Casanova.”

“Tough you can’t decide between Romeo or Casanova. And lucky for me, we share bloodlines. Can’t imagine life without you, cuz.”

She couldn’t, either. Besides being childhood friends, he’d stood by her through that treacherous year with Vic.

“Hey, is Greg married?”

She shrugged. “Who cares? I didn’t check his ring finger.”

“Well, if he goes after pretty faces, I’m wondering how he could resist *yours*.” He waggled his eyebrows. “You’re blonde and brainy. A package deal.”

She cringed at the notion of the older, cocky professor trying to woo her for his own benefit. “You’re sweet, Max, but shut up. The main thing is, regarding Greg—I mean, Dr. Stafford—I won’t have to deal with deceitful charm.”

“No, just the tongue of a snake and the mood of a ravenous bear.”

“Preferable to fake charm. Say, are you going to Crestwood with me next Saturday? Your mom says Oma wants to see us.” Her grandma had raised her.

“I might be playing pickleball with Susie-Q.”

“Who’s Susie-Q?” Leslie pouted. “I thought *we* were pickleball partners.”

“As always. But Susie is *Q* for Quality.”

Quality flirt? “Whatever.” Leslie rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you ever date level-headed girls with names like Ruth or Barbara or Edna?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Edna? Seriously?” He lifted his glass. “Cheers! Congrats again on your new job. Here’s to taming the hungry bear.”

* * *

That evening, Leslie poised over her laptop. She did finger calisthenics, then prepared to strike keys with reckless abandon. But it was no use.

Stupid novel! Why was she so driven to write it? She popped up so fast the chair rolled back several feet. She stalked to the bookshelf and swiped a framed eight-by-ten photo.

This crazy novel venture was the impetus for seeking Dr. Stafford’s expertise. When she’d sought that interview for the article, she figured his potent facts would benefit her novel too. A story about an author she’d long been fascinated by.

Who just happened to be kin.

She blinked at the 1990s photograph from childhood. Leslie sat with Great-uncle Fritz on his front porch in Dillard, Wisconsin. With Max, Leslie soaked in his tall tales, laughing indulgently. Though Fritz’s readers were adults, he could spin a child’s tale so delightfully giddy, the story threads still wrapped around her years later.

No doubt Greg Stafford would trade his first printing book collection for information she kept safely tucked away from probing eyes.

As a granddaughter of Fritz's brother Edmund, she'd hidden her branch of the family tree at Oma's request. Too much drama—including his few days in jail, captured on microfilm in newspaper archives. Family turmoil prompted Oma's move from Dillard and a surname change to Wickersham after her husband Edmund passed away in the 1950s. But what else happened? To put it in literary terms, Leslie didn't even know the inciting incident.

She held a wedding photo of Klara and Edmund, an enigmatic man her grandma fondly called her soulmate, her Eddie. They had two little girls—one of them Leslie's mom.

She swapped photos and gazed at her mother, whose arm sheltered seven-year-old Leslie. But instead of protecting her, she'd ripped her heart open by walking out. Forever. This was the last picture of them together.

Biting her lip, Leslie traipsed to the dinette. She browsed through mail, mostly junk, only one letter, to her post office box. Return address: Vic Rinaldi. Ugh. Not from the law firm that maneuvered their divorce, but directly from him. Fortunately, he didn't know where she lived.

Earlier, his text said:

Got a new number. Check your mail. Vic

Eight little words written to infuriate her. She just wanted him out of her life, and he knew it.

She slammed the envelope on the tabletop and whirled away. In the tiny kitchen, she put away dishes. *Plunk, plunk, plunk*. How'd they pile so quickly? She hardly cooked. Suppers consisted of anything that fit on a microwave plate.

Leslie never told Vic about her Buckwalter kinship, since Oma didn't trust him and had sworn her to secrecy. But shortly before Leslie vacated their apartment, Vic went through her files in a fit of retaliation and inadvertently discovered the

paperwork connecting her to Fritz Buckwalter. He was furious she'd never told him—his cue to double down and take charge.

That was Vic—doing what a narcissist does best. Now she was paying for her previous silence. Literally. She wanted to tell her lawyer about Vic's shenanigans, but her meager income had gone to a year of therapy after the divorce.

Furthermore, living under Edmund's umbrella of shame, she'd never want Greg Stafford to charm her out of intel due to his passion for research. She wouldn't trust his tactics if he knew her heritage.

As inconsequential as a dog scratching fleas. Greg meant the magazine, but it might as well be her. She had no clout, while he thrived as a bigwig among his cronies. Never mind she'd won a short story contest last year, was a finalist in other contests, and published freelance articles. Stafford researched American literary icons and cozied up to contemporary authors with multiple publishing credits. Whereas she was a mouse among elephants.

Did he refuse her because she wasn't a bona fide journalist? Or because he disdained sharing hard-won expertise in a common women's magazine?

Leslie paged through a family album, pictures encapsulating the twentieth century. She and Max danced across later pages in full color.

Every summer, she'd spent two months at her aunt and uncle's home. Aunt Martha and Uncle Russ treated her like a daughter. He'd scoop her to his shoulders for zoo walks and tossing breadcrumbs to the ducks, comforted her for scraped knees, cradled her on his lap for bedtime fairy tales. He'd patiently handled her teen angst as she slogged through middle and high school. He'd tell her she was pretty, and read stories she'd scribbled on notebook paper, applauding her creativity.

Sad was the day he passed away, shortly after she'd graduated with a Bachelor of Arts.

He never would've endorsed Vic Rinaldi. He'd have spied red flags long before she did, though Vic's charm defied all radar.

Fritz and his brothers, August and Edmund, flitted through the album in gray, black, and white while standing on the porch, waiting on customers at Buckwalter Brothers Grocery, posing by their automobiles, or encircled by their wives and children.

Fourteen years ago, Leslie visited Great-uncle Fritz and pried him with questions. While Great-aunt Wilma spoiled her with Fritz's favorite desserts—Bee Sting Cake and Apple Strudel—jovial Fritz expounded on his childhood and the grocery store venture, his detour to literary fame. In his inimitable way, he relayed hilarious town anecdotes, family farm capers, and new novel ideas while chain-smoking cigars and blowing smoke to the clouds.

According to Fritz, they were one big happy family with a thriving business, even after he enjoyed literary success. Reminiscing on how he and Edmund loved wordplay, puns, and riddles, he showed her copies of old newsletters they'd printed in the early 1940s.

But she needed more data. She'd milked Grandma's and Aunt Martha's memories, but Leslie suspected they were holding out. Certain questions still prompted flickers of pain, shrugs, answers as vague as oatmeal, and a change of subject. Moreover, Oma discouraged contact with Fritz's descendants. Leslie's interview requests met dead ends.

Her only recourse was Greg Stafford, who'd met them all. But even he didn't know everything. Oma never afforded him the coveted interview.

Sighing, Leslie replaced the album. Anxiety pricked her.

THE BROKEN WEATHERVANE

She got the job contract, but could she earn Greg's respect? If so, he might be receptive to aiding her. That is, if she ever conjured the gumption to tell him about writing historical fiction. With no intention of revealing her family ties, she needed that angle.

Her pet project. Her ticket to sanity, akin to journaling. She planned to integrate Fritz and Edmund as characters while staging events around them. Staying true to their lives, she'd show Fritz's impact amidst his rise to literary fame. Though fictionalized, it was a way to wrestle through the chaos of her roots, to reconcile the past, to deal with family branches that had been lopped off as limbs for kindling—mainly her grandfather's offspring. If Greg Stafford gleaned any of that from his interviews, maybe she'd discover why her cousins continually rebuffed her.

Or why her mother left, without a hint of her father's identity.

But to gain Stafford's help, she needed his respect. To be true to the Buckwalters and understand family dynamics, as long as her grandma remained silent, Leslie needed information he was saving for the biography.

Back at the table, she opened the letter from Vic.

Hey Leslie,

I need another \$300 by the 15th. You know the gig.

—Vic

She knew the gig, all right. For six months now. If she failed to send money, he'd call the press—or Greg Stafford. He'd reveal Leslie as Fritz's great-niece, granddaughter of Edmund, divulging a tie her grandmother had worked hard to suppress for over sixty years.