

Chapter 1

✿ I stood at the top of the stairs kneading the newel post. The oven timer groaned from the kitchen below. Four pies—two apple, a cherry, and an elderberry—filled the house with a nutty sweetness, meaning the crust was golden and the sauce had thickened around the fruit. I'd finished my shower and started toward the kitchen long before the timer sounded, but now I stood frozen like a raccoon in the beam of a flashlight. Such bold marauders.

Below me, the stairs were a mountainside of wildflowers—a swath of starry edelweiss and buttercups, lupine and red gilia—all growing among granite boulders and spiked grasses from the second-floor landing to the first floor. A breeze that neither lifted my apron nor jostled my curls, whipped the grass and set the flowers dancing.

The timer grew more insistent. Nutty sweetness turned bitter, a sign the pies' crusts had edged beyond golden to toasted. I closed my eyes, but the mountainside remained. I knew better. A few weeks earlier I'd sat on the top step, enjoying the deep purple of the lupine and watching a deliciously red ladybug crawl across

a boulder, but I hadn't had pies in the oven that day, only a load of towels in the dryer.

The timer groaned on, sounding a bit tired from its unanswered call. I slid my foot down the step's riser, willing my brain to ignore the flowery slope and to think of stairs, predictable and ordered. One step. Two steps. A boulder?

"You're not there," I said to the boulder. "I can walk right through you, yes I can. And I will."

Fooling myself proved harder than I thought.

I overstepped and missed the next stair. My ankle twisted and cracked like kindling. I fell forward, reached for the railing that had belatedly reappeared, but my knee hit the wooden stair hard, and my head bounced on the last two risers before I came to a stop. A hot poker of pain seared my ankle. I fumbled with my sneakers and screamed with the movement. With reluctant fingers, I felt a lump rising over my ankle bone. My foot lay at an unnatural angle. I writhed like a landed trout on the floor. I needed help, but moving only intensified the pain.

Bee's dog door slammed shut, and her claws tapped eagerly across the floor. She stopped, tilted her head as if to ask: *What kind of game is this?* She held a tennis ball in her mouth.

You've got to be kidding. "Not now, Bee. Go away!"

She slunk toward me, dropped the ball in my lap, and nosed my hand.

My ankle screamed and so did I. "Bee!"

She lapped at my face and made to sit across my lap. I pushed hard on her chest, but she lowered herself slowly to straddle my legs, all seventy pounds of her. With my ankle crying for attention, I debated who to call. I hated to make a fuss, but I knew the EMTs in town; Tom and Veryl liked nothing better than sounding the sirens.

Then twinkling lights danced before my eyes, and the decision left my hands.

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