

***Bring Your Fiction to Life:
Crafting Three-Dimensional Stories with Depth and
Complexity By Karen Wiesner
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Example***

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BOUND SPIRITS, Book 1, Bloodmoon Cove Spirits Series by
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This excerpt from the book is provided so you can see how these dimensions
were developed within the fully-fleshed out story.

Chapter 1

John Kotter couldn't imagine what it was that made people say you couldn't go home again. The knowledge that he'd said those very words himself ten years ago--and he'd said them, in many ways, as a vow--struck him as ironic now. He hadn't *wanted* to come back then. Oh, his intention hadn't been to abandon his parents and never see them again. *More like I fully intended to abandon Bloodmoon Cove and the park I spent my life in...loving. I wanted to leave to escape the censure of the town's last memory of my selfish failure.*

He'd been the happiest kid in the world, growing up in a park complete with a campground, living at the base of the most majestic mountain he'd ever laid eyes on. He and his cousin Twyla, who was six years younger than him, had been given free reign of the place. They'd gone everywhere, seen everything of their little piece of the world. Once upon a time, John had imagined himself taking over the campground when his dad retired. But then his dad's brother and his wife left with Twyla, John's best friend in the world. In the process, they'd done the unthinkable, what few had dared before in these parts. Folks didn't leave Bloodmoon Cove. They grew up, found employment usually in the family business, started a family, and life just went around and around like a circle.

John had imagined that same life for himself. When he was only seventeen, tragedy that he'd never, ever considered could happen *did*

happen. His only recourse had seemed black-and-white to him. Leave Bloodmoon Cove and his dream of running the park like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather. Make a life for himself *anywhere else* because he couldn't live here anymore where everyone looked at him with blame, accusation, anger.

So he'd left. Gone to a four-year-college and gotten his Bachelor's degree, specializing in natural resources, completed the Seasonal Law Enforcement Training Program to become a law enforcement ranger, then he'd worked seasonally at the first national park that hired him in Arizona. He'd worked there for five years. He'd still be there now if fresh tragedy hadn't struck.

After a decade away, John Kotter was back in Bloodmoon Cove, back to the life he'd spent his entire childhood dreaming of until the dream turned sour and wrong. *Only I never wanted to come back this way. I didn't want to end up running this place until Dad officially retired. But Dad's death put me in charge. There's no one else, and I can't just let this park die, too.*

John drove toward his family legacy, Bloodmoon Cove Park, at first light on May third. Already, the day was shaping up to be overcast, freezing cold, and light snow blew with the promise of much more to come--a marked contrast to the absolutely gorgeous spring weather he and his mother had experienced yesterday afternoon. John, his mother and his grandfather had grilled out and spent most of the afternoon and evening in the backyard, soaking up the brilliant, warm sunshine. He wasn't surprised at the change today though. Weather conditions had always been volatile this close to the base of the mountain. Bloodmoon Cove's winter wouldn't end until, maybe, late June, and sometimes longer than that. When John was just a kid, his father, grandfather, and family friend and Mino-Miskwi tribal leader George Maulson had taught him to read the sky. They were in for a doozy of a blizzard and the bad weather would arrive soon. Even still, John had known he couldn't put this trip off much longer.

He made the turn, heading for the campground entrance. The wind grew fiercer, battering against his truck, trying to push the heavy-duty vehicle off the road. John frowned in surprise at the road ahead of him. He hadn't expected the two-mile-long driveway to be mostly plowed of snow. In truth, no one had been here since the camping season had ended abruptly last September, when his father disappeared, presumed dead. Would the county sheriff--the only law enforcement in Bloodmoon Cove--have sent someone to plow? Why? John couldn't say he and Graham "Gray" Mecham were close buddies. He and Gray got along, sure. But even mild friendship didn't warrant the amount of work it would take to plow out all these roads.

In the three weeks since John had quit his law enforcement ranger position in Arizona last October, trained his replacement, and wrapped up his life knowing he'd never leave Bloodmoon Cove again once he settled back here, he'd realized how few friends he actually had left in Bloodmoon Cove.

Twyla had been gone for a long time. And the reason he'd left here, Cara-Marie's suicide...well, he'd alienated a lot of the people he thought were his friends with that situation. They blamed him for daring to consider a life for himself away from their hometown. Sometimes he even thought his mother harbored the same accusations toward him.

John shook his head, gazing around him in astonishment as he drove closer to the park. He'd expected to see the place a wreck. For almost nine months, no one had been here to take care or "winterize" before the park abruptly closed for the season. His mother had done only what she had no choice to do in closing the place up: Hired someone to come in and pressurize the system at the well house, close the stop valves on the toilets, and turn off the water in the park restrooms. She couldn't have coped with more than that after losing her beloved husband.

John had come home to take over the park, fully expecting to have to hire someone to help him get the place back up to code. While his mom didn't want the family park to close indefinitely any more than her elderly father-in-law, Patrick, did, she knew she couldn't run the place herself. For one thing, she was a nurse at the teeny-tiny hospital in town and her services there were desperately needed. Besides, she was also a full-time, live-in nurse for Patrick. For another, she had a son in the park ranger business. So many generations of Kotters had run the park. John's father, David, had wanted him to be the next in line. When he'd come home for his father's funeral recently thinking he'd only be there for a few days, John had never considered saying no when his mother asked him to come home permanently and take over their family heritage.

On the passenger's side of the 4x4 park truck that'd belonged to John's father and had been passed down to him, his German Shepherd Robert barked when John slowed down before the gatehouse. All his life growing up here, his family had had dogs, but John hadn't gotten one when he moved away. He hadn't expected his father's dog to take to him so quickly. His mother had told him Robert had spent all this time grieving, barely eating since David was taken from him. Somehow, the German Shepherd saw John as an acceptable substitute for his long-time companion.

John put the truck into park, then jumped out, the dog on his heels, and moved to the barrier blocking the road. Beside it was the entrance station with huge panes of glass, a visitor's first stop into the park. The only other way in or out of the park was a service road that only employees were allowed to use.

Planting his feet on the ground to keep the icy wind from blowing him right over, John reached down to his belt. With his Under Armour acrylic hat crammed down around his ears, he managed to find the right key on the retractable key chain his father had worn on his belt for most of his life, then unlocked the padlock securing the thick chain around the barrier gate.

Robert was already exploring eagerly, so John unlocked the gatehouse.

Inside the strangely immaculate campground office, he pressed the button to automatically open the gate barrier outside. He got back into his truck, drove through the open gate, then got back out leaving the vehicle door open. He closed the barrier and locked up the building on the way back out.

Despite the sun peeking occasionally through the clouds and snow, the day remained dark and foreboding. The wind was screaming like all the demons in hell were amassing at the portal. He was hoping to finish his assessment quickly so he could be back in town before the storm hit.

"Robert, come on," he called to his dog, "let's go check out the host house."

The dog obediently jumped back inside and took up vigil at his side. John paused only long enough to wipe down his seat, then drove slowly through the campground first, marveling at the condition of the park considering how long it'd been neglected. His mom had specifically told him she hadn't done anything that wasn't absolutely necessary. When he'd decided he needed to make a run out here to assess the condition of the park, he'd brought along a tablet, expecting to compile a long list of things that needed to be done before the campground re-opened in early June. Sure, most everything was under a few inches of snow and therefore he couldn't know for certain what needed work, but someone had been taking care of this place. For one thing, all the roads were plowed. Additionally, the winterization his mother had willfully neglected last September looked done. He even found a compost pile at the edge of the small copse of trees around the side of the host house.

What in the world's going on here?

The campground house itself was another surprise. The two-story German log and stone structure was unusual with the logs exposed to the outside. John had always found the place charming and a little creepy because of that break from traditional German-built log-and-stone houses. Something about it looked unfinished and even mismatched. The symmetry was off somehow. The inside had everything anyone could need, of course, and it was comfortable. But someone had been here. The sidewalk leading up to the house had been shoveled recently. His second clue was that thick smoke wound its way out of the chimney, mostly blown apart by the wind but still noticeable. Long before winter, John and his dad had always been preparing the woodshed next to the house, filling it with wood that would last them through the winter. Since their family lived at the campground back then, they'd used the wood burning stove instead of electric heat that'd been put in by his grandfather. His mom had moved into a small rental house in town with Patrick after David went missing.

As John walked around the backyard of the house, he noticed someone had put the cover over the central air unit--something he knew for a fact his mother would never have thought to do. The grill and furniture on the back porch had also been secured with winter coverings. Plus, the exterior faucets

had been wrapped.

Shaking his head, John walked back around to the front of the house warily, making his footsteps up to the porch light and soundless. He was relieved to be out of the wind flecked with ice shards that made his eyes water. The shrieking sound became muffled under the porch roof, thankfully.

He put a restraining hand on Robert's head, and the canine understood he was asking him not to bark or rush inside once the door was unlocked. When John closed a hand around the doorknob to unlock it with the key, the knob turned easily. Maybe his mother had done little to close up the park, but she would have locked the front door for sure. The Shepherd walked beside him cautiously when he opened the front door and stepped quietly inside.

His mother had confirmed that morning that she'd made sure the electric heat was turned to a minimum safe temperature that would prevent the pipes from freezing in September. Yet the house felt cozy and warm. *And it looks lived in. Dishes in the drainer...from supper last night? Book--one of the old classics Mom and Dad love--next to the sofa in front of the wood burning stove in the living room, where we used to gather at night and play board games.*

John nudged open the door of the one bedroom that was downstairs. While the bed was neatly made, there was the impression of a head on one of the pillows. Someone had been sleeping here.

He moved out and entered the small bathroom with the free-standing shower, toilet and sink. A towel hung next to the shower--it was dry, as if waiting to be used. He opened the medicine cabinet and saw a toothbrush, travel-sized toothpaste and lotion, a comb, and feminine products. *Okay, so the squatter is a woman. All "mini" items that could have come from the camp store. Probably did.* Inside the shower, he saw the same familiar items--travel-sized shampoo, conditioner, and a bar of soap.

Still on cat feet, John started up the staircase toward the three bedrooms upstairs. *Strange. After I left, Mom said she and Dad slept in the bedroom downstairs. They closed the door at the bottom of the stairs and blocked up the crack beneath so the cold air couldn't get through, and they stopped heating the upstairs for the winter.* He heard the soft whisper of Robert's paws on the stairs behind him and the dog sniffed the whole time. At the top, John couldn't avoid the creaking. No matter where he stepped, he'd learned there was no escaping that inevitable creak.

He stalled on the landing. Like he expected, the upstairs was significantly colder than the rest of the house had been. One door on the second floor was open a crack, and Robert disappeared soundlessly into it after sniffing the hallway runner. John didn't have time to call him back. *So much for sneaking up on this squatter.*

Sighing in frustration, he crept his way to the door and peeked his head around it. Robert stood in the room, licking the hand of a small woman

huddled in the corner of the room, hands over ears, shivering and singing an old hymn, obviously fatigued from doing so, under her breath. John knew his dad's dog--no way would Robert befriend a stranger, certainly not in this affectionate way. It was obvious the canine had recognized the scent of the woman long before he came upon her up here.

The woman jumped to her feet, seeing John. Her eyes were wide open in shock. With no warning whatsoever, she rushed at him and threw herself full-body into his arms. She sounded like she was sobbing when she exclaimed, "You're alive!"

John had no idea what was going on. Why had she been huddled in the corner of the room with her hands over her ears? She'd seemed deathly afraid at first--before she'd launched herself into his arms. Had she heard him drive up, seen or heard him walking around the house? Maybe, but he couldn't shake the feeling that she'd been expecting someone or something else entirely.

Who was this person? Who did she think he was?

Even with a dozen questions circling his head, he became aware of the slight, shivering form of the woman in his arms. She was a good head shorter than him and slim as a sprite. Yet he couldn't escape the fact that she was a woman and she had all the curves of one. He'd instinctively grabbed her when she flew at him, and he felt the hourglass shape of her waist, the slight curve of feminine hips, and a swell of breasts beneath the too-large clothes he'd glimpsed.

Swallowing an emotion he didn't want to experience, he reached up to cradle the head covered in long, thick, blondish-black hair. Then he drew back to look at the waif-ish face.

Just as lightning quick as she'd come at him before, her expression changed now and she fumbled for a moment before she backed off with a flare gun held tightly before her--trained straight at his chest.

Never before had he seen a face more terrified, more closed-off, more contradictorily sweet as this young woman's. Her full bottom lip was trembling as she said wildly, "You're not him. I thought you were him."

"Him who?" John had no doubt that if he didn't speak softly and reassuringly, she'd start screaming bloody murder in a second. Very carefully, he put his hands up to pacify her.

"The man...the one who was here before. He went up on the mountain, and he didn't come back. I couldn't find him."

"My father? You knew my father?"

She didn't respond, only looked at him with confused, scared eyes. "He looked like you...but not."

John nodded.

"He was tall and wide like you. I thought you were him. That's the only reason. But you're not him."

John took after his mother with deeply bronze skin, dark hair and forest

green eyes, but he was six foot and muscular like his father. At first sight, he supposed someone could mistake him for his old man. "I'm related to him. Who are you? How do you know my dad?"

She shook her head, waving the flare gun. "Don't come any closer."

Though he hadn't moved in her direction even one step, John tried to keep himself from laughing. "Look, lady, everything's okay. I wanna know why you're staying here, of course, but I promise I'm not gonna hurt you. The dog won't hurt you either. Obviously he's a pushover."

She shook her head, murmuring in a distracted tone, "He's too well-trained. Whatever David told him to do, he did."

"You obviously know my dad and his dog," John said, beginning to wonder again what exactly was going on here. How long had she been here? Before September, the dog had lived his whole life in this park. He knew every square inch. He knew all the regulars who came here. Obviously he knew this woman...and John's dad had known her, too. How? John couldn't get himself to believe anything lascivious and not simply because this woman was clearly young. Like most Kotter men, his old man had spent most of his life alone. When he'd met Natalia, he'd realized why no other woman appealed to him. She was quite simply the only one for him. But that didn't answer the question of how this squatter knew his old man.

Instead of responding, she looked at him again with her mouth open. Then she swallowed harshly, her throat sounding bone dry in the frigid air. "Did you hear it?"

John shook his head, doubly confused. "Hear what?"

"The screaming."

Is she up here in the bitter cold, hiding because she heard something that scared her--not my presence? Something else? Who else could be screaming? This place is deserted.

Frowning, John asked, "You mean the wind?" It'd been bad last night and early this morning.

"It was coming from the mountain," the woman said softly, "where your father disappeared."

John took a couple steps closer to her. Instantly, she jabbed the flare gun at him. "Look, honey, can we put that down? You don't even have a flare in it. You couldn't hurt me if you tried."

He grinned without the slightest bit of intimidation, reaching his hand harmlessly toward her. "The wind at the base of the mountain can sound like screaming. But it was just the wind, if that's what spooked you. There's a storm coming, so it probably sounds worse."

She closed her eyes, letting him take the flare gun out of her hands. Then she wrapped her arms around her head as if she was trying to block out the sound. "It wouldn't stop. It wasn't like before, like other times. It was...horrible. I thought... Evil..."

John tucked the empty flare gun that he knew she'd taken from the

gatehouse into his belt. "Everything's okay. My name's John Kotter. My family owns this park, the campground, this house."

This close up, he couldn't fail to notice just how small and frightened she look. Even if he wanted to be mad at her for taking over the house like it was her own, he couldn't get himself to be. While he knew nothing about her, she didn't look the type to be bent on anything criminal. She'd clearly been through a lot. Maybe she'd been in trouble and down on her luck and his father had befriended her. It was something the old man would do. He wondered if his mother knew this person. She hadn't mentioned her.

John leaned forward and offered her his hand. She stared at it like he'd offered her a rattlesnake. "What's your name, honey?"

She swallowed hard again, her breath sounding shaky when she sank to the bed behind her and drew her knees up to her front. "You're really David's son? I've never seen you before."

"I just moved back to Bloodmoon Cove recently."

Tentatively, because he continued to hold out his hand toward her, she offered her doll-like one to him. "I'm...I'm Esmerelda ...um, Dumas."

John remembered the book he'd seen downstairs on the living room table. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Okay, she's not ready to get too friendly. Closing his large hand around hers, he shook, grinning a little wider this time to show her she hadn't really fooled him, but he'd go along for now. "That's a mouthful, honey. Do you mind if I call you Esme?"

He wasn't prepared for the electricity in her sweet, small smile or the jolt that ran through him when they touched in a simple handshake. Her hands were like ice. But her skin was silky smooth and alive in a way that made him want to continue holding her. For a long minute in which he couldn't catch his breath, he recalled the way she'd flown at him when he stepped into the room. She'd seemed relieved to see *him*. His heart ached for some reason he couldn't define. The feel of her, small and trembling...*a woman, dear God, what a woman...* in his arms swept over him as if he was holding her again.

"Esme. I like that. Yes, please call me Esme."

Somehow John remembered to breathe and the process of inhaling and exhaling made him feel slightly dizzy. She'd clearly fallen on hard times. Her dark blond hair had been raggedly cut, pulled back in a messy ponytail away from her strangely beautiful face. With no bangs, the way her hair framed her tiny face made her seem more fragile and even whimsical. If she'd told him she was really a fairy from some magical woods nearby, he would have been hard-pressed to dispute her. Everything about her fit that description. Her light brown eyes, so child-like without a hint of makeup, nevertheless belonged to a grown woman who clearly retained a semblance of innocence he'd never seen before. Her abrupt vulnerability tugged at him. She seemed shy and unsure of herself, even a little afraid now. He couldn't help noticing how golden her skin was in glimpses beneath the far too large clothing she

wore. Her strong, white teeth were framed by full lips that trembled slightly. Her neck seemed almost too long and narrow for her small, woman's body. Who was this waif?

Still holding her hand, he drew her gently to her feet. Even in that small contact, he could feel how featherweight she was. Baggy pants topped with his father's heavy-duty ranger jacket--the same kind John was wearing--showed just how little she'd had to live on alone here. She was all but drowning. How long had she been here? Long before his dad's disappearance--that was about all he could guess. "Esme it is. So, Esme, what are you doing here?"

Her eyes opened impossibly wider. "I'm sorry. I didn't have any place else to go. And when everyone left..."

First true thing you've said, honey?

"I had the feeling." He reluctantly withdrew from the handshake and put his tingling hand in his pocket. While he wasn't sure about feeling such sympathy just because she looked like such a tiny wisp, he was glad there'd been plenty of firewood in the shed to keep the house warm, that the supplies at the trading post store hadn't run out on her.

She gave him a pleading, tentative look. "I'm...um, John, I promise that I paid for everything I took. Go ahead and check the campground store. There was a price list in the desk behind the counter, and I included tax every time. I also kept an inventory of what I took, in case you needed it. The money is in the cash register."

So she'd broken into the store or found the key. Whether or not she'd paid would be easy to find out. His mother had taken all the money out of the store in September. She'd also removed the perishables, so whatever Esme was living on couldn't be fresh. About all he could fathom was that she hadn't starved to death.

"You're also the one who's been keeping the roads clear?" he asked.

"I know there's no reason for you to believe this, John, but I love this park. I know it by heart. I've explored the grounds and some of the mountain last summer--as much as was possible on foot. I've been trying to fix things around here, maintain them and take care of them. Keeping the roads clear was part of it. I cleaned up the campground in October, before winter hit. It was a mess. I keep wildlife away from the buildings and I've made sure the pipes haven't burst. I don't have a lot to do around here by myself, like you can imagine, and keeping things up seemed like the least I could do. I started a compost pile and that really helps me cut down on trash, though I waste little."

She'd evidently wanted to say all this for a long time, so he just let her go.

"I'll pay you. For whatever...whatever I've used. The house, electricity, water usage. I needed it. I really wanted to make sure the place was well-taken care of. It's such a beautiful park. So wide open, full of nature and

wonder. Please..." She swallowed harshly. "Don't send me away."

"How long have you been here, Esme?" John asked, uncomfortable with how easily he believed every word she said. Based on the maintenance he'd observed thus far, she loved this park almost as much as his family always had. She took care of it as if it was her own, but also respected the fact that it wasn't hers.

"I came, um, last year. Summer. But..."

"My dad was here then."

She nodded. "With this dog."

So Dad knew about our friendly neighborhood squatter. How much did he know about her?

"I camped out in the woods, and...well, he was nice. Your dad was nice to me. I never met him officially. I only know his name because I heard people say it. But he...well, he let me stay. Without paying."

Maybe Dad knew she was camping in the woods. Figured she couldn't pay and wasn't hurting anybody. Maybe he even left food out for her.

"I'm sorry, but after it got cold and the place was deserted, I couldn't leave. I realized how much I'd come to love this place. I can't explain it, but something about it feels familiar to me, like it's home. I thought if I took care of it, maybe nobody would mind."

Her big eyes were looking at him with so much hope, he could understand what had motivated his dad to overlook her infractions, to help her when he could. Finding someone who loved this place as much as he had when he was a kid wouldn't be easy. Sure, he could probably get some kid from town to come out and help him clean up, but it wouldn't be the same. Esme was what this park needed.

I must be crazy. But I was raised to give people chances. To help others whenever I can. "Look, I have to get this place in shape for the camping season in June. You've done a good job of keeping it maintained so far. I can tell you care about the park. What would you think about a job here?"

She blinked rapidly. She couldn't be any more surprised than he was at the offer. "A job?"

"Yeah. Getting it ready for campers, then when the season starts we'll need a campground host. I'm not sure yet at this point how big of a job it'll be. I can't pay you much."

Her face scrunched as she frowned. "But...is that why you came here? Because you need this house now? You need to move in?"

John shook his head. "No. My mom needs me around right now. She's got her hands full with taking care of my grandpa and his osteoarthritis, and...I don't know. Since Dad died, I worry about her. She's not coping well. She's just going through the motions. She prefers to be in town and wants me to stay there with her and Granddad for awhile."

"Wait... Your dad *died*?" Devastation claimed her expression.

"You didn't know? You said he disappeared."

"He went up the mountain and he didn't come back. The police came..."

Feeling his throat tighten, John offered softly, "This mountain has claimed many lives."

"I looked for him," she burst out, sounding like she couldn't or wouldn't believe. "I looked everywhere. But then I thought...I thought maybe that's what he usually did in the winter. Winterized it. Deserted the place. I didn't want to believe he was...dead. I wanted to believe he came off the mountain...and went home." Tears filled her eyes, and she sat heavily on the bed again.

John watched her in mute surprise. She'd said she hadn't officially met his father, and yet her emotional reaction was deep. John had suspected coming back here, a place he associated with his old man, would affect him, too. He couldn't say if he'd really dealt with his loss. Being away, wrapping up his life in Arizona the past nine months, had kept him from feeling the grief he was afraid to give in to. In some ways, he'd been grateful that his life had had other complications. In the end, even those had left behind the bitter remorse of yet another selfish mistake, more bad memories and recriminations he'd somehow have to live with. John suspected without seeing his father's body, finding it so they could have some closure that he was truly gone, he'd have as much trouble accepting his death as his mom was having.

"Look, you can stay here. Like I said, I can't pay you much, but this house can sure be part of the package."

She nodded, sniffing as she visibly tried to get hold of herself. "I'd love a job here. I'm willing to learn anything I need to. I've ready every book I could get my hands on about parks, wildlife preservation, plants, insects, first aid... You name it. There isn't a paper in this entire park I haven't read through from start to finish."

His old man had been a pack rat. If Esme had been desperate for reading material, the way she implied, the gatehouse office would certainly have provided her with all she needed. "About all I can think of then is that my mom's a registered nurse. She teaches first aid and CPR at the hospital in town. She can help you get your EMT certification. That'll take a few months, but the training is something you'll find real useful out here. The rest of your knowledge is good, too, and might help us expand into some programs during the summer. Mostly, you'd be keeping the campground clean, checking in campers, working in the store when you can."

"I can do all that. I don't know how I'd pay for the EMT course. I assume it costs money. I have a little..."

John shook his head. "Don't worry about that. Bloodmoon Cove needs EMT's. The course won't cost you anything but time."

"What else?"

"A few weeks of intensive on-the-job training here at the campground will be required, and you'll need to read all the SOP manuals in the office--"

"Standard Operative Procedures." She nodded. "Yes, I've already read them. I read everything in the park office. More than once." After a second, she seemed to realize, "I didn't steal anything. The keys for everything were hanging here in that case near the front door downstairs."

The spare park keys, carefully labeled under hooks. If his mother had locked the house, she'd done it with Esme inside.

John found he wasn't surprised to hear that this woman was so keen on learning everything she could. If she'd read all the boring files and manuals in the office multiple times, she'd been serious about digesting the information, filing it in her brain whenever she'd need the information. He'd met few people as interested and eager as Esme seemed to be about what others might consider dry and boring. He couldn't help wondering if life had taught her to become hard and cynical. She'd obviously been afraid of him after she realized he wasn't his father. But she didn't seem scared anymore--just desperate to prove her worth here. He wondered how old she was. She could have passed for eighteen, but he suspected she was older. Something about her insisted she wasn't a child in any way.

"John, how do you think your dad died?"

He shook his head, not prepared for the question. "He went missing while he was supposed to be hiking on the mountain. The backcountry permit he filled out stated he'd been heading toward Spirit Peak and would return by noon that day. My mom called the sheriff when she got home--here at the campground host house--and found the permit in the office still not filed away with a return time of six that evening. After multiple searches of the mountain, his body was never found. The sheriff filed a report saying he tumbled from one of the many treacherous cliffs, possibly after a heart attack precipitated the fall."

"But you don't believe that?" Esme guessed. One of her hands was fingering a chain around her neck. The rest of the necklace was hidden under her shirt.

John shrugged. "My dad believed in filling out permits, using the buddy system. But he went alone that day. Didn't even take Robert with him. That wasn't like him. I don't know what convinced him to go up there by himself. I can't imagine. When we were kids, he drilled it into me and my cousin Twyla that we never went up on the mountain without a buddy, without filling out the necessary paperwork for those down here if we didn't come back."

"Twyla," Esme murmured under her breath, then glanced up at him. "Is Robert the name of this dog?"

John nodded. "He never went anywhere without 'his brother' as he called him. On that subject, you said you explored the mountain this past summer? That you searched there for my father?"

She nodded.

"By yourself?"

He could see she was guilty before she admitted, "Yes."

"That's incredibly dangerous. You can't go up there by yourself. The mountain is treacherous."

"I was fine. But I didn't find him."

"Well, you can't do that again. You have to tell someone down here at the base exactly where you're going and you need to fill out a backcountry permit with a general idea of where you're heading and your return date or time. Above all, you need a hiking buddy. There's no two ways about that, Esme. It's for your own good. If you're gonna work here, it's always safety first. Promise me." John wasn't sure why, but the idea of this frail woman hiking alone on a mountain as dangerous as Bloodmoon scared him spitless. He didn't like it one iota.

There was no guile in her expression when she agreed, "Okay. I promise. I want to work here."

Is that the only reason you're agreeing? Do you know why my dad went up there by himself, without his dog? Even asking himself the questions, he couldn't suspect her of any wrongdoing in his dad's death. But maybe she knew more than she was saying.

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