

Chapter 1

Climb a sheer rock wall dangling from a single rope two thousand feet up a mountain—check. Scuba dive in shark-infested waters—check. Make small talk at the office Christmas party—hell no! Tonight, apparently, that was a bridge too far for Amber Wilson. With her back against the far wall of GenFun’s large conference room, replete with festive balloons and a tacky, artificial Christmas tree, she tracked the progress of her boss, Mark, as he wove toward her through their coworkers.

Mark had sought her out ten minutes earlier. They had briefly discussed a work project, then silence. Awkward, long silence. She didn’t need a drink, but what a relief when he offered to fetch one. This whole evening felt like a hair shirt. Not that she’d ever worn a hair shirt, but it would be uncomfortable, and so was this party. She felt out of place, and what she really wanted was *out of here*. Amber checked the wall clock again—eight forty-five. She’d hold out until nine then make her excuses and escape.

Acquiring the beer was proving complicated. Three times, Mark had to stop and answer a question, or return a Christmas greeting. He was tall and good looking in a rugged, outdoorsy way that appealed to women, which was probably why, just as he finally broke through the crowd, Sharon stepped in front of him, placed a hand on his arm, and began to flirt. When he looked over and widened his eyes, Amber smiled and nodded. Poor Mark—too nice for his own good, sometimes.

“Phew,” he said when he reached her. “That was tougher than running a route in the Super Bowl!”

She accepted the beer and raised the cup. “Thanks.”

His aftershave reminded her of something. She’d been struggling to place the smell. Suddenly, she got it—the mountains—that fresh, woodsy scent. Not for the first time, she admired the strong line of Mark’s jaw. In the office, he was always clean-shaven, but tonight he’d left a stubbly shadow. Purposely, she was sure, because the line on his cheek was distinct, planned. Nice.

Then she noticed Mark’s head tilting to the side. He was waiting for an answer to a question she hadn’t heard. “Sorry?”

“I asked how you were coping... without your mom. I know you were very close.”

Her face grew hot. In seconds her neck would be a blotchy mess. Instantaneous dry mouth left her gaping like a landed fish. Was this why she'd felt all night as if her skin didn't fit? Although it was a whole year ago—or maybe *because* of that dreadful anniversary—thoughts of her mom's last few months swamped her mind.

His left eyebrow lifted, and he touched her arm. “Are you okay, Amber? I didn't mean to upset you.” Concern flooded his ice-blue eyes.

Her heart was racing, and tears were imminent; Mark's sympathy had smashed through a wall she didn't know she'd built, and there was no way to shore it up standing in the middle of a crowd. Amber handed him her cup, spun around, and scurried away like a startled rabbit.

Eyes locked on the floor, she dodged through clusters of people who were dancing in place while nibbling finger food and sipping from plastic cups. Everyone was talking, laughing, relaxed.

Everyone except her.

As she stepped into the hallway, she snatched a backward glance. Mark stared after her, looking stupefied, and she didn't blame him.

The party was her first large social gathering since . . . Oh, God, the last time she'd been with this many people, eating and drinking and talking in groups, was at her mom's funeral—twelve months ago this week. But Mark didn't know that.

She hurried along the hallway, ducked into the women's bathroom, and locked herself in the middle stall.

Seated on the commode with the index finger and thumb of each hand touching, palms upturned, she breathed deeply, closed her eyes, and tried to clear her mind by picturing the view from the top of her favorite Vermont ski slope—snow-draped hills spread out below her feet like huge billowing sheets.

The bathroom door opened, and the clatter of high heels on floor tiles shattered her attempt at meditation.

“I nearly peed my pants out there!”

Two women laughed, overloud and tipsy.

Amber recognized their voices—Sharon, only daughter of GenFun's CEO, who “worked” in Accounting, and her BFF, Carol from Human Resources.

The stall doors on either side of Amber slammed shut. The woman on her left let out a long, loud sigh, causing her friend to snicker.

Two flushes, followed by the sound of doors reopening and then water running as they washed their hands.

Perched on the toilet seat, Amber softened her breathing and hoped the women were too drunk to notice the occupied stall. She considered raising her feet in case they peered under the door. *Why would they even think of doing that?*

“Any luck with Mark?” Carol asked.

“Not yet, but give me time. God, I love his accent. Is he British?”

Amber’s hand shot to her mouth, and she gnawed at a loose piece of skin beside her thumbnail.

“New Zealander, a Kiwi,” Carol said. “Did you see Amber? Sniffing around him like a bitch in heat. And, oh my God, that dress!”

“Must have raided Granny’s wardrobe,” Sharon said.

Their laughter echoed off the tiled walls.

Amber had told Maude the hemline was too long and that red didn’t work with her hair color. So much for taking fashion advice from a fifty-five-year-old.

“But seriously,” Sharon said, “she had him pinned against the wall.”

Oh, God. Did I?

“I know. His eyes were spinning like a trapped animal’s.”

“As if a guy like Mark would be into a geeky lab rat.”

“Shh. Look.”

They’ve noticed me.

Sharon lowered her voice to a drunken whisper. “Whatever, everyone knows she has a crush on him.”

“Damn, Sharon, you can be a bitch when you’ve had a few.”

“That’s Queen Bitch to you. Come on. I’m going to find Mark.”

The bathroom door opened and closed, and the women’s banter faded.

Tears threatened again. Amber dabbed her eyes with toilet tissue. What the hell was wrong with her? She’d led a climb up Wallface in the Adirondacks without trembling this much.

But that was before her mom had died and left her alone.

Deep breaths. She and Mark made a good team, but she didn't see him in *that* way. He *was* handsome: tall and well put together—and those eyes . . . but work and romance didn't mix. Anyway, she didn't have time in her life for a relationship.

Then she realized.

She did have time.

And the ache, Mom's ache, flooded her mind and settled like a rock in her gut. God, she was a mess. For three years, her life had narrowed to work and Mom. And during that final year—filled with chemo, and puke, and soiled Depends—she thought she'd never make it. But she had. And now Mom wasn't there. For a year Mom had been *not there*. After being a caregiver for so long, Amber didn't know how to be Amber anymore.

Wait. If Sharon and Carol thought she had been flirting, did Mark? Perhaps those bitches had saved her from making a total ass of herself.

I have to get out of here. She gathered the crumpled toilet tissue from her lap and flushed it.

Before anyone came in and saw her, she washed her face. Her hair was down for the party. She brushed it back and slid on a scrunchie. Amber grimaced at her reflection: bloodshot eyes, blotchy neck, red hair in a ponytail, and those damned freckles. She resembled a jilted schoolgirl.

Amber cracked open the bathroom door and peered along the hallway to her right. Empty. But the music had switched up tempo; a driving techno drumbeat vibrated the hallway's glass partitions. A woman shrieked at what must have been the world's funniest joke. Swiveling left, Amber hurried past Mark's office and ducked into hers, next door. "Amber Wilson, Senior Lab Technician," the sign read. *Senior self-deluded idiot, more like. Did I really have him trapped?*

Her polished desk stood in the center of the room with papers neatly sorted: in-tray, out-tray, pending. Six framed photos lined the wall—scenes from her mountaineering years, a couple of her in a wetsuit in Key West, and one of the Vermont ski slopes she'd tried to conjure in the bathroom.

Through the door at the rear, she slipped into familiar territory, her lab: a hundred feet long, filled with stainless-steel counters, centrifuges, computer monitors, test tubes. She breathed in the comforting antiseptic smell and skirted past the workbenches to the door at the far end.

With a swipe of her keycard, she entered the growing room where GenFun propagated the fungi specimens she studied.

Rows of tables with two-foot-square plastic growing boxes containing developing mushrooms stood on either side of a central aisle. Infrared bulbs positioned over a few specimens supplied meager light. The air was cool, damp, and musty—the way fungi liked it. Eighty strains constantly rotated, with new specimens shipping in each month. An ever-changing challenge—a challenge she loved.

Amber turned sideways and squeezed between two tables, shortcutting to the red exit sign on the far wall.

Behind her, she heard laughter.

She spun around, and her purse sideswiped the growing box on the table to her right. The lid flipped off, rattling loudly as it hit the floor. The automatic door clicked shut. She froze, holding her breath.

A couple were whispering and giggling out in the lab. It sounded as though they were making out.

Quietly, she retrieved the lid. The box was thick with hundreds of maturing mushrooms. In the dim light, they emitted a silvery phosphorescent glow. The plastic top had gouged the growing medium, and a few fungi, each the size and shape of a Q-tip, had spilled on the tabletop.

Henry, the janitor, would go ballistic if he found torn-up mushrooms lying around. The only waste bins were in the lab, and the couple who had sneaked in were going at it hot and heavy. So she brushed the damaged specimens off the table into her purse, smoothed out the disturbed bedding, and replaced the lid.

In ten more sidesteps, Amber reached the exit and pushed the panic bar.

Clang, clang, clang.

She clamped her hands over her ears. The alarms were never normally armed. *But this is Saturday night, dummy.*

When she stepped outside, the door snapped shut behind her. The loud bell had set her pulse racing, and she ran across the parking lot toward her yellow Prius, wobbling on the four-inch heels she'd worn for the party.

Or did I wear them for Mark?

The lights came on, and a man emerged from the administration building to her left. She recognized Mark's broad shoulders silhouetted in the building's front doorway. *Why him?*

"Hey, you. Stop!" He cleared the steps in two strides and ran toward her.

She slowed to a walk and waved. "It's just me, Amber."

The night air misted her breath, and a damp cold coming off the Hudson River cut through her dress. The overhead mercury lighting gave the parking lot a washed-out, eerie look. She shivered and pulled her unbuttoned coat more snugly around her. More people spilled from the building. Mark turned and shouted, "Okay, guys! Friend, not foe. Go back to the party. I'll join you shortly."

"You sure?" one of them called.

"Yeah, go ahead."

The doorway cleared, and someone silenced the bell.

Mark reached her as she chirped her car's door lock.

"Sorry, Mark. I cut through the growing room and forgot the alarm. Silly of me." *God, I sound so whiney.*

"You're leaving early. Did I offend you, Amber?"

"No. Of course not. I have a headache. Don't worry. I'll be fine. You go back to the party." In the dimly lit parking lot, at least he wouldn't be able to tell she'd been crying. She tightened her gut and focused on cutting this exchange as short as possible. She needed to go home.

"What's on your hand?" he asked.

Amber glanced at her fingertips, which glowed with silver phosphorescence. "Oh, I accidentally touched one of the fungi specimens."

He reached out and took her left hand. Turning her palm up, he stroked the silvering with his thumb. "Which ones?"

Mark's hands transfixed her: broad, with long, strong fingers. Hers were thin and delicate by contrast. When she looked up, he was staring—once again waiting for an answer.

"Huh?"

"Which of the fungi displayed phosphorescence?" Mark's voice sounded businesslike.

"Sorry, I didn't pay attention, but I can show you on Monday."

He dragged his fingers across her hand. Rubbing the silvering between thumb and forefinger, he brought it to his nose and sniffed. "Odorless," he said. Then his voice deepened, became husky, softer. He pointed to her cheek. "You have some on your face, too."

She bent to the car's side mirror. A glowing snail's trail marked the side of her nostril.
Great, now he'll think I'm a nose picker.

When she straightened, he'd moved closer. Now she detected traces of citrus and fresh mint in his aftershave. His eyes were the first thing she noticed whenever she saw him. And right now they were gazing at her intently enough to lift the hairs on the back of her neck.

Don't be dumb, Amber. He was just being kind talking to you, 'cause he's like that. In truth he couldn't wait to get away from you. A trapped animal, remember?

Mark touched her nose, brushing at the silver streak. She swallowed hard, and stiffened. As she opened her mouth to speak, his other hand moved up, and he cupped both her cheeks. Her face felt lost in his palms. He bent forward and pressed soft lips to hers. As her eyes closed, his tongue teased and touched hers, hot, and wet.

Sparks flickered against her eyelids.

Oh, my God!

Legs trembling, she locked her knees and kept her arms rigid at her sides, not daring to touch him, not wanting to encourage him. Or did she? Where had this kiss come from? Had she signaled for this in the party? His fingers slid from her face and caressed her neck then slipped down the outside of her coat. When his hands spanned her waist, he broke from the kiss and stepped back.

Tingling and light-headed, she opened her eyes and finally remembered to breathe.

"Wow!" he said. "I'm sorry. I don't know where that came from."

Neither do I. Should I kiss him back? Should I slap him?

"Please come inside," he said.

And face Sharon, Carol, and the other staff again after sneaking out and triggering the alarm? What did the kiss mean? This was too fast, too complicated. Her voice cracked when she said, "I should head home."

"It's early. The party's just beginning. Stay." He locked those eyes on her again. "Although we've worked together for nearly a year, tonight, for the first time, I feel I'm getting to know you. Come inside."

How was she supposed to process this? Mark was her boss. A shift in their relationship would change everything. This was happening too fast. She needed this job. The job was the only thing that kept her sane—the only solid thing in her life since Mom.

“Thanks, Mark, good to know. But I have a headache. I have to leave.”

“All right, give me a few minutes to say my good-byes, and I’ll drive you home.” He caressed her arm and raised his hand to her cheek.

He’s going to kiss me again.

Breath coming in short gasps, mind spinning, she said, “No. It’s your party. You’re the boss. I . . . I need to go. See you Monday, okay?”

His face sagged, but he released her. Then he lifted her left hand and brushed it with his lips. “Monday.” He breathed the word into her palm like a prayer.

Amber retrieved her hand and grabbed for the car door handle. She missed and stubbed her fingers, got it second try. As she stepped around the door, she tripped on her heel, bumped her head on the doorframe, and more or less fell into the driver’s seat.

Way to impress, Amber.

Mark stood in the parking lot with a contented grin on his face while she reversed and pulled away. He was still waving when she drove past the building.

“Holy shit!” Amber gripped the wheel with both hands to steady them. Tremors in her legs made the gas pedal jerk, so she set the cruise control at forty and practiced deep breathing.

She shot through an intersection where she should have turned right and had to double back. The next thing Amber knew, she was parking in front of her apartment building with no recollection of the drive home.

With her ridiculous shoes in one hand, she ran barefoot up three flights and let herself into her apartment. With the door locked and chained, she leaned against the wall and slid to the floor. Leo, her overweight ginger cat, peered out from the living room. He threw her a disgruntled look and turned away.

Her mind had frozen up. She tried to analyze what had happened. Tried running through her earlier conversation with Mark, looking for markers, looking for ways she might have signaled that she wanted him to kiss her, but none of it made sense. The physical sensation was thrilling, exciting—surprisingly so, but logically this could only lead to disaster. She had to work with the man!

Sitting in the hallway didn't resolve a thing, so Amber headed for the shower.

Forty minutes later, she was curled up on the sofa in her PJs, sipping green tea, with Leo by her side. For once, the cat allowed her to stroke his belly.

She shouldn't have gone to the party. It had been excruciating. Her friend Maude, whom she trusted, had convinced her that mixing with people at the office party would help: "At least you know them. Not like the pressure of meeting strangers." On the one hand, Maude was right. Amber couldn't spend the rest of her life avoiding human contact. But for so long, her mom *had* been her life. Mom had raised her, supported her, encouraged her. She had to repay that trust when the cancer came, had to stay strong for them both. She was a daughter, but in many ways she'd also fulfilled the man's role in their house.

Since she'd lost her mom, Amber hadn't filled the void. Maude meant well. "You're too young to become an old maid." But Maude didn't understand. It wasn't that Amber didn't enjoy the company of men—she did. She had her favorites in the climbing group. Then there was Carl, at the diving school in the Keys. Just thinking of Carl made her smile. But she never brought anyone home, because there was no room for another relationship. Her mother needed all of her.

Then at the party, when Mark asked how she was coping, when he looked at her with his kind eyes, the anguish from last Christmas flooded back. Standing in that conference room, surrounded by people she knew, Amber had never felt so alone. Maybe she would never connect again. What if something in her brain's wiring had changed forever? That's what nuns did, they committed their lives to an idea, to Jesus—a god made human, a perfect man. She'd committed her life to caring for her mom. Who else would; who else could?

It had always been just Amber and her mom. Stanley, her father, died before she was two—she had no memory of the man. Afterward, her mother shouldered the responsibility of raising her, fulfilling Stanley's dreams for his daughter. Dreams of college and a career, of an independent woman he would never meet.

Attractive and still in her prime, her mom had never dated, never looked at another man. No man could fill Stanley's shoes. There was a love for the ages. Amber glanced at the framed photograph on her coffee table. An action shot of a twentysomething Stan Wilson in full stride, powering down the home stretch, tall and muscular, cheeks flushed with effort, his head topped with buzzed red hair. It was her favorite picture of him, and she carried a smaller version in her purse. He and Mom began dating soon after that photo was taken.

As a child, Amber loved to hear her mom's stories about how he wooed her—such a gentleman—and how he doted on his little girl. Later, as she matured, and went to college herself, she understood he'd foreshortened his athletic career when he took a teaching job to support his new family. On her graduation day, her mother told her how proud he would have been. Just thinking of it now lodged a lump in her throat. Would *she* ever find a love so strong? Which brought her full circle to thinking about men again and what had happened in the parking lot.

“Damn it!”

Amber sprang to her feet, dumped the tea in the sink, and filled a glass with chardonnay from the bottle in the fridge. She slugged it in three gulps and poured a refill before plunking herself on the couch again. Leo glared at her from the rug as if to say, “Go ahead, beg, but I'm not coming back up there.”

Where had the kiss come from?

It seemed so out of character for Mark. But how did she know? Maybe he'd had too many beers. Or his kind, generous nature was an act. Was he one of those men who had to dominate a woman, control her? Well, not this woman, he wouldn't. But why did she even think that? Mark had never given that impression, and he was one hell of a good kisser. She grinned as she remembered his lips—so soft. Their tongues had touched. Her cheeks grew hot. She took another pull of wine and let out a sigh.

What if Sharon was wrong? What if Mark liked her and *he'd* been holding back? Perhaps he was shy, too.

But he hadn't been shy in the parking lot. He'd begged her to go back to the party. Good job she didn't. How would she have faced him on Monday? How could she date the boss? Anyway, it was against company policy.

More confused than ever, she phoned Maude. Not that she expected any useful life guidance from her best friend, but at least she could discuss “the incident” rather than have Mark's kiss swirling around in her head.

The call went to voice mail. Ten fifteen—she's probably in bed. Next to Amber, Maude had the most barren personal life of anyone she knew. But Maude was fifty-five. And Maude didn't care.

Oh, God. That'll be me in twenty years. How depressing is that?

She left a voice message instructing Maude to meet for breakfast at the Brooklyn Brew.
To prevent the Mark incident from keeping her awake, she took an Ambien.

When she got in the bedroom, Leo wasn't in his customary spot at the bottom of her comforter. She hunted and found him on the kitchen table nuzzling her purse and purring. Amber tried to pick him up, but he spat at her.

"Suit yourself, but I'm off to bed." She waited at the door, expecting him to follow, but Leo clung to the purse like a junkie to his stash.

"Weirdo," she said, and switched off the light.