

Steel Butterfly is about two broken, damaged people who come together and find love. It takes the reader on a heartfelt journey of passion, jealousy, tragedy and finally healing from the horrors of the past.

STEEL BUTTERFLY

by Karron Kennedy

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The background of the cover features a romantic couple in a close embrace, about to kiss. The man has curly hair and a light beard, while the woman has long, light-colored hair. They are positioned in the upper half of the frame. Below them is a panoramic view of a city at night, with numerous buildings illuminated by warm lights. In the distance, there are dark, silhouetted mountains under a twilight sky with soft, colorful gradients of pink, orange, and blue. The overall mood is romantic and evocative.

Steel Butterfly

A story of passion, jealousy, tragedy and healing

KARRON KENNEDY

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BOOK ONE

JEREMY

Chapter 1

Jeremy Arrives in Asheville

Jeremy arrived in the mountains at last! It had been a long bus ride across the country from Denver, but finally, he had reached the Blue Ridge Mountains. Like most places, they were more beautiful than the pictures: lush and thick with vegetation—very different from his mountains out west. At a distance, from his Greyhound bus window, they looked to him like layers of blue clouds, each ascending layer a lighter shade of blue until they disappeared into infinity. But up close, the very same mountains looked like huge scoops of Blue Moon ice cream.

He never realized there could be so many shades of green. Every hue was represented, from the sage green grass to the dark green fir forests, and the teal of the mountains against the sky. Jeremy had traveled the world, but this place was like no other. It was both wild and celestial, lavish and limitless.

His destination—Asheville, North Carolina—a small but magnificent city, cradled so perfectly in the Blue Ridge Mountains that it looked as if God had placed it there tenderly in the night. On the horizon, Jeremy could see the blue mountains becoming softer and more ethereal as they gave way to a pale purple sky. He arrived at dusk, and the city was alive and illuminated for the night. The contrast of the bright lights of the city against the soft blue mountains and the lavender evening sky was a glorious sight. He teared up at the awesome, heart-stopping beauty and then immediately felt totally stupid for being so sentimental. Quickly he wiped his eyes with his fingers, hoping no one had seen him.

The literature Jeremy read on his three-day bus trip said that Asheville had a vibrant art scene, hip nightlife, museums, great restaurants, and spectacular architecture. He found this to be curious, as he had always heard that the South was slow and

backward. He could tell right away that there was nothing slow or backward about this trendy, contemporary city.

His friend Artie met him at the bus station on Tunnel Road in his sleek new sports car. Artie and Jeremy were the same age—twenty-four—and had been best friends back home in Denver since childhood.

They shook hands and gave each other back-slapping man hugs. They had always kept in touch, but—apart from the occasional Christmas holiday or summer break—hadn't seen very much of each other since Artie came to Asheville five years ago to study biology. Now he was in his second year of a master's program in climate science. Jeremy, on the other hand, had stayed home after high school to follow his father's dream—not his own. Not surprisingly, that hadn't worked out.

"God, it's good to see you. How was your trip? Stupid question. Three days on a bus. I bet you're exhausted." Artie was grinning from ear to ear and talking non-stop. He was thrilled that his best friend had chosen to move to North Carolina to join him at college. They would be roommates and teammates again, just as they had been when they were younger. The two had known each other since sixth grade and were more like brothers than friends.

"Hungry mostly," Jeremy shrugged as they loaded his bags into Artie's silver 350Z. He was too excited to be tired.

As they jumped into the car and sped away toward the college, Jeremy realized that he was a ball of nerves. He could barely contain his excitement at being over a thousand miles away from his parents, ready to start his life anew. But you would never know it from his outward expression. After a lifetime of hiding his feelings, Jeremy had learned to veil his emotions behind a cold, stoic expression.

Artie, on the other hand, was gregarious as always.

"We'll eat soon. You'll hate the apartment; I hope we can move. The apartment complex is full of a bunch of loud partying college kids. It's nearly impossible to study." Artie couldn't wait to tell Jeremy everything he needed to know within his first hour of arrival.

His thoughts tumbled out in disjointed, fragmented sentences. "Professor King is great, but you're going to hate Donnelly, he's an asshole."

"Can we get some food before I die?" Jeremy asked with his forehead furrowed, and his brows knit together in a thick dark line.

Artie knew his friend would love the fare at the Asheville Pizza and Beer Company on Merrimon Avenue. The two considered themselves beer aficionados and were especially fond of beer that was micro-brewed at local pubs, because of the emphasis on quality and flavor. Asheville is famous for its craft breweries.

Artie told his parents that he wanted to attend the University of North Carolina at Asheville because it was an excellent liberal arts school, but Artie admitted to Jeremy that it really was the beer that brought him here. After dinner, they took a spin around campus. Artie was eager to show Jeremy all his favorite haunts around the school—especially the gym and the track.

Both young men had come from affluent Denver families. They had met in private school in sixth grade and had been teammates on the cross country and track teams at Kent, their exclusive private high school.

Artie had always been somewhat of a bad boy: rowdy, fun-loving, very outspoken, never one to take himself too seriously. He loved to chase the girls, and they loved him. Towering above most of his friends at 6'1", Arthur Joseph Lance had the lean muscular body of a runner. He kept his auburn hair cut in a conservative style, and his eyes were a sparkling pool of green. His charming smile had a way of melting hearts—and not just of the young ladies. It was impossible to stay mad at him once he flashed that smile, and he knew it. He was a ladies' man, a real charmer, *and* a confirmed bachelor. Jeremy secretly believed that, like him, Artie hadn't met the right woman yet.

Jeremy had always been shy, soft-spoken, and serious. Some even called him brooding. In school, he kept his head down and never drew attention to himself. He was so good-looking that he

never had to chase the girls; *they* chased *him*. Jeremy's family may have been wealthy and influential, but they were also troubled, his quiet demeanor was rooted in a darkness that he had inherited from his circumstances. People used to wonder how two opposite personalities could be such close friends.

Jeremy arrived in Asheville on July 26th, 2015, two weeks before classes started so he could try out for the cross-country team, begin training, and learn his way around campus. After trudging around the hilly campus for two days, he found that he was just as pleased with the college as he was with the city. The University of North Carolina at Asheville (UNCA) is a small liberal arts college located among the rolling hills in the northern part of town, and Jeremy loved that there were spectacular views of the mountains from many vantage points around campus.

Jeremy's favorite place on campus was the stately Ramsey Library. Situated in the middle of the college, on a lush green manicured quadrangle, the Ramsey Library is the heart of the campus. The huge mid-century building was built in 1965 out of gigantic precast white concrete panels. Rectangular in shape, flat and sprawling, it looks like an enormous white box. There are eight giant vertical windows, four on each side of the massive glass doors. Both the windows and the doors extend the full height of the building's three stories from roof to floor. The library faces southwest toward Mount Pisgah, and the mountain range is visible from the steps which lead from the library to the quadrangle. The austerity and enormity of the building, juxtaposed with the light and beauty of the enormous glass windows create a truly extraordinary piece of architecture. Jeremy loved its stark beauty, sharp edges, glass, and white concrete against the blue sky. The crowning jewel of the campus, it reminded him of a building you might see in Oz.

The college, as well as the city itself, is a series of hills, slopes, terraces, and steps. Jeremy had to hike up the hill to Zeis Hall, and down the hill to the gym. Almost every building on campus required

a rigorous hike. His new world was asymmetrical, jagged and sloped. It seemed as if everything sat crosswise at an angle. But the Ramsey Library sat solidly on a flat park of neatly mown grass. It was the one thing in his new world that wasn't tilted nearly upside down. Jeremy was in great shape, but for the first few days, his legs felt like rubber from the disconcerting landscape.

His second day on campus, Jeremy wandered the college grounds lost in thought about the upcoming track team try-outs. He was happy to be free of his stifling parents and their meddling, glad to be young and alive. He was determined to make a new beginning and not screw it up this time.

That's when Jeremy saw *her* coming down the steps of the magnificent white and glass library. She stopped near the top of the steps to gaze at the distant mountains and sighed a long lingering sigh as if she wished she were anywhere else.

It was a beautiful, sunny day, but when he saw her, the day seemed brighter.

Time moved in slow motion.

The air caught in his chest for a second, as if he couldn't breathe. Jeremy ducked behind a tree to watch her, unseen.

She wore a white low-cut tank top that showed the swell of her large breasts and tight acid-washed jeans that looked like she had been poured into them. Her stomach was flat and muscular, but her hips were full and round. She had silky dark blonde hair that lay in waves over her shoulders and back.

She had the toned muscular body of an athlete, the movement and grace of a dancer. Her skin was slightly tanned where it was kissed by the sun, but Jeremy was sure that the hidden parts were as creamy as a peach. He watched, wide-eyed as if he had discovered a new creature, a yet unidentified species of woman, far superior to the common strain with which he was so familiar.

She moved down the steps like a lazy cat.

Suddenly, she stopped again, lifted her hair in both hands, and piled it on top of her head to cool her neck, then threw her head

back and let out a long slow breath. When she dropped her long hair, it cascaded down her back and shoulders as before. With her head tilted back, she took her right hand and ran it sensuously from her chin to the top of her breast to wipe the tiny beads of perspiration that glistened on her neck.

Jeremy watched this private ritual with delight.

Never before had he seen such a perfect creature.

As he started up the steps to the library, his palms were sweaty, and his legs felt weak. When he got closer to her, his heart pounded as if he had run a race. It startled him that he was having a physiological response to this woman.

Jeremy had been with dozens of women, but he could honestly say he had never been in love. He had never felt this way about anyone before. His feelings amazed and confused him, but they also thrilled him.

When he got closer, Jeremy saw that she had dazzling deep blue eyes and soft angled brows a little darker than her hair. Her wide lips seemed to have a sly smile as if she knew a secret about you that you didn't even know about yourself.

She was a few inches shorter than him, about 5'7" to his 5'10". With a chiseled face, high cheekbones, and a strong chin, she could have been a model. An athlete. A movie star. A goddess. Who was this woman? Somehow, Jeremy knew there was something exceptional about her—something rare.

It wasn't only her beauty and grace and bearing that made her stand out above other women. There was something else—something that he could not name. A wildness. Yes, she was a pure, wild creature. Just gazing at her made his heart jump into his throat, yet also calmed his restless spirit.

How is that possible? he asked himself.

As they passed on the library steps, she looked up at him, smiled, said "Hello," and kept going. Jeremy felt the prickling of the tiny hairs on his arms and neck. *What in the world is happening to me?*

It was just one of dozens of chance encounters anyone might have on any college campus on a sunny July day. There was nothing unusual about it, but somehow, Jeremy knew his life was about to change.

In an instant, he knew he was in love with this amazing woman.

He stood there, frozen, wondering what to do next. Jeremy wanted to speak, but couldn't. There was no air in his lungs. He wanted to turn around and watch her hips sway as she walked away, but he didn't dare. If she were to turn around and see him staring at her butt, she might think he was a pervert or something. He couldn't take that chance.

So, Jeremy let her go. He let her walk away.

Then suddenly he was stricken with fear.

What if she's gone forever and I never see her again?

He wanted to run after her if only to ask her name, but he was too shy, too afraid of rejection. He couldn't run the risk of being hurt by this glorious creature. Instead, he said a silent prayer on the library steps. *Oh, Dear God, let me see her again.*

Twenty-four-year-old Jeremy Devan Brentley arrived at UNCA finally ready to begin his adult life and pursue his lifelong ambition. It seemed as if it had taken him a lifetime to get here.

His parents had planned for him to take over the family business and inherit the family fortune. The problem was that Jeremy neither cared about the family business nor the fortune. He had ambitions of his own.

When he finally told his parents that he wanted to be a veterinarian, they were so adamantly opposed to the idea that they cut off his money. Undeterred by their short-sightedness, Jeremy proudly told them he didn't want their money; they could give it to the homeless for all he cared.

Within a few weeks of that difficult conversation, Jeremy had taken a job with Dr. Samuels, the family veterinarian, who also happened to be a family friend. He rented a small apartment and

worked enthusiastically. Jeremy didn't mind starting with some of the more menial tasks: cleaning the kennels, walking the dogs, and managing the laundry detail. Even though he barely made ends meet, the relief he felt at being able to strike out on his own was worth all the long hours he had to spend on the often-unpleasant chores.

From the start, Dr. Samuels was impressed with Jeremy's dedication to the animals and his spirited ambition. So he went to bat for him and persuaded the Brentleys to let Jeremy move back home and attend the Community College of Denver Veterinary Technical Program. At twenty-four Jeremy earned an Associate Degree in veterinary science.

When his parents finally came to terms with the fact that Jeremy was not only serious about his dream of being a veterinarian but had a gift for his chosen profession, they reluctantly agreed to fund his further education; but they continued to have grave reservations and misgivings about his choice of career.

Eventually, life became so strained at home that he begged his parents to let him go away to school. In the end, they all agreed that a sleepy little town like Asheville might be just the thing for him. Artie was there, and UNCA certainly wasn't known to be a party school. But Jeremy knew his old buddy well enough to know that when Artie got ready for some fun, he would find a party wherever he was, but he was careful not to tell his parents that, *of course*.

Over the next few days, Jeremy often thought about the beautiful woman he had seen on the library steps. He secretly cherished the memory of that chance encounter without speaking of her—not to Artie or anyone. Jeremy went back to the library several times hoping to see her again, only to be disappointed that she did not appear. He began to fear that she was a summer student and had left campus for good. Or had she been a visitor using the library? Or had she been a dream?

He hated himself for being so shy. If Artie had been in his shoes, he would have introduced himself right away, flirted with her on the spot, and asked her out. Jeremy, on the other hand, was afraid of saying the wrong thing or making a fool of himself. *Well, who's the fool now?* he thought to himself. *She's gone, and I'm sitting here feeling lost and alone. I'm such an idiot! How could I have let this one chance pass me by?*

From the time Jeremy started fooling around with girls at age fifteen, he wanted to be in love. Over the years, he searched for love, tried to pretend he was in love and tried to return the love of many girls and women who said they were in love with him. But in his heart, Jeremy knew that as much as he liked these women and enjoyed their company, he was not *in love*. More than once, he had settled for one-sided relationships so that he would have someone in his life and not be alone. At times Jeremy wondered if there was something wrong with him. Perhaps he was like his parents—incapable of love. But, no. He knew in his heart that he had tons of love to give. He just needed to meet the one woman for him.

Months before Jeremy left Denver, he decided to remain celibate until he met his soul mate—his *life* mate. He knew it would be difficult, but he had tired of the lonely, pathetic lifestyle of casual sex and meaningless relationships. Now, Jeremy believed he was ready to fall in love, settle down, and be a man.

Could his forever love be the woman on the steps, or was she just a fantasy? Jeremy couldn't get her out of his thoughts. She lingered there, barely hidden as he went about each day. At night, he brought her forward and made her the object of his dreams. How could he be so spellbound by a woman he had never met and may never see again? Easily given to despair, he had to be careful not to fall into darkness in this glorious new place. So, Jeremy tried to remain hopeful and keep his spirits high.

I will see her again, he promised himself.

Chapter 2

Fresh Air and Roses

Jeremy

I was the child of a loveless marriage. My parents never showed any affection for one another. I don't remember seeing them hug or kiss. Even as a young child, I wondered why they had married when they obviously loathed each other.

My parents seemed like two strangers who had accidentally moved into the same house, somehow bore a son, and decided to continue living in the cohabited space, while the child wandered aimlessly searching for a lifeline to cling to.

I was that son. I could not possibly have been born of love, for the house we lived in was as cold and desolate as an ice palace. It amazes me that my parents ever got physically close enough to have carnal relations, let alone produce a child.

My needs were attended to by a competent staff, who were instructed not to "spoil" me. I went to the very best private schools in Denver, from nursery school through high school. Money truly did grow on trees, and I had everything a rich kid could want, except the love of my parents.

In elementary school, it was evident that I did not fit in. Timid and awkward, I rarely talked to anyone. When I did, I spoke so softly no one could hear or understand my speech. They called me the "mute" because I was silent and introverted. The bigger boys teased me mercilessly and often hit me. I ran home many days bruised and humiliated and wanting to die.

When I came home crying, I was met with chastisement rather than sympathy. I longed for affection but was consistently shown only bitterness and regret.

In spite of my bleak circumstances, there were a few bright spots in my childhood. There's one memory that I have always clung to: sometimes late at night, after my mother had gone to bed, my father would get out his old acoustic guitar. Sitting on the couch in the living room, he would play and sing old folk songs from the sixties and seventies. As long as I was quiet and didn't wake my mother, he allowed me to tiptoe out of my room and come downstairs to listen. I loved to listen to my dad play that old guitar. All the stress and worry melted from his face, and he appeared happy for a few stolen moments in the dark.

When he was weary from singing and playing, and it was time for us to sneak off to bed, the very best thing in the world would happen, making everything else in my life a little more bearable. My dad, still at peace from his music, would ruffle my hair, or pat my back and say, "Goodnight, Son. That was fun."

That was the most affection my dad ever showed me, and the most time he ever spent with me when I was young.

The enormous Highsmith Student Union housed the bookstore, alumni hall, food court, student lounges, game rooms, meeting rooms, and several other community spaces. It was where students could hang out, eat, study, or just socialize with each other.

On Saturday, August 1st, four days after Jeremy had seen *her* on the steps of the library, he and Artie were sitting in the food court at the Student Union, eating lunch. Summer school was ending, so the food court was neither crowded nor noisy. About a dozen students were eating and talking in the sprawling common room.

Then *she* walked in.

She didn't see them at first, but she immediately caught Jeremy's eye. She wore a tight black crop-top shirt, crocheted out of fine silk

thread, loosely laced at the top, exposing a tantalizing bit of breast and the soft skin of her cleavage. Her tight black Capri leggings and black ankle strap sandals were the perfect complements to the shirt. Her entire outfit hugged her curves in all the right places. Two dangling silver earrings twinkled in the summer light each time she moved her head. Once again, Jeremy was astonished by her sensuality and her hour-glass figure.

She shook her head to toss her hair back over her shoulder.

Jeremy felt his heart begin to pound.

"Oh, my God, there she is!" Jeremy whispered, more to himself than to Artie. He silently thanked God for answering his only prayer.

"Who?" Artie asked, looking up from his burger, following Jeremy's gaze to the door where he stared mesmerized. "Oh, that's Kinzie," he said nonchalantly.

"You know her?" Jeremy asked, dumbfounded that his friend could be acquainted with this mysterious woman who had become like an ethereal fantasy in his mind. Or that *any* human could know her. Over the last few days, Jeremy had almost convinced himself that she hadn't been real at all. "You actually know her!?" His stomach filled with butterflies, and the heat rose in his chest, making him feel flush.

Artie looked at Jeremy with something between curiosity and astonishment, stunned that the usually solemn Jeremy had become so animated. "Of course, I know her. I know all the pretty women." Artie said, grinning. The good-looking redhead was always happy to one-up his friend. "Do you want to meet her?"

Jeremy wasn't sure. He was afraid he would say something stupid—or worse, not be able to talk at all. He could be timid and awkward around women.

"She's a whole lot more than pretty, she's *gorgeous*, man," Jeremy replied with a reverence bordering on worship.

"Come on," Artie got up and started over to where Kinzie stood by the door. All Jeremy could do was get up and tag along behind. His heart raced, and his legs threatened to fail him before he had a

chance to cross the room. Suddenly nauseous, Jeremy felt sure he would throw up on her if he had to open his mouth to speak. All he could muster was a nod of his head.

Artie loves to hear the sound of his own voice. I'll let him do all the talking, Jeremy thought.

Kinzie spotted her friend, Artie, with a dark, sullen man coming toward her. *Have I seen him before? He is very handsome but has such a severe look.* He was shorter than Artie—about 5'10", she guessed. His dark, thick, unruly hair fell haphazardly in waves all over his head to just above his collar. His full dark eyebrows furrowed in a scowl, and tiny wrinkles etched his forehead. He had just enough facial hair to make him look as if he hadn't shaved in a day or two, and his skin was the color of toffee.

What a body! He looks like he lives in the gym. He must be a bodybuilder, Kinzie thought.

But the feature that spoke to her as if she had known him all of her life was his unsmiling amber eyes. His half-closed sleepy eyes, filled with a mixture of seduction and sadness, seemed to reveal a soul-crushing sorrow.

I'm going to make him smile, she thought. She wanted those sad bedroom eyes to light up. Kinzie knew he would be the best-looking man she had ever seen... if only she could make him smile.

She managed to snap out of her thoughts just as they reached her. She threw her arms around Artie's neck, and he lifted her off the floor with a big hug.

Jeremy stood there—stunned that Artie not only knew her but was touching her, hugging her. Artie's arms were around her waist, and her most sensuous curves pressed against his shirt. Beads of sweat formed on Jeremy's upper lip.

"Hey, Baby, how was your summer?" Kinzie asked Artie, as he placed her gently back on the floor.

"Bo-ring," he sang it, rather than said it. "I spent it with my parents. How was yours?"

"Bo-ring, too," she echoed in the same sing-song tones. "I was in class all summer. In fact, I just finished my summer finals. I hardly had a chance to get up into the mountains at all."

"Oh, Kinzie! This is Jeremy, my childhood friend. Jeremy, this is Kinzie."

"Hi, Jeremy," Kinzie greeted him with a breezy, carefree smile.

Jeremy nodded hello, but did not speak. *Ok, that's over. No damage done. We can go now*, he thought. He kept his hands behind his back so she wouldn't notice that they were sweaty and trembling.

"So, you're from Denver, too?" Kinzie asked.

Jeremy nodded again. *God, she smells like fresh air and roses!* His head whirled in light intoxication. He lowered his eyes and frowned at the tile floor, careful not to stare at the soft skin of her exposed cleavage. Jeremy understood how it felt to be gawked at like a piece of meat. Women stared at his body all the time. He once thought about having a T-shirt made saying: "*My Face Is Up Here*," with an arrow pointing upward.

But as hard as he tried, he couldn't help but notice her luscious body. *Her legs are long and sleek, and her stomach is as flat as the moon*. He made a mental note to watch her ample hips when she walked away.

"What do you think of our mountains?" she asked with a country girl grin. She was determined to make this man, who looked as though he was angry with the world, *talk* to her.

Why does she want me to talk? Jeremy wondered. Slightly exasperated, he shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another and continued to stare at the floor with his sleepy doe-eyes.

Artie stood back, grinning. Somehow, he found this scenario amusing. He knew that his friend's awkward shyness caused him to make a terrible first impression. At the same time, he also knew that Kinzie would see right through Jeremy's nerves and find a way to put him at ease.

"They're beautiful... but very different from the Rockies," Jeremy replied softly, his head slightly bent. He nervously rubbed the short

whiskers on his chin and hoped she didn't notice that his breathing was raspy and erratic.

"Really? What do you mean?" Kinzie asked, twisting her wide, luscious mouth in a sideways grin.

Jeremy contemplated for a minute. It gave him time to calm his breathing. Then he spoke musingly, "Well, the Rockies are off in the distance. They don't come to you; you have to go to them. But, these mountains—these mountains are everywhere! They're all around you. They shock you by their nearness. They invade your senses." Jeremy raised his head and looked into her dazzling almond-shaped blue eyes for the first time. Her eyes sparkled when she smiled. He knew he was speaking in short impulsive sentences and he desperately hoped he didn't sound like an idiot.

Behind her breezy, engaging smile, Kinzie was secretly drawn to his soft sensual voice and piercing golden eyes. *What a poetic and insightful depiction of my mountains*, she thought.

"That's the most extraordinary description I have ever heard of my mountains," she said quietly. "But so true. They find a way to get inside you, and you can't get them out... and you never leave them."

Jeremy noticed that she spoke reverently about the mountains she loved.

"But Artie has told me so much about Colorado... I do hope to go out west to Denver to see the Rockies someday. I would love to see the Aspens in the fall, and those adorable Ponderosa Pines! They are so tall and skinny. They look like they remembered to grow *up* but forgot to grow *out*!" Kinzie said, chuckling a little at her own joke.

Even her laugh is sexy, Jeremy thought to himself.

Her comment perplexed Jeremy. Of all the things a young woman might want to see in Denver—the malls, restaurants, and nightclubs—she was interested in the trees? Jeremy thought it was strange that a sophisticated woman like her would be fascinated by *trees*.

Intrigued by this unexpected revelation, Jeremy mustered a tiny sheepish smile. "Oh, are you a tree person?" he asked.

It was a shy smile, but it was a smile, nonetheless! Kinzie thought, noticing he had relaxed slightly. *He has a tiny dimple on the right side of his mouth and pearly white teeth.*

"You could say that," Kinzie replied, with her coy sideways grin.

Artie laughed and remarked, "No one knows more about the forest than Kinzie: trees, plants, minerals, wildlife—you name it. I think she was born in the forest!"

Jeremy was astounded. *This woman, who looks like she just stepped out of Vogue Magazine, is a naturalist?* The two sides of this woman were so incongruent that Jeremy could not formulate a picture of it in his mind.

"That's not true, Artie," she declared, a little flustered. "I just had a great teacher."

"Oh, and the Blue Ridge Mountains belong to her, so don't get it twisted," Artie explained with a teasing smile.

"Shut up, Artie! You make me sound like some kind of nut job!" she scolded, pretending to be angry.

Artie gave her a big sideways bear hug and said, "You're the cutest little nut I ever saw."

Jeremy marveled at the closeness between the two of them. They were so warm and natural together as if they had a special bond. He felt a pang of loneliness. Jeremy wanted a relationship like that with her, sweet and tender, open and honest, something he never had before with anyone. But before he could have a relationship with her, he would have to get to know her, which meant opening up and *talking* to her. The very idea was excruciatingly painful for him, but he took a deep breath and decided to try to have a conversation.

"So, do you live here? Is your family from here?" Jeremy asked.

"I don't have any family, but this is my home. I grew up in Franklin, North Carolina, about an hour's drive from here. My grandparents raised me, and they passed away when I was seventeen," she replied with a wistful, far-off look. "So, it's just me. I

live here in Asheville now." In a flash, her blue eyes were once again bright and alive, with no hint of remorse or sadness.

God, I feel like shit, Jeremy thought, chastising himself. *I should have just kept my mouth shut and nodded.*

"I'm sorry," he babbled, lowering his head.

"It's okay; you couldn't have known," she answered tenderly. "I love to talk about my grandparents and my farm in the mountains. I'll tell you all about them sometime if you let me. But I warn you; once I get started, it's hard to shut me up."

Her big contagious smile dispelled Jeremy's fear that he had bungled this first conversation. He breathed a deep sigh of relief. And before he knew it, he was grinning too.

Kinzie noticed that the darling dimple at the edge of his mouth was only visible when he smiled. She was sure that Jeremy was the most handsome man she had ever seen. Looking at him made her a little giddy.

"You don't have much of a southern accent to have grown up here," Jeremy noted, off-handedly.

"Well, I grew up very secluded, way up in the mountains. I seldom left our farm, and my grandfather wasn't originally from here, so I didn't get that deep, twangy drawl of most mountain folk. On the other hand, my grandmother came from a little town near here called Canton. So, trust me, *I* can put it on thick as molasses when I want to!" she said, putting on a thick southern drawl.

Jeremy and Artie both laughed heartily at her performance.

Kinzie was happy that she had made Jeremy laugh. He had a sweet laugh, like a child. His face had finally started to relax, and the creases on his brow had disappeared. He didn't look sad or angry anymore.

Jeremy couldn't help but wonder—*Who is this woman who grew up isolated in the mountains?* He envied her guileless spirit, her unpretentiousness. *She clearly loves to talk and has an inquisitive, friendly way about her.*

"Are you a runner like Artie?" Kinzie asked.

"Yes, I hope to make the cross-country team, but I'm not used to everything being on a hill. I hate to admit it, but I've only been here a few days, and my legs are already sore and feel like jelly." He spoke softly with his head slightly downcast. He seemed to be a very gentle person.

She laughed and said, "You'll get used to it eventually, and before you know it, your legs will be stronger than ever. I've lived in these mountains all my life. My calves are like cannonballs."

Artie tapped Jeremy on the abdomen. "He's been out of school a while; I think he's gotten flabby." He loved to tease his shy friend.

Jeremy kept quiet, but rolled his eyes and shook his head ever so slightly in disagreement with Artie.

He is anything but flabby, Kinzie thought. Even through his expensive Armani T-shirt, she could see his bulging pectoral muscles, his hard-rippled abdomen, and his big strong arms.

"Well, he doesn't look flabby to me!" she laughed, giving Jeremy a wink.

Jeremy looked down at the floor and blushed, but Kinzie was tickled to see his pink lips turn up in a bashful smile.

Artie laughed out loud. He knew Kinzie had a way of making people feel at ease. Jeremy needed a friend like her.

This woman who had bewitched him four days ago was nothing like he thought she would be. She was a thousand times more amazing—not conceited or snobbish as you might expect for a woman with her brand of beauty and sophistication. She was fresh and natural, kind and beguiling, and easy to talk to—not to mention easy to love.

Yes, it's love. I'm in love! Jeremy's thoughts surprised him. He had never felt this way before. He didn't want her to leave. He wanted to spend every minute of every day with her.

Just then, a few of Kinzie's girlfriends came in. She said goodbye to the guys and started to walk away. Then she quickly turned around. "Jeremy, I forgot to ask, what is your major?"

"Biology—I'm a junior," he answered.

"Are you going to study climate science like Artie?" she asked.

"No, I'm in pre-med. I'm going to be a veterinarian," he answered, wondering what Kinzie might think about his choice of profession.

"Oh, that's so cool!" she declared. "I like you already." She liked this shy, sweet man who wanted to heal animals.

"What about you?" he called out. "Are you going to be a dendrologist?" Jeremy assumed as much because of her love for trees.

"No, I'm a sophomore in clinical psychology," she replied. "I want to save the world. You think it's a lost cause?"

"It never hurts to try," he said with a playful frown.

They smiled at each other one last time before Kinzie joined her girlfriends and started talking non-stop with them. Jeremy hadn't remembered smiling so much in a long time.

Artie and Jeremy went back to their table. Their lunch was cold, but Jeremy didn't care. He couldn't eat anyway. His stomach was doing cartwheels; he was so thrilled about meeting the elusive woman he had first spotted four days earlier on the steps of the library. She was full of surprises, like a breath of fresh air, like the very mountains themselves.

But something nagged at him. Jeremy knew that Artie was a playboy in the extreme. Artie met very few women he didn't have sex with. Kinzie dressed and moved like a seductress, and they seemed very close. Part of him didn't want to know, but he had to know—before he let his feelings get too tangled.

"Artie, have you ever... you know... slept with her?" Jeremy asked, praying the answer was no.

"Watch your mouth, asshole!" Artie snapped, "Of course not! She's a special girl, like a sister to me. Anyway, she doesn't date. So, don't get your hopes up. I've known her for a year, and I've never seen her on a date with anyone. I mean *No One!*"

Over the next few minutes, Artie reminisced about the time when he met Kinzie. "When I first met her, sure, I tried to run my

game on her, but she wasn't having it. She said she was going to focus all of her energy on her education and career and didn't want to get involved in a relationship with anyone. But I think there's more to it. I think she's been hurt very badly in the past. She has lots of friends, but she's afraid to get really close to anyone."

"Well, she said she was orphaned at seventeen... anything could have happened to her after that. It scares me to think what it might have been," Jeremy uttered, almost in a whisper. "She's so gorgeous and sexy, but she also seems—I don't know...", he reached for the right word... "innocent."

"I respect her so much. She is absolutely brilliant," Artie continued. "She's on a full scholarship and has a 4.0-grade-point-average. She tutors to make extra money. I've never heard her be unkind to anyone. She's one of the nicest people I've ever known." Artie was expounding on his friend when their roommate Ken Mori plopped down at their table with a hot dog and fries. A Japanese American student from Michigan, Ken was a know-it-all who was always in other people's business.

"Who? Who are we talking about?" Ken pried.

"Kinzie," Artie answered, reluctant to involve Ken in the conversation.

"Sweet girl. Such a waste. She's a lesbian, you know," Ken stated so matter-of-factly as to leave no room for dispute.

"She is not!" Artie announced so loudly that the couple at a nearby table turned to stare.

The three of them looked across the room where Kinzie was deep in conversation with her three best friends, Diana, Anne, and Piper.

"She never dates, and she is always with her *girls*," Ken remarked, nodding toward the group of them.

Jeremy watched Kinzie as she talked with her friends, heads together as if sharing a deep secret; then from time to time breaking out in hearty laughter.

"Okay, wait a fucking minute!" Artie declared, "Diana is no lesbian. I've banged her a couple of times. She's all woman."

Jeremy and Ken gawked at Artie. Diana was cute, with short dark red hair and big brown eyes. She was a little overweight but in a curvy way. Opinionated and brash, she pulled no punches. But Diana had a terrible reputation. Everyone at school knew she was loose. She honestly would sleep with almost anyone.

"It was pretty good. I'd do it again, anyway, I was really drunk," Artie defended himself. "And everyone knows Anne has a steady boyfriend at Appalachian State. They're getting married when they graduate. So, she's no lesbian.

"What about that cute little Pixie? They're always going to the dance studio together; I've even seen them arm in arm," Ken said.

"It's *Piper*, you dick-head, not Pixie, and there's no way Kinzie's a lesbian." Artie was beginning to get angry with Ken.

A beautiful petite platinum blonde, Piper majored in dance, and Kinzie loved to dance, so they did spend a lot of time together. They were close friends, and Kinzie was a very affectionate person. It wouldn't surprise Artie to see Kinzie arm in arm with any of her friends, male or female.

Finally, Jeremy couldn't listen to any more of this nonsense. "That woman over there is no more a lesbian than I am. All you have to do is watch her walk and move to know that she was made for a man," he said, shooting Ken a threatening glare.

"That's right, Ken," Artie agreed. "If she's a lesbian, I'll kiss your bare-naked ass!"

"Me too," Jeremy said. Then he turned to Artie and whispered. "And by the way, Artie, it's too late, my hopes are already up."

Five days after their meeting at the student union, Jeremy was on his way to the gym. He walked fast with his head tilted slightly downward as not to be noticed. But the women had quickly begun to take notice of the new dark-haired pre-med student with his Rolex watch and Tom Ford sneakers.

Kinzie was leaving the dance studio at the Sherrill Center when Jeremy spotted her walking down the sidewalk with her head down,

her nose in a small notebook. She was reading with such intensity that Jeremy wondered what the book contained that intrigued her so. He watched her, spellbound, as she moved like a lithe forest creature along the path. *She is so physically fit. She looks as if she has never eaten a carbohydrate in her life. I bet she lives on bean sprouts and tofu*, Jeremy mused.

Not paying attention to where she was going, Jeremy had to move out of her way to keep from crashing into her as he passed. Kinzie never even noticed him... until she tripped on something in her path and started to fall. In a split second, Jeremy almost effortlessly reached out and grabbed her around the waist with his right arm and kept her upright.

To Kinzie, it seemed as if he had come out of nowhere to scoop her up—just like Superman. She suddenly found herself holding on to his left bicep with both hands to steady herself while his right arm encircled her waist. Through her shock and discombobulation, Kinzie couldn't help but notice how secure and steady his arm felt as she clung to it for dear life.

Jeremy quivered at the sensation of her bosom mashed against his upper arm. It was almost more than he could take... being so close... touching her.

Flashes of heat, like dry lightning, coursed through Kinzie's body and she froze momentarily to savor the warm, solid feeling of his big hand pressed against the small of her back. He smelled of sweat and something she couldn't name—a manly scent. She closed her eyes briefly to take in his aroma.

"Oh, God, Jeremy, I wasn't paying attention to where I was going. Thank you," she blurted out, a little embarrassed.

"You remembered my name?" he asked, as he reluctantly let go of her. He could tell she had just showered. She smelled fresh, like soap and honeysuckle. Her hair was a million shades of golden blonde in the August sun. The color reminded him of caramel and honey. The slim-fit jeans that hugged her perfect shape had sequined pockets and ripped knees. Her tank top was grey with black lace

around the top. Underneath her shirt, a push-up bra hugged and lifted her big breasts.

"Of course, I remember your name. You're Artie's friend. It's a small school. I make it a point to know almost everyone, especially good-looking men from Denver who are going to be veterinarians," Kinzie said with a flirtatious wink.

"I'm pretty sure I'm the only one," he answered shyly. He loved that she seemed to be flirting with him. She had the most beautiful smile, playful and teasing.

"Exactly," she said.

Jeremy picked up her notebook and handed it to her. "They should put up a sign that says, 'No Reading While Walking,'" he joked.

"It wouldn't do any good. I'd be too busy reading to see it!" Kinzie chuckled.

He laughed at her. It felt good to laugh again.

"Thanks for saving my ass. I'm dancing on Saturday, and it's hard to twerk with a bruised butt," she stated as she rubbed her butt.

Kinzie had a big precocious grin that was neither modest nor delicate. Jeremy envied her boldness; he found her self-confidence refreshing.

"What? Where? Um, I want to see that. I mean..." Jeremy was so excited that his words tumbled from his mouth. *This is too good to be true*, he thought.

"I was kidding about the twerking, but I do sing and dance at the Off Broadway Club sometimes on Saturday nights. It's a popular club with the students. Artie's usually there with some of his groupies," she said, grinning.

Jeremy shook his head, "Artie's always been a terrible rogue."

"He's sweet. I adore him. He's a good friend," Kinzie replied, thinking about her silly redheaded friend.

"He's been a good friend to me. I've known him since I was twelve. We were teammates and partners-in-crime back home," Jeremy said, with a tiny smile.

“Wow, I know a lot of people, but I’ve never had a good friend like that,” she sighed. There was a hint of sadness in her smile.

Jeremy stuck out his bottom lip in a pout, “What about your friends back home in Franklin?” he asked, hoping he wasn’t getting too personal.

“I haven’t really kept in touch with anyone,” Kinzie mused, looking down for a moment. “I’ve been so busy with school and work.” Then she brightened and immediately changed the subject. “I better go; I’ve got to get home. Maybe I’ll see you on Saturday?” There it was again—that breezy, flirtatious wink.

“Yes, I can’t wait. I’ll see you Saturday at the club,” Jeremy replied, attempting a light-hearted grin himself. But his eyes were fixed on the ground. He was afraid to look up at her, afraid of what he might see in her eyes. Even though she told him she needed to go, she stood there facing him, frozen in place. What was she waiting for? A moment later, Jeremy found the courage to look into her startling eyes. There was wisdom in those blue eyes, but he also saw sadness and grief.

They gazed at each other a moment: he, into her deep blue eyes and she, into his piercing gold ones. She saw a gentleness there, a sensitivity she had never known from a man. She sensed that he took things deeply personal and that life had not been kind to him.

She broke away from his gaze, turned quickly, and walked away.

This time, Jeremy watched her walk away—watched her perfect round hips sway in those tight jeans, and he didn’t care if she turned around and saw him. He had saved that butt. He was unashamed.

Chapter 3

One-Eyed Chicken

Kinzie

I am a child of the Appalachians, a place thought of as home to poor, hard-working, uneducated people. I knew no such place. My world was full of magic and rainbows. I lived in a dream.

When I was barely tall enough to reach the foot peddle on my Grandma's Singer sewing machine, she began teaching me to sew. I practiced with colorful scraps of cloth that Grandma pulled from a wicker basket. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy sewing; I did. But I was restless. I wiggled and fidgeted in the old vinyl chair.

I wanted to be outdoors with Gramps: replacing windows, mending screens, repairing fences. I hated being cooped up in the house all day. But today was sewing day, so I served my time and learned the skill put before me without complaint.

I was a good child, easy, compliant. Gramps would say that I was too curious for my own good. I tried to learn everything—to know everything. My big blue eyes took in every nuance of the forest. I could spot things that my grandfather's old eyes would miss: a chipmunk, a sparrow, the iridescent moon peeping its head above the tree line as we walked back to the farm in the evenings. The forest was home to me, as much as my own bed, covered with the quilts Grandma had made.

As I got older, the sewing lessons became more advanced. I learned to make bobbins out of brightly colored thread, to expertly lay and mark a pattern, then to cut the cloth from the pattern. Grandma taught me to sew simple garments at first: a skirt, a plain dress. Over time, the garments became progressively more difficult. I learned to make collars and sleeves, pleats and tucks, ruffles, and linings. I learned to work with all types of materials: linen and taffeta,

silk, and lace. By the time I was a junior in high school, I could sew a prom dress or a wedding dress or just about anything—all thanks to my Grandma’s excellent tutelage.

At night, after supper, when the dishes were done, and the house was quiet (Grandma was usually asleep in front of the television), Gramps and I would open the laptop that I had insisted they purchase for me at Walmart. We would look up some of the many wonders we had seen in the forest that day. My grandfather taught me about the mountains, the trees, the plants, the animals, the rocks—the entire world surrounding my home—but I taught him to use the computer. I opened his world so he could leave his mountain home without stepping one foot off the land he loved.

I knew Gramps would die in the house he built and would never even go to the Dollar General in downtown Franklin. So, I brought the gift of the world to him. We took great adventures around the world on that laptop, learning about every tiny exotic place on the globe. Our appetites for knowledge were voracious. We had that in common.

Like the laws of nature, my life had structure. It had order. I felt confident and safe in my world. I knew a snake would bite if you got too close, a deer would run, a bear would stay and fight to defend its young. I learned to protect myself in every situation in the forest.

It would be a few years before I would discover that things were not so predictable in the human forest of life, where the laws of nature don’t apply at all.

It was a hot Saturday night, August 8th, one week after Artie had introduced Jeremy to Kinzie at the food court, and two days before fall semester classes were to begin. Most of the students had arrived on campus, and spirits were high. Old friends were meeting up after the long summer absence, and new friends were being made. Jeremy had made the cross-country team and had met most of his

teammates. A party atmosphere spread throughout the Asheville clubs frequented by the students of drinking age.

“Off Broadway,” a favorite club among the older students, was located one block off of Broadway Street near the college. Upon entering the front door of the old renovated warehouse, you were greeted by a long bar, forty feet in length, with swiveling bar stools. A tantalizing array of liquor bottles lined the back of the bar. At the end of the bar a slightly raised wooden platform, twenty by twenty feet, served as a stage for the bands and musicians who came to play for the energized crowds. Adjoining the stage was a wood veneer dance floor—twice the size of the stage.

An assortment of mismatched tables and chairs, all shapes and sizes, filled the remainder of the huge room. The hodge-podge had obviously been purchased from “going out of business” sales held at several restaurants. Except for the hard-wood stage and the dance floor, the floors were grey concrete once painted a dark blue. The paint had peeled in many areas from years of mopping up spilled drinks. The mismatched tables and chairs and the peeling paint on the floor gave the club a shabby, dilapidated look.

Marty, the club’s owner, tended bar along with two young women who were usually dressed in scanty outfits of hot pants and low-cut tops, or tight-fitting bodysuits.

For Kinzie, Saturday nights at the club had become an important part of her week. She loved dancing the night away under the four sparkling mirror ball lights hanging from the ceiling.

With the only light coming from the bar lights and the reflection bouncing off the mirror balls, the club was eerily dark inside. But no one seemed to notice or care about the club’s seedy appearance. On this night, it was packed with students and other customers.

Saturday night was Amateur Night—a night when local musicians came from all over town with their instruments. Singers came to sing, musicians came to play, and everyone came to drink, dance and party. The club’s eclectic mix of musical genres gave it much of its charm. On any given night, you might hear rock, blues, soul, funk,

pop, or indie. The possibilities were endless. It was a singer-songwriter's paradise where artists could try out original material; aspiring singers could sing obscure songs no one had ever heard before, and introduce great music to appreciative listeners.

Kinzie loved to dance, and she loved to sing, so the Off Broadway Club was made for her. It was where she could tell her life story through the songs of others. Kinzie chose her songs carefully because they revealed the pain and the joys of her life. It was where she could release her demons and relish in the happy times. Tonight, she was there to celebrate a straight-A summer semester and ring in the beginning of the new fall term.

Her girls, Diana, Anne, and Piper, had chosen a round table in the middle of the floor where they could see and be seen. They were eager to dance and party on this last weekend before the fall semester began.

Kinzie rarely sat for more than a moment or two. Men kept her busy on the dance floor; and when she wasn't dancing, she was singing with some of the artists who regularly came to entertain. She knew most of the musicians and they enjoyed performing with her. Kinzie had become somewhat of a regular with her favorite band, "Deus Ex Machina." They were accomplished musicians with a blues-rock vibe, and familiar with the songs she loved most, so she sang with them often. Kinzie's near-photographic memory made it easy to recall the words to almost every song she had ever heard. Depending on her mood, she might choose a rock song, a ballad, or a sad love song. No one, including Kinzie, knew what to expect until she got up on stage.

The lead singer and guitarist of Deus Ex Machina was a typical skinny, long-haired rocker-type named Troy Aimes. She loved that he could play lead guitar like nobody's business, and they often sang duets together, with Kinzie dancing to the beat.

Jeremy, Artie, Tyler Scott, Paul Cohen, and Ken Mori were seated at a long rectangular table in the back, drinking, talking and laughing together. Tyler and Paul were on the cross-country team with Artie

and Jeremy. Once in a while, one of them would get up and ask a girl to dance—except for Jeremy; he didn’t dance. Artie knew it was partly because he was too shy and self-conscious. But it was also because Jeremy preferred to drink beer while he watched Kinzie dance.

Jeremy noticed that Kinzie dressed even more provocatively here at the club than she did at school. Tonight, her big breasts nearly spilled out of a red lace halter top. Her hip-hugger jeans had cut-outs around the waist that revealed little squares of her bare hips. Her shiny red four-inch stilettos accented her long sleek legs, making her bust and butt even more prominent.

Jeremy was grateful for the relative obscurity of darkness because he didn’t want to take his eyes off of her. He purposely let his dark waves fall over one eye so no one could tell that he was staring. Usually shy and self-conscious, Jeremy didn’t care if he seemed a little creepy; he found everything about her nothing short of spell-binding.

It had only been a week since he had met her at the Student Union, and watching her dance for the first time under the sparkling lights in the dark club, made her seem like an illusion. Jeremy had to keep reminding himself that she was a real flesh and blood woman. He had met her, talked to her, touched her. She was a gentle, down-to-earth woman who had made him laugh.

As he watched her on the dance floor, Jeremy wondered why Kinzie stood out from every other woman in the room. She was beautiful, but not in the classic sense. Her dark blonde hair framed her face and highlighted her exotic blue eyes. Thick angled brows, high cheekbones, and a long straight nose gave her an almost chiseled appearance. Jeremy had never seen a more gorgeous body, with large, luscious breasts and curvy hips, which were accentuated by her small waist and flat, muscular stomach.

Beautiful was too plain a word for her. “Ravishing” came closer to describing her, but even that word was inadequate.

Kinzie was exquisite.

Jeremy sat there, mesmerized, as he watched. She was an amazing dancer; he was sure she could have been a professional. Rhythmic and unbelievably flexible, her dancing was sensual, and her moves were timed perfectly to the music. Watching her made Jeremy ache with a hunger that was much more than physical. She aroused him in every way possible. He wanted to know this magnificent woman, heart and soul.

Around ten o'clock, Kinzie ordered a margarita and went to the stage. She sat her drink on the piano and walked up to the microphone. The patrons were fired up, and everyone was well on their way to being smashed.

A hush fell over the club as they anticipated her next song.

"How's everybody tonight? You ready for school Monday morning?" Kinzie shouted into the microphone, tossing her wavy blonde hair over her shoulder with a sensual movement of her head.

About half the crowd shouted "Yes!" and the other half, "Nooo!"

Kinzie laughed at the mixed response and gave another carefree toss of her head. "How many of you are attending UNCA for the first time on Monday?" she asked the crowd. About twenty people held up their hands and cheered. Jeremy held up his beer bottle and whistled. A delicious sense of camaraderie filled the room. And he was having a wonderful time, watching her.

Still playing with the crowd, microphone in hand, Kinzie turned to the club's owner and quipped, "We have a rowdy crowd tonight, Marty, and a bunch of 'newbies!'"

Marty loved it when she got the patrons fired up like this because they drank more booze.

Then Kinzie turned back to the partiers with a wide grin. "Alright, all you new-born babies out there, you're gonna be back here in a couple of weeks feeling like you've been gut-punched! Don't say I didn't warn you assholes! This shit ain't easy. You're gonna be cryin' on mama's shoulder in a few weeks, wondering how the hell you got into this mess." She patted her bare shoulder for emphasis.

The room buzzed with cat-calls, cheers, whistles, and hearty laughter. Kinzie knew how to get them going, and the crowd was loving it. Jeremy and Artie's table joined in, making a lot of noise. It was clear that Kinzie was eating it up and having a blast.

Riding on the energy that filled the room, she kept egging on the crowd. "You remember the pretty college brochure? I know you've all seen it, the one with the picture of the school and the mountains in the background? It talks about the great professors, and the first-rate education you're gonna get?" Kinzie paused a moment. "... Well, you're going to get a great education all right! What it *doesn't* tell you is—by the time it's over, you're gonna wish you were *dead!*"

The drummer gave a saucy roll and a staccato rimshot on his drums for emphasis. Everyone laughed and hooted and cheered.

"So, this song is for all you babies out there. It's called "One Eyed Chicken." Believe it or not, in a few short weeks you are all going to be running around in circles like a fucking one-eyed chicken! Party your asses off tonight, 'cause Monday you're going doowwnnn!" The whole band followed with a long, sad note. But the crowd only laughed, hooped, and hollered all the louder, totally pumped when the music began.

Jeremy was a little surprised by her nasty mouth, but he knew he shouldn't be. He had already seen that she was plain-spoken, said what she thought, and dressed so provocatively. He liked her touch of vulgarity; it made her sexier to him. It made her hot! Jeremy had a brief fantasy right there in the club of her begging him to "please fuck me." He knew it was just a dirty fantasy, and that it would never, in a million years, happen. But being a twenty-four-year-old man who hadn't had sex in months, he could dream, couldn't he?

The song "One Eyed Chicken" was a fast, hard-rocking song by blues singer Beth Hart about a woman who has two sides, one good and one evil.

Kinzie was dynamic, with a powerful, raspy voice that boomed into the microphone. She rocked back and forth with Troy, the lead guitarist, played her air guitar with him, and banged her sexy blonde

head like an eighties rocker to his electric guitar. She pumped her hips to the beat as if she were making love to the world and shook her big luscious breasts until Jeremy thought they might pop out of the skimpy top she was wearing. She leaned into the microphone stand, and rode it like a lover, closed her eyes, threw her head back, and swayed to the beat. The music was inside her. It penetrated every nerve ending, every fiber. The crowd loved her, especially the men. Kinzie could feel their eyes on her body, and it energized her, fueling her eroticism. Music was her sex. And God, she was good! She was beyond Jeremy's wildest expectations. What a star!

She sang a full set with the band before taking a break. The songs she chose were bluesy with lots of sexual innuendos. She touched herself provocatively and made eye contact with some of her male fans as she sang certain sexually suggestive lines, pointing them out and singing directly to them.

After the set, men flocked around her like moths to a flame. She danced with anyone who asked her, without prejudice. Kinzie treated the ugly men just as nice as the handsome ones. Fat, skinny, black, brown, rich, poor—she made everyone feel special. Jeremy knew that for some of these men, spending five or ten minutes in her company, dancing or talking, had to be the high point of their week. They came to the club just to see her, dance with her, and watch her perform.

Kinzie had played this role for over a year now. She had it down: the wide-eyed flirt, laughing at their silly stories and crude jokes, pretending to be in charge, her own woman. She enjoyed having sexual power over men, to entice them and leave them salivating. It had become second nature to her.

Yet, she knew... she always knew that it was a game. None of these men interested her whatsoever. They were fools: jesters in a raucous show. They did not know her. It was only her body they craved. It wasn't personal, and she didn't take it personally. Kinzie knew she was interchangeable with any woman who caught their eye. She was only flesh to them.

Try as they might, none of them would ever get close to her. She was a virgin of sorts and intended to stay that way. So, Kinzie played her game in public and kept to herself in private.

Jeremy was mesmerized by Kinzie's singing and dancing. He had never known anyone like this woman. He had to get to know her better. But how? He realized that as friendly as she had been to him, he was just one of dozens of admirers. She could go home with any man in the club she chose. And just because she happened to remember his name, it didn't mean a thing.

It was after midnight. Artie and Jeremy's friends had gone home, and for the first time all evening, they were sitting alone at their table. Several women had come and gone throughout the night, laughing and talking with them. Artie wanted to pick up a girl and take her home, but he knew Jeremy had given up "one-night stands"—or so he said. Artie hated to leave his old friend in the club alone when he had only been in town for two weeks. So, he sat and drank—a lot.

Finally, after several drinks, Artie gave Jeremy a disapproving glare, "What the hell is wrong with you, man?"

"What do you mean?" Jeremy knew precisely what Artie was referring to.

"What's all this celibacy shit? It ain't like you. Did your dick quit working? We can get you some Viagra!" Artie was drunk and running his mouth as usual.

"Hell, no! Shut up before someone hears you. You prick." Jeremy looked around to make sure no one had heard Artie's comment. "I'm twenty-four years old; I decided to quit whoring around. I'm tired of that life. I want to be in a relationship with somebody I care about. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, but you can screw around until you meet someone," Artie suggested.

"No, you can't, because you get a reputation as a womanizer and when you meet someone you're serious about she won't have

anything to do with you,” Jeremy explained to Artie as if he were a child.

“Oh, for God’s sake, you’re worried about your reputation? I’ve heard it all now!” Artie snapped back.

“Just drop it. I don’t expect you to understand. Anyway, the woman I want has also taken a vow of celibacy.” Jeremy looked over to where Kinzie was talking with a man. “So, it might be a long time before I see any action.”

“Yeah, like never. Your dick will fall off if you wait on her. Jeremy, I’m telling you, no offense, but she’s out of your league. She’s out of all our leagues. She’ll probably graduate and marry a famous NFL player, or a rich politician, or someone like that. Or she could be one of those thousand-dollar-an-hour escorts and never have to work a day in her life,” Artie said.

Jeremy cringed at the idea of Kinzie making a living on her back, having sex with disgusting old men in expensive business suits. “Sex *is* work if you’re not into it,” he snapped back in his typical sardonic tone.

“I wouldn’t know. I’m always into it!” Artie joked. “Look, buddy, it ain’t gonna happen. Look at her over there.” He motioned with his head to where two men were vying for Kinzie’s attention. “On a scale from one to ten, we’re sevens, and she is about a ninety-nine! Every man in this club wants to fuck her. Forget *Her*.” Artie was adamant.

“I can’t. I’m in love.” Jeremy spoke the words out loud for the first time in his life. Then added, “Come on, man, we’re at least eights, aren’t we?” he gave Artie a questioning glance.

“Oh, for fuck sake!” Artie replied. He called for the waitress and ordered another drink. “You know what pisses me off about you?”

“No, I thought we were best friends,” Jeremy whined, pretending to be hurt.

“We are, but I hate the way you get girls so easy, and I have to work so hard for my pussy,” Artie commiserated.

“What the hell are you talking about? You’re the biggest playboy I know. You get more pussy than a rock star,” Jeremy snapped.

"But all *you* have to do is sit here with that stupid sad-ass look on your face like you just left your dog's funeral, and the women flock around you," Artie lamented.

"I can't help the way my face looks, Artie," Jeremy grumbled sarcastically. "You really can't hold that against me."

"But then you sit here and hardly say two words to them, and they're ready to jump in bed with you. I have to dance, talk, buy drinks, tell jokes, listen to their fucking life story, and I still may not get laid!"

Jeremy shook his head, "Maybe women like the quiet, thoughtful type," he noted with his dry sense of humor.

"Bullshit! You're boring as hell, but you're too good looking for your own good, and now you're wasting it on a woman you'll never get." Artie shook his head in disbelief.

"You're a mess, Artie." Jeremy had learned years ago not to take his friend's nonsense too seriously.

Later that night, most of the partiers had staggered to their cars and gone home. The eerily quiet club smelled of stale whiskey and sweat. Kinzie sat slumped at the bar feeling tired and drained from dancing for hours with anyone and everyone. She couldn't say why she was so melancholy all of a sudden. She had been in high spirits earlier.

A little nagging voice in her heart told her it was because Jeremy had been sitting at the table with two women earlier and they had been flirting with him like crazy. Both of them. One on each side. Leaning against him. Rubbing their bodies on him. Feeling his muscles. *Arrrrgh!*

To his credit, Jeremy seemed uninterested, so they finally got up and left. But for some unexplained reason, it bothered her.

Jeremy was so good looking, Kinzie knew he would have lots of women pursuing him. He would have no shortage of girlfriends.

Was she jealous? That was ridiculous, she didn't even know him, and she had long ago given up on men. But deep, deep down, it

tugged at her heart to see him with other girls. *Stop being so silly*, she told herself—*you barely know this guy!* Confused by her feelings, she stuffed them down and refused to acknowledge or examine them. After all, Kinzie was a master at pretending. She had done it for years.

Jeremy seemed so sweet and gentle, just the kind of man she could love if love were possible for her. But Kinzie had trusted herself to love once before, and she had misjudged so badly it had left her maimed beyond repair. She knew she hadn't learned the skills necessary for choosing a good partner. She had trusted too easily, believed too readily. Her sheltered life had left her too naïve. She gave her heart and asked nothing in return. She vowed never to make that mistake again.

Kinzie glanced over at her friends' table. Diana had long since left with someone; she couldn't remember with whom. Anne was sitting with her boyfriend, Henry, who had come down from Appalachian State for the weekend. Piper had gone home early. Suddenly Kinzie felt very alone. Normally, she liked being alone and would have been glad to go home, take a shower, and get a good night's sleep, but not tonight.

Just then, Kinzie noticed Artie stumbling back from the restroom. He had been drinking heavily all evening. Jeremy, too, had been drinking steadily. Neither of them was in any condition to drive.

Now that it was quiet, this night had a forsaken, lonely feeling. Kinzie could not say why she was so sad. Was it because others could love and she could not?

Perhaps that's why she did it. She didn't really know. She'd never done anything like this before. She just knew she didn't want to go home alone.

Jeremy watched as she spoke with Marty, the club's owner, then walked over to the table where he and Artie were sitting.

"Come on, guys, I'm taking you home. You don't need to be driving," Kinzie said to Artie and Jeremy.

"What about my car?" Artie asked.

"I talked to Marty," she said. "He said you could leave it here until tomorrow."

Jeremy really wasn't drunk. He had only had three beers, but he wasn't about to tell her that. Any excuse to spend time with her and to get to know her better, he would gladly take.

The three of them walked outside and got into her all-wheel-drive Subaru. Quick as a flash, Jeremy jumped in front of Artie and claimed the front seat. Artie gave him a menacing look and climbed in the back.

They had barely gotten out on the road when Kinzie said, "I have something for you at my house. I think I'll take you home with me. You can spend the night there."

Jeremy jerked his head around to the back seat. He and Artie exchanged silent gasps, Artie's green eyes widened in astonishment, his mouth flew open. He had known her a year but had never been to her house.

"Oh, my God, she wants a threesome!" Artie exclaimed, "Damn girl, it's about time you decided to have some fun! I don't want a threesome, I don't like Jeremy like that, but we can take turns!"

"Shut up, Artie! You're drunk." Jeremy sneered. He knew Artie was going to regret talking dirty to Kinzie when he sobered up. And it pissed him off to have her treated disrespectfully.

Kinzie thought the whole thing was funny. She laughed so hard she ran off the road.

As she swerved the car back into her lane, she said, "Well, I bet *that* sobered him up!" Moments later, Kinzie was still laughing when she pulled into her driveway.

Chapter 4

Good Squishy Hug

Kinzie

My grandfather taught me the names of the trees, but my Grandma taught me the names of the butterflies. In early spring, when she was sure the snows had gone, she planted hundreds of wildflowers encircling our small farmhouse.

Grandma chose each flower, not for its beauty, but its nectar.

She allowed me to help her till and fertilize the soil, then generously spread the seeds. We nurtured and watered the plants each day, impatiently waiting for the burst of color to appear. They never disappointed. Before long, the thick, perfumy scent of flowers filled the air.

The black-eyed Susans were my favorite. A sturdy, confident flower, I loved the bright yellow petals. They reminded me of a big happy smile. So, we planted dozens of them. Strewn among our black-eyed Susans, we also planted cornflowers, Indian blankets, forget-me-nots, red poppies, lavender, marigolds, and many more.

Every spring, our yard became an emblazoned display of scarlet, azure, white, indigo, violet, gold, yellow—all the colors of the rainbow.

When the flowers bloomed, we waited again... waited for the butterflies to come. Soon our garden became an iridescent world of tiny insects, a kaleidoscope of lacy fluttering wings in the colors of the earth. Oh, what a miraculous sight!

How could I *not* believe in fairies and pixies with this luminary of mythical creatures before me? We had dozens of species of butterfly visitors in our yard each spring and summer—all the way into the early autumn.

We saw hundreds of common monarchs with their bold yellow, orange, and black wings. Grandma taught me how to tell the males from the females by the black spots on the males' wings. We saw the red-spotted purple butterfly with its glossy purple wings and the question mark butterfly which has a question mark shape on the underside of its wings. There were tiger swallowtails, spring azure butterflies, and dozens more. My favorite was the tiny eastern tailed blue butterfly with its soft blue-grey color trimmed in black. Smaller than the others, it seemed so delicate and vulnerable.

I loved all the animals of the forest, large and small, but the butterflies were special to me, and I often wondered why.

Now that I have lived a little and know some things, I believe I loved the butterflies most because they knew a secret about life that I had not yet learned.

Their lives seemed so frivolous and carefree, yet butterflies were fragile. They fluttered through the world defenseless, continually crashing into their unexpected fates.

You could crush them in your hand.

I, on the other hand, was confident and tough, secure in my place in the world. Thanks to my grandparents, I had come to believe I was invincible. I could do anything. Be anything. I was sure no one would ever hurt me.

No one would ever crush me.

I was wrong. I crumbled like the brittle wings of a butterfly.

Butterflies know the cruelty and frailty of life. They know that life is temporary and we should live each day as if it were our last. If only someone could have warned me...

I wish my grandparents had taught me that, unlike the animals, humans are not always as they seem. They can be cunning and duplicitous, and often their hearts are black and dead.

Kinzie's house was a comfortable three-bedroom bungalow nestled on a hillside in a quiet neighborhood off of Edgewood Road, near the college. Three steps led up to a small porch. Hundreds of wildflowers blossomed along the front of the house. Even in the darkness, Jeremy could smell the sweet fragrance and see the variety and multitude of flowers.

The inside of the house was cozy and neat as a pin. The décor was an eclectic mixture of original pieces which Kinzie had collected since moving to Asheville.

Jeremy looked around the room at all of her unusual, creative, artistic things and realized that her home could not possibly look any different. This place was *her*, exactly as he expected it to be, even though he had never thought about it before. Jeremy grew up in a mansion in an affluent neighborhood in Denver, but at this moment, he understood how a real home should feel. He could never imagine this woman living in a mansion. But she was richer than he would ever be.

"Make yourselves at home," she said carelessly, with a quick smile. Only too happy to do so, Artie quickly flopped down on the large L-shaped sectional sofa in the living room. Jeremy, on the other hand, sat tentatively on the other end of the couch, with his back straight, not knowing what to expect. Kinzie turned on one very dim light, put some blues on the stereo, then left the room to get something.

Jeremy watched her walk down her hallway. Her blonde waves bounced with each step, and her curvy hips swayed when she walked, somehow accentuating her small waist. Jeremy was sure he could watch her walk all day and never get bored.

When Kinzie returned, she had put her hair in a ponytail, scrubbed her face, and changed into a T-shirt and some comfortable shorts. She was barefoot, and her long legs were bare and sleek.

Jeremy thought she looked so fresh and wholesome, like the farm girl she was. Seeing her like this, he could easily imagine her

living on a farm. She looked natural, not made-up, and dressed like a stripper. She absolutely glowed.

Jeremy wasn't sure which side of her he liked more, the vixen or the country girl. He loved them both; he quickly decided. The vixen made him want to bend her over a table and have wild, impetuous sex with her. The country girl inspired cuddling and making slow, sweet love on a cold night under blankets. Both sounded exquisite to him.

He had to shake his head to clear his lustful thoughts.

Kinzie tossed a one-ounce bag of marijuana on the handmade cypress coffee table. "I hear you Colorado boys like your weed," she stated with a big grin.

They both dived for the bag. Artie grabbed it first and rolled a joint with the papers lying on the coffee table. Kinzie smiled at them. They reminded her of excited children running for the ice cream truck.

"Now, isn't this better than a threesome?" she teased.

Neither of them answered; they were too intent on the weed. They passed the joint back and forth and let the familiar musky aroma fill the room. Before long, Jeremy relaxed and leaned back against the sofa. Kinzie noticed that his entire demeanor seemed to change. The tension in his face melted away, and a warm, contented smile took its place.

Kinzie sat cross-legged between them in the crook of the L part of the couch: Jeremy on one end, Artie on the other, and Kinzie in the middle. Beginning to feel a little dazed from the weed, Jeremy caught himself staring at her muscular legs. Her calves were the size of fists, and her thighs were as strong as a young oak tree from a lifetime of dancing and living in the mountains. But, her legs were long, smooth, and graceful.

Kinzie felt comfortable in her own skin, not at all self-conscious. She knew no strangers and made friends effortlessly. Jeremy envied her ease with people.

How can it be that easy for her? he wondered as he feasted on the sight of this beautiful girl who connected with others so effortlessly. He, on the other hand, had few friends and preferred to be alone most of the time. But he prided himself on being loyal and trustworthy. When he made a friend, it was for life. In school, Jeremy had covered for Artie many times, to keep him out of trouble.

After a few minutes of smoking in silence and enjoying that fuzzy, otherworldly feeling, Kinzie asked, "So, pot is legal now in Colorado? Can you smoke it in restaurants and bars, or the park or walking down the street? How about at Starbucks? Do they have Starbucks there? What about the zoo, or...?"

Jeremy and Artie burst out laughing at her—the way you do when you're stoned; she, too, was very high and rambling non-stop.

"What?" she asked, through her haziness, "I'm asking a serious question." But at the same time, she was grinning her silly, sideways grin.

"Well, it's complicated," Jeremy replied, speaking slowly. "They're still figuring it all out right now."

"Oh," she whispered, feeling a bit sheepish that she had blurted out the questions at all. Jeremy grinned at his new friend, enjoying the fact that she was so talkative when she was high.

In the moments that followed, a quiet, contemplative mood came over the three like a warm shroud.

Grateful for the renewed silence, Kinzie took a moment to study her new friend. Jeremy was bewitchingly handsome. But not everyone's type, she guessed. He wasn't tall. They were the same height when she wore her heels. He was built like a lowland gorilla, all buff and muscled. But he was painfully shy and usually appeared so severe—something she would not have expected in someone so good-looking.

Kinzie had always liked long hair on men, and she was captivated by his long black waves that cascaded to his collar. But she had to be careful not to stare, as it was too easy to be drawn into the intensity of his dark gaze—too easy to get lost in her own fantasy. Jeremy had

a heart-shaped face and piercing bedroom eyes, which seemed to say, “Come fuck me.” His five o’clock shadow gave him an air of mystery. His lips were a light pink—too pretty to be a man’s lips—and he had a teensy dimple on the right side of his mouth just at the crease. *How can I describe the color of his skin?* she asked herself, *A very light brown: caramel is color that comes to mind.*

“You haven’t told me your last name,” she said.

“Brentley, Jeremy Devan Brentley,” he replied.

After a few minutes, Jeremy spoke up, “I don’t know your last name, either.”

“MacKenna, not McKenna, *MacKenna*.” She spoke concisely so he would comprehend the difference. “Kinzie Elaina MacKenna. I’m Scots-Irish.”

“Oh, God,” he said with a teasing grin.

His smile was alarming. Kinzie tilted her head and gave him a look, “Are we stereotyping?” she asked, feeling a bit defensive.

“Yes,” Jeremy answered honestly, still smiling at her.

“Okay, let’s hear it.” Kinzie smiled back at him. She loved that he was beginning to feel comfortable enough around her to tease her.

“Let’s see...” He thought for a minute. “You’re superstitious, stubborn, miserly, and have a terrible temper.”

Kinzie stuck out her bottom lip, making a pouty face.

He continued, “But you’re also loyal, hard-working, down to earth and compassionate. What part of that am I wrong about?”

Kinzie clamped her mouth shut and stared at him, wide-eyed. It was as if he had seen right through her. She was *all* those things, every single one! “Fuck you!” she snapped back with a big grin, “Let’s smoke another joint.”

Artie and Jeremy burst out laughing.

The next joint took them to an even dreamier place, as the thick, pungent smoke swirled around their heads. Every few minutes, someone would say something outrageously silly, and everyone would laugh. All three had lost track of time and space and were

enjoying their high. *Jeremy's not nearly as shy when he's stoned*, Kinzie thought to herself.

"I loved your singing, and you're a great dancer," Jeremy said, "You could be a professional."

"Funny, you should say that." Kinzie gazed at him intensely, as if she was still trying to figure out how he could read her so well. "I wanted to be a dancer. It was my first love. I took dance in high school, and I take private lessons now," she told him. "But..." Her eyes clouded over. "I don't have the body to be a professional dancer," she added in a wistful, hazy voice.

"What are you talking about?" Artie asked, "You have a great body. You're sexy as hell!"

"That's sweet, Artie, but it's not a dancer's body. It's too, too..." She struggled for the right word.

"Voluptuous?" Jeremy blurted the word that came to mind—and immediately wished he could take it back. His cheeks flamed bright red; he knew the weed had made him uninhibited. Artie and Kinzie chuckled hysterically at him.

"*Big! Big* is the word I was looking for. My butt's too big and my boobs are too big, and I'm too tall. Oh, I could do music videos or background dancing for a few years, but that's not much of a career. My friend Piper has the perfect body for a dancer. She's a size one, very petite and delicate. There's nothing delicate about me! I look pretty good in a leotard, but could you imagine me in a tutu?"

The guys sat still and quiet for a minute, concentrating. Then both of them burst out laughing at once. They must have pictured the same image in their mind, at the same time: this beautiful athletic woman dancing a ballet, with her D-cup breasts and her big luscious butt straining in a frilly pink ballerina's tutu. They couldn't stop snickering.

Kinzie pretended to be hurt, "Go to hell, both of you!" She flashed her lively smile at them. They all had a good laugh.

A few minutes later Artie passed out on the couch, hugging a large throw pillow.

Kinzie was enjoying the floating feeling and the music on the stereo. She seemed to be in a dream state, smiling contentedly, completely relaxed. Jeremy wanted to say something to her—to talk to her, but everything that came to mind sounded stupid. Over the next few minutes, he practiced, in his head, a dozen things to ask her, but when he started to speak, he nervously scratched his chin and stopped himself. He realized that he was used to the woman being the aggressor. He never had to make the first move—or a whole lot of conversation for that matter. So, they sat in silence for what seemed like hours.

Then Jeremy said the stupidest thing he could ever remember saying. “When I first saw you, I was sure you were a supermodel or movie star or something. I’m glad you’re just a super nice girl.” Then he realized how that sounded and added, “Not that you couldn’t be a supermodel or movie star!”

Kinzie tried not to laugh at him, but she was stoned and giggled in spite of herself.

“Oh God, I’m such an idiot,” he berated himself.

“No, you’re not. Don’t say that. You’re very sweet,” Kinzie said with a reassuring smile.

After a while, the effects of the marijuana began to fade, and Jeremy formulated a more intelligent question.

“You do have a very muscular body; do you work out at the campus gym?” He was hoping to see her there working out sometimes. *Oh God, I hope she didn’t take that the wrong way.*

She smiled at him, with gentle discernment; somehow, she understood that it was hard for him to talk to her. “No, Jeremy, I don’t go to any gym. I don’t like gyms, for myself, I mean. I find them very boring. They are great for other people. It’s obvious that you live in the gym.”

Jeremy blushed and smiled at the compliment. Kinzie noticed that his sad eyes brightened when he smiled at her.

"I don't understand," he said. "How did you get that body if you don't go to the gym? I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

"I understand, Jeremy, you are not speaking to me sexually. We are speaking as fellow athletes," she answered.

"Yes."

"And friends," she added.

That was her way of making sure he knew his place. With two hateful words, Kinzie had set the boundaries between them. "... *And friends.*"

"Yes, I hope so," he answered.

"Can I ask you why you don't you like the gym?" he asked.

"Well, it's hard to explain. Gyms are kinda like monkey bars to me."

He tilted his handsome head and tousled his wild wavy dark hair. "Okay, you're gonna have to explain that one."

"It's a long story," she sighed. For a split second, Kinzie wanted to put her hands in Jeremy's dark curly hair and caress his five o'clock shadow. Shocked at herself, she had not had this reaction to a man in years—and *that* had turned out badly.

"I've got all night. You're holding me captive, remember?" he reminded her with a bashful grin.

She noticed that Jeremy had the most beautiful white teeth, and lips that she was sure were soft as heaven. She turned to face him more directly and scooted a little closer to him on the couch.

He ran the fingers of his right hand through his hair, pushing it straight back from his face. An unruly curl fell back over his eye. Kinzie thought it made him look so sexy; she had to close her eyes to gather her wits.

"Well, I told you I'm from Franklin, North Carolina. My grandparents' little farm backed up to the Nantahala National Forest. As a child, the forest was my playground—all five-hundred-thousand acres of it. I spent my days roaming the woods, streams, hills, and mountains with my Gramps. He taught me about the trees, plants, animals, rocks, and everything else. We collected and cataloged

hundreds of rocks and minerals. If you get a chance before you leave tomorrow, go into my sunroom and look at some of my specimens. I have a small museum in there. I have some animal skeletons and fossils, too.”

Jeremy wondered, *Who is this forest creature?* He ached to reach out and kiss her soft pink lips and touch her smooth, creamy skin. But she was too rare, too precious, almost as if she was from another universe.

“Anyway, when I was ten, Grandma decided I had run around half-naked in the forest long enough. It was time I got an education. My grandfather and I railed against it, but we lost. I believed my Gramps could teach me everything I needed to know. But off to school, I went.

“I tested three grade levels above my age, so I was bored. I had never been around anyone but my grandparents, except to go to the store once a month, so I was arrogant and spoiled. They taught me enough manners to get through Walmart, but I had never played with other children. The only people I had ever been around were the two people who believed I hung the moon. I had it rough at school. I was tall and skinny and such a backwoods hick.

“It wasn’t too bad in class because I loved learning and soaked up knowledge like a sponge. I kept my head down and ignored the teasing. Recess was the worst. I hated it. We were supposed to play on this lame playground. There were some monkey bars that all the kids loved. I was used to climbing mountains, and they expected me to play on these stupid monkey bars. It felt false to me, unnatural and degrading. I refused to play on that playground, and I refused to play with those hateful kids. After a couple of months of being a stubborn pig, the teacher said she was going to call my grandmother and tell her I refused to participate. I knew it would disappoint her. I thought, *I’ll show you.* So, I went out on the playground, climbed to the top of those monkey bars, did a backflip off the top, and stuck a perfect landing.”

Jeremy clapped his hands like a child. “Way to go.”

"The kids thought I was cool and began to accept me. But my teacher got mad and called my grandmother anyway.

"When I got home that afternoon, I asked Grandma if she was mad at me. She said she wasn't. I begged her, *Please don't make me play with those kids on that awful playground again.*

"Grandma pulled me onto her lap and told me, *You don't have to play on that playground if you don't want to, but did you know some of those kids have never been in the forest or the mountains?* I couldn't believe it. I assumed all kids grew up in the mountains. We lived right in the middle of them.

"Then Grandma asked, *Why don't you go out on that playground and get to know the kids and help them learn to do the things your Gramps has taught you to do? So, when they come to the forest on their vacations, they will be able to climb the rocks, hills, and trees just like you.*"

Kinzie's eyes began to sting with tears, remembering the warmth of her grandmother's arms. Suddenly a flood of tears rolled down her cheeks making a puddle in her lap. She put her hand over her mouth to stop herself from crying. Jeremy got a tissue from the box on the coffee table and wiped her eyes. His arms ached to hold her. It was almost a reflex; he had to stop himself from pulling her into his embrace.

"So, I went back to school and made it my mission to help the other kids learn to do all the things that Gramps had taught me to do, things I took for granted. But best of all, I learned how to have fun and make friends. You know, to this day, I can honestly say my grandfather taught me almost everything I know, but my Grandma taught me my most important lesson... humility."

"That's a sweet story, Kinzie. I've never known anyone like you," Jeremy said earnestly. "So, going to the gym is like climbing those monkey bars for you?" he asked.

Kinzie took a moment to study his face. There was a tenderness in his eyes, and she was touched that he truly understood the point of her story. Who was this guy who seemed to see straight through

to her soul? “Yeah, it’s stupid, I know. But as long as I have some mountains close by, I don’t need the boring old gym. I’ll take a mountain range or a rock face to a gym any day,” Kinzie said. Her eyes lit up when she spoke of the mountains she loved.

Jeremy shook his head. “I guess I understand.” Then he took a chance, “Maybe you’ll take me up to your gym in the mountains sometime.”

“I’d love to show you my mountains,” she answered with a smile. “You know the big mountain you can see from the library?”

“Yes, Mount Pisgah,” he answered.

“I’ve climbed it dozens of times. I’ll take you there one day. But for now, it’s 3:30 a.m.; we better get some sleep.”

The time Jeremy had spent in her company had flown by like a dream. He wanted to remember every word of their conversation, every nuance, every look. He longed to keep her to himself, tucked gently in his heart forever.

“There’s food in the fridge. Help yourself. The guest room is the first door on the left. The bathroom is on the right. There are new toothbrushes in the drawer and clean towels in the closet. I don’t do mornings, so make yourself at home.”

Kinzie brought a blanket from her room and silently spread it over Artie, who was snoring softly on the couch. She and Jeremy said goodnight.

For a long time after they parted company, Jeremy couldn’t sleep. He lay in the guest bed, staring at the ceiling, replaying the moments they had spent together. Gradually he began to notice a few of the objects which gave the room its shape and character: a small desk, a hand-caned chair, a weather-beaten hurricane lamp, a well-worn braided rug, lace curtains softly dancing at the open window. Every part of this room was homey and warm, like Kinzie herself. Even though it was late summer, there was a slight chill in the air, and he was grateful to have found a quilt on the bed.

As Jeremy drew the quilt under his chin, he wondered if it had been handmade by Kinzie’s grandmother. It smelled so good. The

whole room smelled of Kinzie—like sunshine and linen and wildflowers. He continued to lay awake, thinking about the woman down the hall in her own flower-scented room. Did she sleep nude? Were her nipples rubbing against the sheet right now? God, he loved her breasts. They were big—more than a man-sized hand full. He wanted to hold them and rub his face against them. And what he would do with the rest of her! He would give everything he had to hold her and kiss her and make love to her.

Damn it, I've given myself a hard-on, just thinking about her.

At 10:00 a.m. the next morning, Kinzie walked into the kitchen in her pink baby doll pajamas, towel in hand, rubbing her wet hair. She smelled like shampoo and camellias. Jeremy loved how she always smelled so clean and natural, not perfumed, like other women he had known.

"I see you found the coffee," Kinzie said with a grin.

She looked amazing in her short pajama bottoms, with a loose off-the-shoulder top, and no bra. Jeremy marveled at how genuinely comfortable she was with her body. *Maybe it was all those years of running around in the woods half-naked*, he thought.

"Yes, and the cereal. I hope you don't mind." Jeremy said as he sipped his coffee. *Her luscious nipples are poking at me from under her shirt. Does she have any idea how astonishing she is?* he wondered.

"Of course not, I told you to make yourself at home. Where's Artie?"

"He went off to do his morning run. I can't believe he felt like it. He drank a lot last night. He'll probably run to the club and get his car. It's only a few miles."

Then he added, "I snooped through your collection this morning. It's awesome! That's a fox skull in the drawer, isn't it?"

Kinzie was impressed that he knew his animal anatomy. *But of course, he does*, she reminded herself, *he intends to be an animal surgeon, after all.*

“Yes, a red fox. Gramps and I found it when we were mining for amethyst one winter. It’s perfectly intact. When I was growing up, I didn’t know girls were supposed to think things like that were creepy,” she said with a shrug of her shoulders.

Something had been nagging at Jeremy since coming to Kinzie’s home last night. He wanted to ask her a question but didn’t know how to broach it. He knew it was none of his business, but he couldn’t help himself, “Kinzie, do you own this house?”

“Yes, Jeremy,” she said and gave no further explanation.

Jeremy continued to pry, “I know it’s none of my business, but how can a sophomore in college who only works two hours a day pay a mortgage on a house?”

She smiled at him as if he were asking a silly question, “I don’t have a mortgage. I own this house. I bought this house fifteen months ago, last spring when I moved to Asheville. Now, enough about me. What about you, Jeremy, tell me about your family.”

“Like you said last night, it’s a long story,” he sighed, “and not a very happy one.”

“Well, it’s Sunday morning. Do you have anywhere else to be? I don’t.”

They sat across the handmade oak dining table with coffee mugs warming their hands, and Jeremy began the story he had not shared with anyone since coming to Asheville.

“My parents are rich, Kinzie.” His voice sounded strained as if it were physically painful to talk about it. “We live in a big house in Denver. My dad is an investment banker. I swear, until a few years ago I wasn’t even sure exactly what that was. He was hardly ever home when I was growing up. My dad didn’t teach me to play catch, or ride a bike, or shave, or any of the things that a father is supposed to teach his son. Nannies mostly raised me.”

“But suddenly, when I graduated from high school, my dad started to take an interest in me—or at least in what I was going to do. My parents didn’t ask me what I wanted to do, they *told* me I was going to start working in my dad’s office and go to UC part-time, so I

could become an investment banker and eventually take over the family business.”

Jeremy’s thick brows were knit together in a hard line. Kinzie could tell this was still a very raw subject for him.

“Desperate for their approval, I tried to please them. I really tried. I put on a suit every day and went to work. I took business classes at night, and I hated it. I did it for almost three years. By the second year, I knew I could never make a career of it. I didn’t have the constitution for the competitive cut-throat world of business. I started drinking way too much. I spent my weekends at the clubs. I hated the business classes and was doing terrible in school. I had become so depressed that my parents sent me to a shrink. They couldn’t understand that I hated it, and I hated them for trying to make me into something I’m not. I tell you, Kinzie, I have never told anyone this, but I was close to being suicidal.”

Kinzie put her hands to her mouth and whispered, “No! Oh, you poor thing.”

“Every time I would come close to telling them I wanted out, they would make me feel so guilty, and they used their money as a weapon. But it all came to a head one night, and I finally got the courage to tell them that I didn’t want the family business or the family fortune, and I didn’t care what they did with it. I think if I hadn’t done it, I would be dead now.”

“So, what did you do?” Kinzie asked.

“I had always loved animals, so I applied for a job at our family veterinarian’s office, Dr. Samuels. He hired me to clean kennels and walk the dogs. You know, the entry-level stuff. I didn’t have much experience.” Jeremy’s mood lightened when he talked about his time at the animal clinic. He loved the work and loved being independent of his parents finally at twenty-one years old.

“My parents cut me off financially and stopped speaking to me for a while. I got a tiny apartment and did so well at the animal clinic that Dr. Samuels spoke to my parents on my behalf, and they reluctantly agreed to send me to CCD vet tech school. For the next

two years, I went to school and continued to work for Dr. Samuels. This past May, I graduated with my associate degree in veterinary science and transferred my credits here to UNCA so I can eventually become a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine.”

Kinzie watched closely as the tension which had gripped his face slowly eased into a completely different look—one of joy mixed with great pride. His story made her want to cry. No one would guess that this adorable man had been through so much. At first glance, Jeremy seemed to have it all: good looks, a good athlete, lots of money... but behind that impressive façade, he also seemed so vulnerable. Kinzie had already sensed there was something fragile about him, but now she knew that his spirit bore a wound which drew her to him—one that created a deep ethereal kinship between them.

“My parents gave in and are paying for all this. Finally, they are *allowing* me to pursue my dream. They think things are patched up between us, but I am still very hurt and angry with them. The thing that hurts so much is that they never gave a shit what I wanted. They never cared about what would make *me* happy. They were more concerned about their legacy than their son’s life. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive them.”

“Jeremy, I know you don’t want to hear this right now—you’re too upset—but I think your parents must love you very much. You’re here, you got your dream, and they *are* paying for it. They could have cut you off permanently, and you could be working full time, trying to go to school and struggling, like a lot of kids. But they didn’t let you do that. Your parents may not be happy about it, but I bet they’ll come around when they see how well you’re doing.”

He knew Kinzie was trying to be encouraging, but she didn’t know his parents.

“I don’t know. I hope you’re right, but they seem awfully selfish to me right now. I think my parents are paying for my education to save their reputation with their friends and business associates.”

He looked so sad and empty, sitting across the table with his cold coffee cup. Kinzie wanted to reach out to him somehow. “Jeremy,

don't take this the wrong way, but how long has it been since you've had a good, squishy hug?"

He looked at her with his gorgeous amber eyes and smiled, "I can't remember the last time I had a hug of any kind."

"Stand up," she ordered. Then Kinzie walked over to Jeremy's end of the table, put her arms around his neck and gave him a firm hug.

Jeremy put his arms around her perfect waist and hugged her too. She felt so warm and soft in his arms, and secure, like a home he'd never known. She felt like everything he had ever needed and wanted since he was a child, begging to be enveloped in love. His breathing was rapid at first, but finally, it steadied, and he relaxed and gave into her embrace.

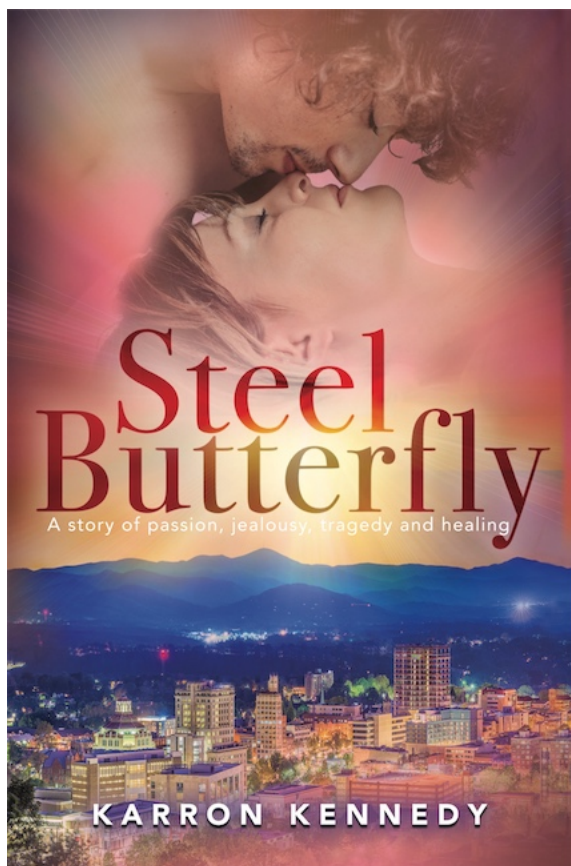
Kinzie was a very affectionate woman who hugged her friends all the time, both male and female, so Jeremy knew this probably didn't mean anything to her. But she was holding him so tenderly, and she was in no hurry to let him go.

He knew she meant the hug to be therapeutic, but it was much more to him.

But then, Jeremy had loved her from the first moment he saw her.

No, he had loved her long before that.

He had been waiting for her his whole life.



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