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BRACING FOR BODIES

# **Bracing for Bodies**

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BRAKING FOR BODIES

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## Chapter One

“What’s with the garlic and bottle of olive oil?” I asked Fiona when I bumped into her, the two of us heading down the Shepler’s Ferry dock, which was crowded with tourists. “Spaghetti for dinner and I’m invited?”

It was June on Mackinac Island and a perfect evening with small swells on Lake Huron and clear skies overhead. Those of us brave enough—or stupid enough, the jury was still out on that one—to tough out the winter from hell on the island so deserved an evening like this. A year ago I lived in Chicago and thought I knew all about snow, winter and ice. Yeah, right.

“It’s the devil himself in three-inch lifts on that ferry.” Fiona gripped the yellow *I ♥ the Town Crier* tote bag I gave her for Christmas and stared at the big white ferryboat gliding up to the dock. “Irish Donna said garlic and holy oil got rid of evil. I figured olive oil marked *extra virgin* was about as holy as I could get on short notice around here, not that the *extra* part made much sense. I mean either you’re a virgin or you’re not, but since that ship sailed for me a long time ago, who am I to judge?”

The setting sun sparkled against the purple sequins of Fiona’s paperboy hat fitting her present position as reporter/editor/chief cook and bottle washer of the *Town Crier* as the ferry engines growled in reverse, bringing the big boat to a gentle stop. “I’m guessing we’re not talking devil as in horns, pointy tail, red suit here.”

“More like bleached teeth, smarmy attitude, and the hair implants hide the horns.”

“Politician?”

“Peephole Perry, editor and creep of the *Inside Scoop*, that tell-all rag I worked at back in L.A.” The dockworkers in orange vests scurried about securing the lines as Fiona added, “I can’t imagine why he’d leave the land of fake and famous for a remote island. Either he’s on the run and needing a place to hide out ’cause someone’s had enough of his lies, or he’s shaking someone down for a sizable chunk of cash.”

Day visitors to the island queued up to board the ferry to the mainland as those on the ferry disembarked, stepping carefully from the bobbing boat to the pier. Fiona’s jaw clenched as she searched the crowd. “I thought when I left L.A. last year I’d never see Peep’s little bloodshot rodent eyes again.” She gave me a sideways glance. “And I know why you’re here; my brother sent you to keep me from shoving that Hollywood jackass in the lake, didn’t he?”

I zipped my jacket against the evening breeze and went with the laid-back innocent approach to fibbing. “I’m just here to pick up Irma’s wedding dress, figuring it’s the least I can do with being her maid of honor. Can’t believe she’s getting married in four days. The Butterfly House is the perfect venue, and Reverend Lovejoy who wrote that *Senior Moments* book is actually coming in to perform the ceremony, and the Happily Ever After string quartet is playing as the happy couple walks down the aisle, and Irma and Rudy are writing their own vows—”

“And you’re babbling.” Fiona gave me a squinty-eyed look. “That means you’re lying. Spill it or I’m putting it in the *Crier* under local interest that you haven’t had a date in six months.”

“Hey, neither have you.” I sighed. “And maybe your dear brother mentioned there could be a situation, and since I was headed here and he was headed for a blacksmith convention, I should keep an eye out.” I hitched my chin toward a blond version of Charlie Sheen the non-sober years, judging by the silver flask in his left hand and inability to walk in a straight line. “I’m thinking the situation is coming our way right now.”

“Hey, you.” Fiona held up the olive oil and stomped her way toward the short blond. “Go away.

There's nothing for you on this island; it's small, it has bad cell phone service, the Wi-Fi sucks and we eat fudge instead of avocados. Mess up somebody else's life, okay, and leave me the heck alone."

The guy smiled, kissed Fiona on the cheek and flopped his skinny arm across Fiona's shoulders. "Is that any way to greet the Peepster?" He hiccupped, pulled her close, cut his eyes side to side and lowered his voice. "Call me Perry, just Perry, got it? I have to blend in around here."

"Blend?" Fiona pointed. "You're wearing turquoise pants, three gold chains and a gold Rolex."

"Great, huh? It's my down-low look."

A guy in a navy Detroit Tigers ball cap with dark eyes and built like Adonis looked at Peep like he was nuts. I looked at Adonis like I wanted him for dinner. I wasn't proud of my gawking, but I truly couldn't help it after a long, cold, male-deprived winter.

Porters piled luggage twice their height into bike baskets sagging under the weight as Peep stumbled up the pier crowded with visitors for the annual Lilac Festival. The Peepster was zonked, not on Fiona's BFF list and I hated leaving her alone with him. Not that she was in any danger, but truth be told I didn't want to miss anything. This was drama, really good drama, and I had a front-row seat . . . but I had a dress to pick up.

"Hey," I said to the dockhand in an orange vest helping people off the ferry as it rode the swells. "Got a package for Irma Sutter in there?"

He helped a lady in a yellow fleece jacket. With one hand he shoved a clipboard at me and with the other grabbed a woman who was swallowed up in duffels and garment bags and nearly tripping into the lake. I signed the clipboard, snagged the white box tied with a big pink bow that he thrust at me and hustled my way back to Fiona.

"I'm here, so get used to it," the Peepster growled to Fiona as I drew up. He slid a gold cell phone into his pocket, then hissed at me, "This is none of your business; get lost."

"It's an island, dude, there is no lost."

"Wanna bet? There's all kinds of lost, even around here." The Peepster scowled, then turned back to Fiona. "Look, kid, you owe me. I gave you your first reporting job and let you sleep in the office when you didn't have a roof over your head." He eyed the woman with the luggage who was nearly fish food back at the boat. I could see her face now, forty-something in a cherry-red pencil skirt that matched the highlights in her hair.

"Zo here lent you clothes when someone stole all your stuff," Peepster added. "We were just one big happy family back in L.A., remember?"

Fiona's face turned the color of her hat. "What I remember is that I had no money and gave Zo my gold bracelet so she'd let me borrow her clothes."

"You mean this bracelet?" Zo stuck out her arm with an adorable turtle charm suspended from fine gold links braided together. "I just love it to pieces and get compliments on it all the time."

"You're probably the one who stole my stuff in the first place to get it," Fiona steamed, yanking her arm away from Peepster. She jabbed her finger in his direction. "And I worked for you for almost nothing when I was too stupid and desperate to know what I was getting into."

"And, like, what are we getting into, Peep honey?" Zo yelped. She stopped dead, tilting to starboard from the weight of the bags, her eyes widening as she took in Main Street. "Like, there's a real live horse on the street. Like, a really big live horse? And there's another horse and OMG three more? Like, are they shooting a film or something, and, like, what's with all the bikes?"

Fiona. "No cars, no pollution, no gridlock on the 405. And . . ." Fiona wagged her brows at Zo. "Not one Kardashian to tweet about. How are you going to live with that, huh? The ferry's loading up right now and I bet there's a red-eye to L.A. If you hurry, you can make it."

The Peepster's lips thinned to a straight line. "We got business here, important stuff." He faced Zo. "We're staying the week. Deal with it. Now get the luggage on one of these horse wagons going to the Grand Hotel. You said it was a decent place to stay on this hunk of rock, but I didn't figure on needing an animal to get there."

Peep heaved himself onto the maroon carriage with driver in black top hat and red jacket. Zo handed off the luggage. "Like, this is kind of romantic, Peep?" she cooed as she slid in beside him on the bench seat. "Like, just the two of us? We can come here when we get married?"

“Perry, it’s just Perry,” Perry mumbled. “And I’m already married, so keep it down, will ya?”

“But you’re not going to be like married for long now, are you, Peep honey. You got me.” She snuggled closer and gazed around. “This place is really, like, you know, a movie set or something with the cute shops and the big lake out there and everyone on bikes and stuff just pedaling along? Maybe tomorrow we can, like, get one of those double bike thingies? Maybe we can get married in that little gazebo in that park over there. Wouldn’t that be, like, scrumptious?”

Peepster ignored Zo and glared down at Fiona. “You and me, we need to meet. We got things to talk about. Bring your checkbook. See you in twenty.”

“Not if I see you first.” The carriage lumbered off and Fiona heaved a garlic bulb, missing her target by a mile. “See what being extra virgin gets you? Nothing in more ways than one! Talk about being overrated.”

She dropped the bottle back in the yellow bag next to a stack of yellow papers. “And to top it all off, Peepster and Zo are staying at the Grand Hotel. The place has been here for over a hundred and twenty-five years. It survived storms, prohibition, fires and now it’s never going to be the same. In a week Zo will have them all saying *like*, ending everything in a question and doing avocado facials.”

She studied the box in my hand. “At least you got Irma’s dress except . . . except . . .” She snagged the package. “Idle Summers? The address is for up at the Grand Hotel. Didn’t you read the label?”

“Label?” I studied the front of the box and swallowed a groan. “You were alone with the Peepster and I was worried.”

“You were worried you’d miss some juicy gossip after a winter of being cooped up at the bike shop and talking to cats. Now you got the wrong wedding dress. I think this takes maid of honor to a new low. What are you going to do?”

There was one long blast from Shepler’s Ferry, meaning the boat was sailing off. My hair stood straight up and I tore back down the dock, Fiona running right behind me, the two of us snaking our way around tourists and workers. We pulled up at the end of the pier, nearly careening off into the dark water as the big ferry drifted out into the lake.

“Irma’s going to kill me,” I panted, taking the box from Fiona’s hand. “Like in doornail dead.”

“If you say *like* one more time I’m shoving you in the lake myself.”

I leaned against one of the posts supporting the pier to catch my breath, the last rays of sun casting gray shadows across the water. Fiona and I were on the lighter side of thirty-five and island besties. She grew up on Mackinac, worked the paper with her family, then hightailed it to L.A. to be a reporter in the big league. She came back here a few months before I landed on these sunny shores and took over running the *Crier*. She didn’t talk much about L.A., but she didn’t seem to miss it . . . except for In-N-Out Burger. Those must be some crazy-good hamburgers.

“So what’s the 411 on this Peepster guy?” I asked Fiona before she could ask me what I was going to do about the missing dress.

“Long story short, he’s a total jerk.” She raked her short blonde hair.

“And?”

“Skunk, dweeb, pond scum, total piece of crap.” Fiona worked her bottom lip as we started back to Main Street. “He’s trouble, Evie. He knows stuff about . . .” She took a deep breath. “Well, he just knows stuff.”

“About you?”

“Me?” Fiona’s eyes shot wide open. “Of course not. Not me. Never me.” She forced a smile that didn’t reach her green eyes. “But they don’t call him Peephole Perry for nothing. He looks though peepholes, finds out everyone’s secrets then holds it over their heads and they dance to his tune or he’ll put it in that crappy rag of his, the *Inside Scoop*, or threaten to tell their producer, their agent, the director of the film they’re working on.” She took a breath and added in a quiet voice. “Their dad.”

“No one really believes what’s in the tabloids, do they? I mean really. UFOs, I had Elvis’s baby, Oprah goes bald isn’t exactly Wikipedia type of reporting.”

“It gets people thinking the worst, and . . .” Fiona gazed out at the ferry now zooming past Round Island Lighthouse and the harbor light blinking green to mark the entrance. “Never in a million did I expect Peephole Perry to show up here. Heck, I didn’t think he knew where Michigan was.”

“My guess he still doesn’t, but I got a bad feeling about him.”

Fiona smiled and it was genuine this time, her green eyes bright with a hint of devil like usual. “That bad feeling is ’cause you left Irma’s wedding dress on that boat and now you have to fess up. Do you think it’s part of that black cloud thing you brought with you from Chicago last September?”

I shook my head. “No way. There is no black cloud. It’s gone . . . all gone. I got Rudy off that murder charge, didn’t I? I’m cured of all cloudness. I’m officially cloud free. I had all winter to get rid of it. Heck, it probably froze to death just being here. The wedding dress fiasco is an easy fix. I’ll get the right box on the next run. The ferry will be back in an hour and all will be right with the world.”

I handed the box over to Fiona. “Take this to Idle when you go up to the Grand Hotel. If you don’t meet with Peep, he’ll come looking for you, and what did you mean about Peep telling your dad? Tell him what? Why should you bring your checkbook? Fiona, what’s going on and what the heck happened out in L.A.?”