

Chapter One

Bear

Beryl “Bear” Langston stood on the deck of his soon-to-be new home, tasting the salt of a bracing ocean breeze that blew sand, loose beach grass, and the aroma of dead or dying fish across his property. The shrieks of hungry seagulls resounded overhead, somewhere in the gray mist and fog that blocked most of the efforts of a beleaguered sun from warming his uncovered arms.

Had he made a mistake, moving from the warmth of California to the isolation of the north Oregon coast?

No. Agate Cove was perfect: small, remote, undiscovered, and with the exception of a handful of dilapidated tourist traps along Highway 101, undeveloped. As he’d discovered when he’d attempted, the day before, to phone in the installation of cable TV and internet services.

“You want it where?” the young woman at the so-called Customer Service Center said before breaking into hysterical laughter. “Do they even have electricity out there?”

Come to think of it, he wasn’t sure. He’d assumed, but not confirmed, that all of the towns in Neahkahnie County provided such basic services. Didn’t everyone?

Bear *had* confirmed the availability of running water and lawn ornaments, two things that seemed essential for successful beach life after retirement. And sewer services, or so he presumed when he tested, to his satisfaction, that the toilets—both of them—did, indeed, flush.

He checked his watch, a so-called “smart” device that apparently didn’t require the availability of the internet. As he suspected, his realtor was over an hour late. They still had time to finalize the paperwork before the banks closed...assuming the town had a bank. Another thing he’d need to check on.

He leaned on the wooden rail and squinted into the breeze, because that’s what slightly overweight, fifty-something, financially independent men do in all of those Viagra commercials. When they’re not soaking in hot tubs, sipping wine with bikini-clad women in their forties who looked twenty. Just a typical middle-aged American retired man, waiting for his realtor to come in.

“Are you the new owner?” A young woman’s voice drifted over from somewhere—he assumed upwind. No sound could possibly overcome the beating it would endure from the suddenly-howling gale-force blast that threatened to blow away the patio table and umbrella the seller had promised to leave for him. Right on cue, the umbrella’s strap, which until this moment had kept its canopy bound tight to a white aluminum pole, snapped into pieces, and the umbrella ballooned open, rocketing skyward. He lunged for it, his hand striking the last few inches of shaft before it sailed over the splintering wood railing onto the grassy beach below.

“Damn it!” He hustled to the steps that descended from deck to sand, at the last second slowing before depositing his weight onto the sagging remains of a top step. He’d noted the need

for repairs to the stairs during his initial inspection, not letting a little thing like that stop him from snapping up what the realtor assured him was a “real steal” of a property. “You just don’t get many three-bedroom beachfront bungalows for under one-point-five,” the realtor had assured him. One-point-five, as in, million dollars. Until then, he’d assumed real estate inflation of that sort was strictly a California phenomenon.

He eased down the steps, the boards creaking beneath his six-two, two hundred-twenty-pound frame (eating less and exercising jumped to second place on his New Place-New Lifestyle Resolutions List, right behind fixing everything that moved, but shouldn’t, in this house). He lifted the umbrella and grabbed the slider to shut the canopy—and, too late, he realized he should’ve pointed the top into the wind. A perfectly-timed gust yanked the umbrella out of his hands, propelling it fifty feet downwind, nose-first into a pillowy, sandy dune. South, if he had his bearings right. He ran after it.

“I’ll get it for ya,” the woman’s voice said from somewhere. A moment later, she appeared, both hands wrapped tight around the pole, which she pointed northbound, allowing the fierce breeze to close the canopy for her. An experienced hand at beach life, apparently. She made it look effortless.

“Thank you,” he said, huffing toward her. He stumbled, unaccustomed to maneuvering in the uneven, soft sand, and nearly face-planted at her feet.

“Easy, Gramps,” she said. “Let me help you up.”

Gramps! For the love of—

Yeah, fair enough. He was at least twice her age, maybe much more.

She reached out a hand to help him up. Smiled in a friendly way. Yes, “friendly.” He’d go with that, instead of “pitying.”

He hesitated, gazing up at her. A twenty-something white girl with a pretty, sunburned face, a delicate, freckled nose, and shoulder-length hair the color of emeralds. Yes, green hair. Slight of frame, she couldn’t have been over five-two, a hundred pounds. Dressed in the incongruous uniform of the Oregon coast: mid-thigh-length shorts, flip-flops, and a heavy, gold-and-green University of Oregon hoodie.

Humiliated, he accepted her aid, and with surprising strength, she yanked him to his feet. One-handed, because the other hand still gripped the barrel of the deck umbrella. He’d expected soft hands, but rough calluses pressed into his palm. A hard-working girl. Probably grew up on a farm, he guessed. Or a boat.

“Thanks,” he said, dusting himself off. “Here, I’ll take that from you.” He reached out for the umbrella.

“I’ll carry it up,” she said, and led him back into his own yard—only then did he realize the wind had blown it into the lot next door, probably the one that housed his new and only Agate Cove acquaintance—and back up the stairs. She laid the pole down onto the deck, weighed it down with a couple of red bricks he’d intended on tossing out—not any more—and leaned against the rail. “So,” she said, “you never answered my question. Are you my new neighbor?”

“I guess so,” he said, and extended a handshake. “I’m Bear. What’s your name?”

“Crystal,” she said, accepting his handshake with a bemused smile.

Crystal. Of course. It was either that or Sunbeam.

“What kind of name is Bear?” she asked.

He tried not to roll his eyes. A girl named Crystal, asking *him* why some idiot would name him Bear. “It’s short for Beryl. Call me that and you’d better duck.”

“Okay, *Beryl*,” she said, and jumped away from him with a grin. “Quack!”

He was about to complain, but the “Quack” stopped him. “What the—? Oh, I get it. You’re an *Oregon Duck*.”

“Class of 2023,” she said, as if none of it mattered.

“What did you study?”

Pride returned to her voice. “Marine biology, with a minor in geology and a concentration in medieval lit. You know, Chaucer and all that.”

He nodded. “Perfect for a coastie. Let me guess—you work at the library-slash-aquarium?”

She shook her head and seemed to grow a few inches right before his eyes. “You might have noticed Agatha’s Rock Shop at the south end of the boardwalk? That’s mine.”

Of course she did. Where else would a ‘Crystal’ work? “I did notice it. Sorry I haven’t been in. I like the name, though. Clever.”

Her face twisted into a puzzled frown. “How so?”

“Agatha’s. Like Agate Cove.”

She waved him off. “Agatha was my mom’s name.”

“Oh? Was she named for the town, or vice versa?”

She glared at him. “You’re weird.”

“I meant no offense,” he said. “I thought it was just, you know, a pun of sorts.”

“*Just* a pun? *Just* the highest form of humor in the English language?” She broke into a bad English accent. “Caution, squire. I may challenge you to a duel of wits, in which you apparently would engage unarmed.”

“I didn’t mean...oh, hell.” Bear sighed. “Listen, I appreciate your help just now. That umbrella thing was kind of crazy, eh?”

Crystal shrugged. “Par for the course at Hardship House.”

“Hardship House? What are you talking about?”

She waved her arms toward his—soon-to-be-his—bungalow. “Your house. That’s what it’s called.”

He turned and stared at the structure, as if that would somehow provide evidence to confirm or contradict her claim, then faced her again. “Why?”

She mugged an oh-shit-you-didn’t-know face. “My dad says everyone who lives here suffers, or has suffered, hardships.”

He harrumphed. Actually, out loud, like some 1880s land baron, *harrumphed*. “Everyone suffers hardships.”

“Perfect, then, right?” She crossed the deck toward the stairs. Before descending to the beach, she turned back toward him. “Anyways, nice to meet you. Let me know if you—Oh, wait...are you a permie?”

He coughed. “Am I a...what’s a ‘permie’?”

She rolled her eyes. “A permanent full-timer. There aren’t many of us in Agate Cove. You’ve got a tan and dress pretty nice, for a guy, so I’m guessing this is a second home for you. Anything’s better than a blood-sucking landlord converting it to an STR—sorry, ‘short-term rental.’ We hate those.”

“Understandable, I guess.”

“It sucks. Driving up the cost of local housing seems to be a hot hobby for people out of Portland.”

“I’m not from Portland. And I do intend to live here, as full-time as I can.”

“Oh, cool. You don’t have a son or daughter my age, do you?”

He cleared his throat. Almost answered her question. This young woman had a way of

getting him to say things. “My wife passed away last year, and...I’ll be, ah, living alone.”

She grimaced. “Bummer. Well, welcome, even though I was hoping for someone younger. But I know that’s a pipe dream. Nobody my age can afford a freaking house, much less one on the beach.”

He gestured toward her place. “You do.”

She laughed. “That’s my dad’s house. Rocky Stone. Yes, that’s his actual name,” she said in a dismal drone. “Well, not the Rocky part—that’s a nickname, but damned if anyone can remember what his real name is anymore. He and my brother Pete run the quarry out on the east side of the highway. “ She lapsed into a mock TV-announcer voice. “If you need rock, call Stone. Okay?”

Bear laughed. “I wouldn’t think of calling anyone else.” He shook his head. “So you’re Crystal Stone, your dad’s named Rocky, your mom is Agatha, your brother’s Peter...is everyone in your family named after rocks?”

“Is everyone in your family named after predatory mammals?”

He thought about it. None that he could recall. He’d wanted to name his son “Hunter,” but Loreen, his late wife, refused. “Touché.”

Silence, other than the wind, reigned for a moment.

“Okay,” she said. “I’d better get going. It’s almost time to go open my shop.”

He checked his watch. “You open at one o’clock?”

“Re-open, I mean. I’m on lunch break.” She started down the steps, then stopped and waved at a lone jogger loping north-to-south along the water’s edge. “Hey, Mare-Mare!”

Bear glanced at the runner—then did a double-take. The slender, sun-wizened woman had to have been at least eighty years old if she was a day. Her long, silver braids flopped left to right across her shoulders. She sported a uniform bronze tan from head to toe, from her wrinkled forehead down to her ankles.

And every inch in between.

The woman, waving and grinning back at them, was, except for a pair of bright orange running shoes, as naked as the day she was born.

“Did you say she was the *mayor*?” Bear asked. “Or is ‘Mare’ her name?”

“Both,” Crystal said. “Mayor Meredith Berger. Isn’t she great? She used to be a Vegas showgirl, and now look at her! Hey, I’d love to chat more, but I gotta run. Talk at ya later. Come visit me in the rock shop once you’ve moved in!”

Bear watched her go. Because the alternative was to watch the mayor flop past...and he just wasn’t prepared for that part of Agate Cove’s culture just yet.

Chapter Two

Jason

Jason edged open one side of the swinging double doors, on the business side of the “Employees Only” area in the stockroom at Roger’s ShopMart, and peeked through the crack to the pharmacy service area. His friend Mark, who’d gotten him the job at the ShopMart a month before, had told him that the pharmacist, old man Eichenberg, took potty breaks at 2:00 p.m. sharp. Every day, like clockwork, and every hour, on the hour, thereafter. The man’s bladder was, apparently, extremely regular and extremely tiny, and as troublesome as his irritable bowels. The old man probably could benefit from taking one of the products he dispensed to the store’s many elderly customers every day.

The key thing about the man’s 2:00 p.m. potty break is that it coincided with Mark’s afternoon break. And, Mark nurtured a mutual infatuation with Eichenberg’s young red-haired assistant, Eileen, a recent college grad from Sacramento State, majoring in pharmaceutical science, or some such. Whatever major gets a person a job as a pharmacist’s assistant in sleepy little Oak Park. Of course, with her model-quality looks, she could’ve gotten the job without the degree. She had both, though, so, winner, winner, chicken dinner.

But today, Jason would be the winner. His girlfriend Jenna would be so proud and grateful, she would...he stopped thinking about what she would do. If he floated a woodie right now, he’d be unable to walk. And everyone would notice, and he didn’t want *anyone* to notice him for the next five minutes.

Sure enough, at exactly 2:00 p.m., the old man removed his white lab coat, said something to Eileen that made her step up to the counter with a bright, expectant smile, and shuffled out the back toward the employee restroom. Ten seconds later, Mark appeared out of nowhere, and her smile broadened even more.

Jason wished a girl would look at *him* that way sometime. Jenna sure didn’t.

The restroom door, right around the corner from the double doors where Jason was hiding, banged shut, and the bathroom’s noisy fan whirled to life. Excellent. That meant Eichenberg had more business to conduct in there than a quick pee. Plenty of time for him to sneak in behind Eileen and find what Jenna needed.

Suddenly, though, Jason had to pee, too, dammit. And if he went in after old man Eichenberg conducted his smelly-ass business...ugh. He might die.

Peeing could wait. Girlfriend-pleasing could not.

He snuck around the corner and ducked low, hoping any security cameras would miss him that way. He slid into the pharmacy area as quiet as a Prius in a parking lot. Glimpsed at Eileen, confirmed she had eyes only for Mark. Mark, likewise, had no intention of ever looking at anything except Eileen’s beautiful face, brilliant red hair, and amazing figure. She could speak gibberish and he’d call it poetry, and vice versa.

By contrast, Jenna spoke gibberish, and it sounded like gibberish. Especially after they got really high, as they planned for tonight. She wasn't as pretty or as smart as Eileen, but Jason didn't mind. She was willing to go down on him, among other things. Good sex forgave a multitude of other sins.

As luck would have it, Eichenberg arranged the pharmacy so that the good stuff—opioids—sat on shelves close to the door Jason had just zipped through. He scanned the bins, each labeled in long, complicated doctor-ese chemical terms, none of which he understood. Jenna had asked for “oxy”, but none of the bins had such simple names. There were a billion drugs that had “oxy” somewhere in it. He tried to remember which one the doctors prescribed for his mom when she got sick. Hydro-something. Terrible, those. Made him feel stupid without giving him the right kind of high.

He had to act fast, though. Mark and Eileen would only google-eye each other for so long, and old man Eichenberg wouldn't poop forever. He stole a glance at the lovebirds, still deep into each other's bullshit, and then he heard a noise from the employees-only area, and sweat broke out on his armpits. And forehead. And...everywhere. He had to choose, fast.

“Saturday?” Eileen was saying in that sexy little fake-Southern drawl of hers. “Yeah, I suppose I could make Saturday work...”

Crap. They were already in the asking-out-talk-to-you-later-about-details phase of the conversation. He was out of time.

Fuck it. Jason took them all.

Well, not *all*, all. Some of each. Grabbed a plastic white bottle of each kind, shoved them into his pockets until they were full—

And *then* he spotted the oxycodone. *That* was the one Jenna wanted.

He grabbed a big bottle of that one, and realized he had no room left in his pockets, and he'd either have to empty one pocket and make a racket, or—

He shoved the plastic bottle in his pants. His underwear, to be exact. Hoped it didn't *look* like a woodie. He turned, stole one last glance at Eileen's perfect ass, and, still crouched over, shuffled toward the door—

“What are you doing back here, young man?”

Jason froze. A bony but surprisingly strong hand grabbed him by the neck and pulled him almost upright. The age-spotted, bespectacled face of the pharmacist glared down at him. Jason struggled to remain crouched in that position, as the white pill bottle had slid down into his groin area, squishing, well, *everything*, in a very painful way.

“Well? Explain yourself!”

Jason's lip quivered, his brain racing. He'd had a story all thought out, what to say if something like this happened...and he couldn't remember any of it. Or, rather, what he'd planned to say sounded so *stupid* in his head in that moment, he didn't dare utter a word. He looked away—

That was worse, seeing the “oh, shit” expression on Mark's face, and Eileen's horrified disapproval, those pretty red lips all pouty and pitying.

“N-nothing—”

“What's in your pockets?” Eichenberg said, his voice growing even more frosty and suspicious.

“Huh?” Despite himself, despite everything he knew about not showing guilt when getting caught, Jason couldn't resist checking. And, sure enough, the white cap of a pill bottle showed at the top of each of his front pockets. To him, looking straight down. Maybe not to the old man,

though. If he could somehow hold out—

“Stand up straight and hand it over. Come on, boy, empty ’em.”

Jason hesitated. If he stood up without, uh, *adjusting* his load, the plastic bottle in his pants would absolutely crush his balls. Plus, the briefs he’d chosen today, his last clean pair, had almost no elastic left around his thighs. If the bottle shifted even a little bit, disaster could strike.

He squirmed—

“I said *stand up!*” Eichenberg, still gripping his neck, yanked him to his feet.

And his underwear’s elastic was no match for the tug of gravity on that pill bottle. Moments later, the bottle slid down his thigh, lodging at the bottleneck of fabric around his knee. It looked like he’d suddenly grown a tumor the size of a softball.

“Come with me,” Eichenberg said, his face flushed red.

Jason risked a desperate glance back at the lovers—correction, *lover*. Eileen, with her look of pouty disapproval.

Mark, his buddy, had disappeared.

Then an unfortunate, sharp aroma reached his nostrils, the unmistakable smell of urine.

A moment later, he understood their expressions of pity and shame. All it took was a quick glance at his own warm, wet crotch.