

GOLDENSEAL

by
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CHAPTER ONE

Oh no, I don't need a chaperone! No way. Not here. Just tell me where in the valley I can't go, north, south, east or west, and I'll keep out of the way."

Amy Fortune was angry and adamant, underscoring her words with a furious glare at Leone Garoul, her ex-girlfriend and supposed chaperone around Little Dip Valley. Amy wanted it understood she was not going to comply. She had practically grown up in Little Dip Valley. Amy was as good as adopted into the Garoul family that owned it. She did not need an escort to go and work in the forest or mountains.

"Hey, I don't want to babysit you either, but Mom's got a point," Leone responded with a big, annoying grin. "It's hunting season in Little Dip, and you could get hurt out there. I'll just drop by your cabin each morning and take you to a safe place. You can toddle off with your paint box and draw plants to your heart's content, and we'll all relax knowing you'll return in one piece."

Amy glowered at the open taunt. She had no idea what Leone's game was, but she was not playing. Amy was a long way removed from the gullible teenager who years ago had left Little Dip to study art in Europe. A lot had changed and Leone had best remember that.

"Amy, it's only because it's a family hunting week." Marie Garoul, Leone's mother, tried to soothe the standoff. As Connie's loving partner, Marie had practically raised Amy. Marie would always be family to her. Now Amy saw Marie struggle valiantly

to maintain peace between her and Leone. “We don’t want you accidentally stumbling into a shooting alley. Fantastic as it is to have you back home with us, we have to make sure you’re kept safe. We don’t want our new botanical illustrator coming to any harm, now do we?”

Amy did not miss the irony of her words. She was here because they had already lost an illustrator. Connie Fortune, an artist of great renown. Amy’s aunt and Marie’s loving partner had taken seriously ill and Amy had stepped in at the last minute to replace her.

The Garoul almanac was an eagerly awaited volume of botanical and medicinal interest. It was scheduled for release at the end of the year and now was in jeopardy due to Connie’s illness. Amy was prepared to scour the valley floor for the specimens still to be represented alongside Marie’s text. But she was not agreeing to Leone Garoul escorting her every step of the way. That had not been in the small print when she signed up. In fact, it was a recent and very annoying change of plan.

“What say we organize something else so you know where to go and where to avoid. Maybe a daily alert?” Marie looked hopefully from Leone and back to Amy.

The storm clouds were gathering already and Amy had only just arrived. She turned to Marie, deliberately ignoring Leone. “I’m still a little jet-lagged, Marie. Could we discuss it later, after you’ve shown me where Aunt Connie left off? I need to see the work you want me to do.”

“Of course, but first you need to eat. We can go over to the office later and look at the work.” Marie smiled gently.

Amy was tired after her journey. She had barely unpacked before paying a quick call to see Marie, anxious for the latest news on Connie. Now, two hours into her visit, here she was, embroiled in an embryonic argument with Leone, Marie’s eldest daughter and a former thorn in Amy’s side. *No, she’s not a thorn; she’s a whole damn cactus field.*

Marie’s kindness mollified her slightly; she had neither the inclination nor the energy to enter into a silly argument with Leone at this time—or any other time, for that matter. Amy was not a

stranger to Little Dip. She did not need to be led about the place on a short leash, and she particularly did not need Leone Garoul anywhere near her.

Marie pointed through the throng of family members milling around the main camping compound. “I think the cook is almost ready to start serving.”

“You’re right, I am hungry.” Amy relaxed at Marie’s measured tones. “And I want to catch Uncle Claude before he starts doling out the food or I’ll never get near him.” She turned to find her adopted uncle, as expected, stationed over the grill. “And there’s the man himself.”

With a cheerful good-bye wave to Marie and a total blanking of Leone she made her way past the Garoul party crowd to say hello.

“Can I assume that was an example of ‘How not to do it’?” Marie said dryly as soon as Amy was out of earshot. “You do know it’s impossible to bodyguard someone who doesn’t want to cooperate, Leone? You’d better back down and give Amy some room.”

“She hasn’t changed one little bit. Still obstinate and pigheaded...” Leone murmured back. Her eyes were glued to Amy as she ambled across the picnic area toward Claude, waving hello and swapping greetings with everyone she met.

“Oh? I think she has. I think you’re looking at a very sophisticated young woman. One who will keep you on your toes. However you do it, just make sure she comes to no harm. We owe Connie that much.”

Leone listened to her mother’s remarks as her eyes devoured every movement Amy made. Her mother need not have worried. Leone was prepared. She was more than ready, and she had waited a long, long time for Amy Fortune to come back to Little Dip.



The outdoor eating area of the Garoul holiday compound was dominated by a huge barbeque and fire pit. These were surrounded by a variety of long wooden tables and benches capable of seating the whole clan if the occasion called for it. Dozens of men and women

from the Garoul family relaxed around the tables. They had come from near and far for the start of the hunting season and now sat chatting and sipping beer, catching up with family gossip and shop talk as they waited for the food to grill. The atmosphere was happy and buzzing. This was one of the more popular family gatherings and was always well attended.

“Amy,” a voice called her, and she glanced up and waved energetically at a huge bearded man who stood guard over an obviously beloved barbeque grill.

“Hey, Claude,” she greeted him back, “something smells good. What’s on the menu for tonight?”

“Meat.” Amy shook her head at his ancient tease at her venture into teenage vegetarianism. Claude had a long memory and a soft humor. Every barbeque she received the same teasing response; Claude liked his routine. She grinned mischievously at him as he pointed to a cooler.

“Amy, hon, could ya fetch me another brewski?”

She selected his favorite brand and one for herself, and wandered back to where he sweated over the grill.

“Ah, you’re a lifesaver, hon.” He wiped the sweat off his brow and took a deep swallow from his beer. “Settling in okay?”

“Yes. But it’s odd staying in Connie’s cabin and not having her around. Though I expect Marie will keep me so busy I won’t have time to get too maudlin. And I’ll be able to visit Connie soon, apparently.”

“Sure.” He gave her a warm grin. “She’ll be fine. Just needs a rest is all. Trust Marie on this. And it’s great you’re here to cover her workload for her so she can get a break,” he added, sounding a little too upbeat. Amy caught the forced joviality and understood his attempts to ease her worry. He was a good man; she had enormous affection for him. Claude would always be family to her. She cracked the cap on her beer and smiled up into his beaming face, florid from the grill like a big bearded pumpkin.

“Yes. She will be okay,” she murmured, more to reassure herself.

It would have been so much better if she’d had the chance

to see Connie first, but Marie's call had come out of the blue. By the time Amy had flown in from Heathrow, Connie had already been whisked away for treatment. The retreat Marie found for her insisted on a several week isolation period for initial assessment and orientation before family or friends could visit. To Amy it sounded extreme but she also knew Marie only wanted the best for Connie; she loved her dearly. So Amy relaxed and hoped the weeks would fly by. She knew if she immersed herself in the work she'd come to do it would. Time always slipped away from her when she was painting.

"Marie is going to show me where Connie left off. Have you seen any of her plant illustrations yet, Claude?" She watched him flip the enormous venison steaks. The Garouls were big on meat.

"Nope, not yet. Though Leone said they were fantastic."

Amy stiffened slightly and then forced her shoulders to relax at the mention of Leone's name. She had better get used to it here in Leone's home valley.

Leone Garoul is ancient history, she reminded herself, as defunct as the Roman Empire, and anything you have to do with her will all end in ruins. She was not going to let Leone get under her skin now that Amy had returned to Little Dip, not even their earlier run-in over Leone's self-assigned babysitting duties. Amy had practically grown up in this valley; she did not need someone to show her around.

"Connie's got a worldwide reputation now. And I hear you aren't two steps behind her." Claude poked at the sizzling meat.

"Oh, I've got a long way to go before I could touch Connie's reputation." Nevertheless, she was pleased he'd followed her success in Europe.

She cast a swift glance across to where Leone had been standing with her mother. Marie was now talking with another family member. Leone had moved away.

"How're you liking London?" Claude asked.

"I'm loving it. And Barcelona, and Athens, and Bucharest. I'm loving Europe, period."

"You're doing swell. But it's good you've come back home to

do some prestigious work here, too. Not that you're forgotten, but it does no harm to have your name on one of Marie's almanacs. Keeps your profile high in the U.S. market." Like most of the Garouls, he was employed in the family's publishing business. Claude headed up marketing and promotions for Garoul Press at its Oregon home office. Marie, an acclaimed author and expert on herbalism and First Nation medicines, had recently stood down as Editor in Chief to make way for her eldest daughter, Leone. Though she still presided over the boardroom.

"Yes, you're right. I need to keep a toehold here, too." Amy had spent the last several years studying and working abroad. She loved Europe for its multilayered vibrancy, history, and culture. Each job took her somewhere different, and while for some it might be a rather lonely, nomadic way of life, it suited her perfectly. The only true sense of home she could ever remember had been her aunt Connie and this valley. For years she had been reluctant to return to it. Somehow it had always seemed right to keep moving on, to the next city, contract, pinprick in the map.

Marie trudged over to join them, looking appreciatively at the grill and its contents.

"Are we nearly ready to serve some of that up?" she asked.

"We're about ready for round one." With one final flip Claude bellowed, "Paulie," over his shoulder into the family throng.

A tall teenager peeled away and came over.

"Paulie, I'm sure you don't remember her, but this is Amy, Connie's niece. She's come to stay for a few weeks and help Marie with the almanac," Claude said while transferring a steak to a nearby plate. Paulie smiled shyly down at Amy. He looked to be in his mid teens, and was easily over six feet tall.

"Oh my God, it's little Paulie." Amy was flabbergasted. "You were just starting school last time I saw you. Look at you now, you're enormous." She wasn't sure why she needed to point that out; all the Garouls loomed over her compact five foot four inches. They were all very tall and dark, and even when they married shorter, fairer people, the offspring were undeniably Garoul in stature and coloring.

Paulie blushed and laughed good-naturedly. "I'm fourteen now. I was already at school when you left. And I do remember you, Amy. You and Leone took me to the fairgrounds a few times." His blush deepened. He was at that sweet but gawky self-conscious age.

"Here, first bite goes to the hunter." Claude handed him a plate brimful with bloody steak.

Amy felt a little queasy looking at it. All that heat blasting off the massive grill and Claude still hadn't cooked the damn meat through.

"Paulie provided tonight's dinner," Claude stated proudly. "He came a little earlier in the week with me and got his first kill last night."

Paulie blushed even more and was immediately surrounded by the rest of his family slapping his back and congratulating him profusely. They all gathered around the grill now that it was time for the food to be dished out.

"Congratulations, Paulie. Good for you." Amy added her praise knowing how much hunting and fishing mattered to the Garouls. It was a big deal when their youngsters followed in the family footsteps.

"Mmm, could I have mine really well done, Claude?" she asked anxiously as she watched him fill the line of plates. Part of her would always be that teenage wannabe vegetarian.

"Yup. I can do that. Go and sit, and I'll send it over when it's ready."

"I'll bring it to you." A silken voice came from right behind her. She spun around and found herself swallowed by Leone's dark, enigmatic gaze. Amy stepped back, finding Leone much too close for comfort. The small smile playing across her lips told Amy she was well aware of the effect she was having. An awkward silence hung between them, allowing Amy's disquiet to simmer slowly. She found Leone smug and arrogant.

"Back there." Leone indicated the area with a nod.

"Pardon?" Amy asked coldly.

"I'm sitting back there. With Jori and Elicia," Leone stated. "Go on over and I'll bring your steak when it's ready."

It was a badly disguised order and Amy bristled. She wanted to refuse except that she was genuinely friendly with Leone's younger brother, Jori, and was dying to meet his new girlfriend. Lord knew she had heard enough about the wonderful Elicia in all Jori's e-mails and telephone calls to be more than curious. It would have been her natural choice to share his company for the evening. Now she was warring a childish impulse to sit elsewhere simply because she did not want to be near Leone.

Her rational, mature side won—but barely. Without another word she peeled away to Jori's table. She really did want to sit with him and meet the lauded Elicia, despite Leone's presence. Reluctantly, she decided the smart thing was to steel herself and get this first evening with Leone over and done with. It might be for the better to set her boundaries early.

On approaching the table Amy noticed Jori had mooched off to join the long line at the grill, leaving a young Hispanic woman with beautiful brown eyes and long dark hair sitting on her own.

"Hi, I'm Amy." She smiled and extended a welcoming hand. "I'm a family friend, but I guess odds are anyone under six foot is probably only visiting."

The woman burst out laughing and shook her hand. "I already figured you weren't a Garoul with that blond hair. I'm Elicia. I'm here with Jori, and it's nice to meet someone nearer my own height in this valley of the giants."

Amy climbed into the bench opposite, shucking off her jacket. Elicia seemed fun; she could see why Jori had fallen for this pretty woman with warm, laughing eyes.

"You're Connie's niece. I've met her a few times. What a lovely woman. I do hope she gets better soon," Elicia continued as Amy settled in so that they faced each other across the wooden table.

"Thank you. She will. It's nice to meet you too, Elicia. Are you the fishin' huntin' type, or are you up here for a week of relaxing?"

"Oh, I'm planning on reading a pile of books this big." She indicated her waist. "Jori says you're here to work. You're a botanical illustrator like your aunt?"

"Yes, that and wildlife illustration."

“You must be in your element here. It’s gorgeous. I could hardly believe it when Jori told me his family owned the whole valley. It’s like owning your own holiday resort. Imagine just packing up and coming here every time you want to chill out, or hunt, or hike, or whatever.”

“It’s fantastic the way they maintain it.” Amy was happy to find another convert. Very few outsiders knew of this valley. You had to be invited by a Garoul to even find the damned place, and that only happened when you were as good as one of the family. It was obvious Elicia and Jori must be in a serious relationship if he’d asked her along on a hunting break. For the Garouls the hunting vacations were tantamount to a holy pilgrimage. In fact, Jori’s increasing mention of his new girlfriend in his e-mails had alerted Amy that something major was happening for him. She was close to Jori and regarded him with the warmth and affection she would have for a brother of her own—if she’d had any siblings.

“Just look at all these little holiday cabins waiting for visitors.” Amy looked fondly around the compound as she spoke. It was very picturesque—a little log cabin village right out of a fairy tale.

Her gaze fell on Leone, who was still in the line chatting with her brother. As if sensing Amy’s eyes on her, she looked up and winked. Amy turned away sharply and continued talking to Elicia.

“When I was younger this place was packed with kids all summer. We used to run wild. It was the best time ever. It’s nice to know the little Garouls still come and meet up every year for a summer camp.” She smiled happily at her memories. “It’s an ideal way to keep family connections strong generation after generation.”

“And you were the only little non-Garoul?”

“Yes. I’ve always been a sort of honorary cousin. Connie has lived out here as long as I can remember, and I visited every school holiday. I loved it here.” Her smile widened. “I’m so looking forward to hiking around the valley with my work pack, sniffing out plants and birds to sketch.”

“How do you do that? I mean, do you just sit down with your paints and stuff and draw a flower?”

“Not really. First I do detailed field sketches with color swatches. But I also use my camera to catalogue—” A deep chuckle interrupted her.

“Hey, you two, Claude sent us over with these. Typical...sitting in the middle of a forest and you both expect waiter service.”

Amy swiveled in her seat and looked up into the twinkling eyes of Jori Garoul. He stood behind her with a full plate in each hand.

“Jori,” she cried as he leaned down to kiss her cheek warmly. She gave him a quick peck and a big hug back.

“Amy, darling. It’s great to see you again. I got your last e-mail. Hey, those photos of Venice were amazing.” He moved to sit beside Elicia, delivering her plate as he spoke. “We’re so gonna go there someday. Take a year out and just travel. Venice, Rome, Paris. Do the whole deal.” He smiled at Elicia, openly including her in his dreams of Europe.

“I got tons more photos of Italy. I’ll bore you both to tears someday and show you every single one...” Her sentence died away as she noticed Leone poised directly behind her carrying another set of plates. Their eyes locked momentarily before Amy suddenly became very interested in her paper napkin. She shifted in her seat as Jori and Elicia shared their food. Leone placed the plates on the table before squeezing her long frame onto the bench beside Amy. She ended up sitting much too close, unfazed by Amy’s clumsy sideways shuffling to make more space between them.

“Here.” Leone pushed a plate toward Amy, unaware of any awkwardness or else choosing to ignore it. Amy was uncertain which, and felt even more unsettled.

“I’m sorry for the earlier misunderstanding, Amy.” Leone flashed a big smile and launched into conversation as if they were the best of friends. “Your hair’s gotten really long. And you lost a stack of weight,” she continued as they prepared to eat. “It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

Amy was disgusted that her frosty vibes were totally wasted on Leone’s thick skin. Taking a new tack, she looked at Leone as if she were insane.

“Yes, it has. Six years, eight months, and fifteen days,” she

threw out flippantly, ignoring the rest of Leone's statement. It was none of Leone's business what her hair, or metabolism, had been up to these past years.

Leone's coal black eyes twinkled back at her. "Twenty-one days." Her grin widened even further.

Amy blinked back confounded. *Has she really been counting the days?* She glanced questioningly into those unfathomable eyes, and deep within caught the slightest teasing glint. Immediately Amy slammed shut, tight as a refrigerator door. All her thoughts and feelings sealed away, cooling right down to zero.

"Well, I guess you keep count better than me," she said snippily, wanting to convey her annoyance but not alert Jori and Elicia that there was something amiss.

Amy knew before she arrived she would have to work alongside Leone Garoul. She had schooled herself on the flight over to be civil, no matter what the circumstances. She was here on a mission on behalf of Connie and at the anxious request of Marie, who was not only Connie's partner, but co-author, too, as well as publisher. This was an important project, and Amy was a professional. If Leone was going to be her editor, then she would just have to cope with it and not let any murderous feelings for her ex-girlfriend get in the way.

She decided the best thing was to ignore Leone for the rest of the meal. Mind made up, she cut into her steak but was more than a little perturbed to find it still quite bloody. Sighing, she plucked at her bread instead, plopping a cherry tomato into her mouth.

Leone looked over, happily tucking into her own. "Underdone?"

"A little. I told Claude to make sure mine was cooked through, but I don't think he knows what that means."

"Do you want me to take it back and tell him to incinerate it?"

"To be honest, I'm not that interested now. I'm happy enough with the salad," Amy said truthfully. Leone reached over and took her abandoned steak, piling it on top of the massive one already on her plate. Amy looked at her aghast.

"What?" Leone asked, cutting into it. "You said you didn't want it."

“I’d forgotten what a big stuffer you are. How the hell you keep your figure with the amount you pack away beats me.” Amy shook her head in genuine mystery, all intentions to ignore Leone forgotten in the sight of such happy gluttony.

“That’s because I am a wild woman of the woods, and you always had the metabolism of a marshmallow,” Leone mumbled around an enormous mouthful. Amy stared at her, mortally offended. It was as if the years had all melted away to nothing and she was once again looking at the smug, exasperating teenager who’d been her first love.

Don’t you dare try to take me back there as if nothing ever happened. She glared at Leone, who smiled gracefully back and continued to wolf her food. Basking in the hot, angry stare as if it were sunshine.