

“Gorgeous, absolutely drop-dead gorgeous.”

Todd Fischer stood near the edge of a snowy precipice and slapped his chest like a primate surveying his kingdom. He pulled in a lungful of air, his new Filson hiking vest tight against his broad chest. He was winded, more than he cared to admit, and cold. Even at the end of April, the temperatures on this trail lingered in the low thirties. A late-season snowfall added to the discomfort, not to mention the threatening gusts of frigid air.

“You know,” he continued, turning to his companion, “people would pay plenty to live here.”

“I don’t think you can just put up housing in a national park,” she replied.

“Anything can be bought and tamed, Elena. “Even the Rockies.”

“I believe you, Todd. Now, please come down off that ledge? Remember the warnings we received about the missing railings and the danger of microbursts? I do not want my husband to be blown away like a character in *The Wizard of Oz*.”

Fischer laughed. “I’m not about to be knocked over by a blast of air. I think you should worry more about the kids. Go see what’s happened to them.”

As soon as she’d moved out of sight, he bent over, suddenly dizzy. Crap, getting old was not for sissies. He needed more exercise, more hydration, more time, more of everything.

Elena turned back to the trail, shaking her head. The “kids” were young adults and, as far as she was concerned, pampered twenty-somethings. She was the “wicked” stepmother, just ten years older than the eldest, perpetually a graduate student. Whereas younger brother Paulie treated school as one long excuse to party.

Now she heard them, bickering, as usual.

“Could you stop complaining?” Rowan was saying.

“Not a chance,” Paulie griped. “We are tramping in the mountains, just past dawn, in the cold and the wind. In late April. I left a warm bed and a warm body so I could freeze my backside off with distant dad and wife number three.”

“Maybe the warm body should have helped you dress for a hike in the Rockies.”

“You’re just jealous.”

Rowan appeared first, dressed perfectly for a mountain trek. Paulie, on the other hand, looked like he’d come from a night of clubbing, right down to his overpriced sneakers and his curated day-old beard.

“There you are,” Elena said, forcing a smile. “We were on the ledge for a better view.”

“The one with the ‘danger’ sign?” Paulie asked. “Oh, right. Dad likes to go where he’s not supposed to. I guess you could call it his specialty.”

Elena reminded herself that she could handle two brats for one morning. Before long, she would get herself pregnant and make them both irrelevant.

“Take a look,” she suggested. “It’s quite lovely.”

But they were back to fighting, ripping into each other like territorial animals. Until an unexpected gust of wind interrupted their discourse, strong enough to send a few rocks scuttling down into the valley.

“What was that?” Paulie asked.

“Nature, dummy,” Rowan retorted.

“Wait, where is your father?” Elena demanded.

Paulie cupped his hands and yelled, “Attention, Todd Fischer. We’re officially concerned. Show yourself.”

Rowan climbed to the ledge and swallowed hard. “Maybe he found another way to head down,” she said.

“No,” Elena declared. “Something happened.”