

ONE

Late Summer, Southwest Oregon

Bram looked over his shoulder and swallowed at the absolute certainty that he wasn't alone. The rustle of whispered sound curled out to him from the trees, a movement just beyond him hidden by the darkened shadows between trunks and foliage. Something he couldn't see but could hear prowled, paced him, unseen deep in the shadows. More than once, his gaze strayed to the brush and trees surrounding him as he walked. He did his best to ignore it. He'd had the invisible companion for the better part of a day and a half already. Whatever it was hadn't bothered him, and he couldn't see it. He was fine with the status quo.

Pausing for a break, he lifted his canteen and took a short sip, capping it carefully when he was done. He was being cautious with his water, trying to not gorge himself on what was left. He didn't know when he'd find water again the way things were going for him.

He peered into the dusky tree line with a straining search where he stood but couldn't see anything to give away the source of the sounds that had all but mimicked his every step. A soft breeze shook the trees and sunlight broke through the canopy a moment later, arcing in slices of radiance bringing the realization home that he was being foolish. He was alone in the woods except for Mother Nature, but it didn't stop the feeling of being observed either.

After a few minutes of studied scrutiny, he realized with a sense of dread that the shadows were thickening with evening closing in around him. Darkness was taking over the tree line and obscuring his path quickly. The unwelcome idea came to him that he was going to have to spend yet another night lost amongst the trees. With that fact looming, he was thankful he had brought his windbreaker on a whim, his only protective garment tied around his waist as he had made his way down miles of trails.

He cursed at his own arrogant stupidity as he slowly started to hike again. He'd gone much farther than he had planned on, assuming with the aid of his compass and the recognizable landmarks he could leave the main trail safely. That was the first mistake he'd made. The second was not having enough food for what he had thought was going to just be a day hike. His father would have been ashamed at his brash overconfidence.

He clenched his fists as his father's teaching flooded him. He knew better. *He knew better!* He ground his teeth, fighting off a wave of despondency, an acute depression that the death of his father had left in his life.

He took a deep breath, releasing it slowly, centering his thoughts. Realizing now that he had gone too far didn't do him any good, other than to drill home the fact that he was going to be sleeping on the ground again.

"Priorities," he muttered as he continuously took in the landscape around him, searching for the best place to call it a night. The rolling hills led to brief sharp rises of low escarpments and trees. He turned and twisted to take in his surroundings, larger than life Douglas Firs on either side of him. He caught the swift twitch of a chipmunk's tail, scurrying with intent and speed to a hiding place as he walked past.

He'd set out the morning before, full of enthusiasm, a happy anxiousness to visit the area where he and his father had camped together, had spent their last summer being a father and a son before Bram had left for college. He'd been absorbed in the views, the peaceful abandon that was just not possible in the middle of St. Louis. There was something spectacular about the land, a freedom, a scent in the air, the way he could stretch his frame in the wildness of the Pacific Northwest that even the best manicured park couldn't emulate. And he'd lost track of time.

He'd realized late yesterday with a bitter reprimand that he'd also lost his compass. He could hear his father berating him for his carelessness. So now he was lost. He'd thought he'd been positioned south of the Sisters, but he hadn't seen the twin mountain peaks through the tree line for a while and had become nervous as the day grew later, fearing that as humans could do, he was walking in circles.

He stopped on the path, hearing faint sounds again. He slowly twisted his head toward them, his gaze sharp, his ears tuned into the natural hum around him. The snap of a twig, the flutter of leaves settling. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up.

“Who’s there?” he called, subconsciously aware it was only him and nature, and Mother Nature didn’t talk. He narrowed his eyes as he searched into the shadowed, twined undergrowth. He shook his head, forcing himself to relax. No, there wasn’t anyone else out here. Just him and a lot of small, furry animals.

Releasing the wary feeling with a strong exhaled breath, he looked up, craning his neck to get a better idea of where he was, but the path was narrow and the coverage was high, already casting long shadows before him. He should have tried to find a place to bed down for the night over an hour ago but he’d been determined to find his way out, and now he was short on light.

He continued in a direction that he hoped was correct, using the lengthening shadows to guide his steps. Several minutes later he broke through the edge of the trees to a gentle clearing. Just a break in the trees with a mound to the side. He hated the idea of lying out in the open again praying the occurrence of predators was still rare in this particular area of the state. He made a disgusted face as the thought occurred to him that he didn’t really have much of a choice considering his lessening light.

He made a circuit of the clearing, checking for recent prints or signs of life. After two circles, and finding nothing that would be alarming, he bundled a few twigs and fallen limbs and dug a shallow pit with the heel of his boot, putting the mound at his back. At least he had remembered to grab his travel lighter, he thought as he started a small fire to give a little light and a touch of warmth. It was a barrier more than a comfort.

He crossed his arms as he leaned back against the grassy knoll, his long legs stretched out before him into the growing darkness. He loved to hike, to be outdoors and had actually been intent on Yellowstone for his break but on his way west had changed his mind. He’d already been through miles of Yellowstone. He and his brother Mitchell had made numerous trips to the well-known parklands with their father while growing up, but their last trip together had been special. He hadn’t known it and neither had his father, but it would be the last camping trip they would ever take together.

His father had been a real woodsman, a throw back. He could hunt, fish, and camp like a pioneer. No matter how long he lived in the city, his father had never lost his wonder of the great outdoors.

While Bram hadn’t received that entire gene, he was happy with what he did have. He had survival knowledge, could tell direction by the stars and if necessary, could find a way to eat and stay alive. He silently prayed it didn’t come to that. Eating bugs had never been a secret childhood fantasy, even though his dad had shown him how to do it and how to look beyond what he was consuming.

The thought made Bram smile softly as he stared, his thoughts lost on the past. Man, he missed his dad. His dad was the reason he’d come out west. His death had been unexpected and difficult. This trip was for him. Homage to the man and what he’d loved, a memory to his skill. His Mom and Mitchell were still at home, starting to rebuild. She was starting over and Mitchell was starting college. They had all tried in their own way to make peace with his passing, but it hadn’t been easy. They never once thought he’d get cancer and never doubted he couldn’t beat it.

He reached for the canteen at his side and took a shallow swallow, shaking it with dejected anticipation. He let out a breath. Less than half. He was going to have to be careful with what he had unless he could find fresh water.

He leaned his head back, looking up to search the stars, already starting to dazzle the darkening night sky. He sought the patterns that he’d learned when he was a boy, sitting on his father’s knee in their own backyard. He located north, and then made the compass in his mind’s eye, finding south and east, then relaxed. He could find his way in the morning.

Sitting straight, he stared into the fire when he heard a sound, like a soft sneeze. He looked into the tree line not seeing anything again, but as his gaze coursed back and forth, the hairs on his neck stood up with little warning. There was that feeling he was being watched. His lips thinned. He knew he was tired, and by morning his ignorable hunger pangs would be as loud as the rumble at

Aneheiser-Busch stadium during the playoffs, but the feeling he was being watched would not leave him.

Staring into the shadowed depths his eyes widened and he felt a hitch in his breathing. It wasn't at the tree line. It was deeper in the blackness. Two gray eyes, shining out of the darkness as they watched him with as much intent as he was watching them.

For a matter of heartbeats neither so much as flinched. Then, in a blink, it disappeared. He didn't move. He didn't breathe. After a minute or two, when it looked as though whatever it was wouldn't be returning, he released the breath he had been holding. The encounter left him unsettled and wary for the rest of the night. He managed a stilted sleep at best because of the uncertainty of where his midnight watcher had gone.

The next morning, feeling groggy and gritty, he refilled the hole that had held his meager fire, and finding his directional bearings again, made his way south. Day three, he thought just as his stomach rebelled with a harsh sound.

He cursed again, not so silently this time as he trudged on a path that he hoped was *an actual path*. What would happen if he really was lost? He'd allowed himself to go soft while being in school, according to his stomach. His long grueling hours serving his internship at St. Louis Med Center in the ER didn't equate to long hours of actual exercise, and his stomach was letting him know it. He fought down the hunger pains, making his feet move with purpose.

Unfortunately, thinking of the hospital, his other home, brought to mind Rebecca, the one person he really was trying not to think about too much while on this trip. She was making loud marriage noises and he wasn't ready. He did care for her. At least, he assumed he cared for her. He imagined he could even be in love with her.

He shook his head even as he thought it. Something just wasn't right between them. He had envisioned a life of love and happiness, like his parents had shared, but Rebecca didn't seem to be the right one. He could admit he cared for her, but he just wasn't happy anymore. He pushed a low hanging branch out of his path. It was a feeling that as he'd progressed and picked his future, they'd outgrown one another but she refused to let it go. To let him go.

As his thoughts rambled, his feet carried him down one nonexistent trail to another, as due south as he could discern. He'd worn the windbreaker overnight to ward off the chill of the evening, a steep contrast to the heat of the days.

Oregon was in the middle of a hot streak. The day he'd left, it had been ninety-seven with forecasts of gradually increasing heat. Today it could be a hundred. He wouldn't have been surprised, but the jacket was beginning to impede his progress as branches and stiff growth grabbed at him. He took a deep breath as he slowed, trying to refocus his attention to where he was putting his feet.

Giving up on his rambling thoughts for the moment, he stopped, leaning against the trunk of a tree and took a drink. The canteen was nearly empty now and as the sun broke through the trees, the predictions for the heat index looked like they were going to be accurate.

Taking a step to start once more, he paused as he heard the rustle in the foliage to his right. It was louder, as if to acknowledge each other's presence. He peered into the trees in the direction it had come from but saw nothing. Sunlight and shadow.

He remembered the eyes from last night and felt a tingle on his skin. *Something* was following him, but when silence was his only companion, he started walking again. He stopped shortly after to remove his windbreaker, wiping an arm across his damp brow. As much as he hated to do it, he drank the last swallow from his canteen. He frowned, aware that his options had just shortened dramatically.

The sun had risen higher still, nearing its height when he noticed a change in the thickness of the trees. He cocked an ear, stilling his breathing. A stream or a creek was just to his left. He released his held breath with a hope of fresh water. He followed the sound for several minutes, finally breaking free of the trees to find a shallow, swift paced creek.

Even as hungry and thirsty as he was and with his exhaustion growing, he could draw in and relish the beauty of what he had found. Bleached rock framed the waterway on either side, showing it

was a winter run off stream. Trees, tall and full, swayed on either bank in unison. It was a gorgeous spot. The water ran clear and cool as he knelt on the bank. He drew one deep cleansing breath, savoring the crisp taste of the air on his tongue. His father had always said he'd had a good nose for the outdoors. Now he could understand what that meant.

He recognized the smell of the trees, the earth beneath his body, the scent of wildlife just out of reach. He let his head drift to his chest where he knelt, the feeling of his father and his words right there in his mind. He'd never allowed himself release to cry at the funeral and he had not cried when his mother needed him to be the man of the house. In this place of nature that was so much of what he remembered of his father, he couldn't hold back the pain, and he didn't even try.

His sob was harsh in the quiet of the creek, the gurgling sound of the water his only backdrop to the sharpness of his grief. Whether it was from emotional or physical exhaustion, it didn't matter. This place, this serenity was who his father was, had been. For a brief moment the boy inside mourned his father like a son should, letting the empty space that had been created by his death fill again with memories and the love that they had shared. For now, in his silent private world, his show of grief was allowable.

Several minutes passed before he sucked in a smooth breath. The scent of this place would stay with him forever, helping him to remember his father. He unclenched his hands and wiped the tears from his eyes, having permitted his heart to finally bleed for the father he'd never talk to again.

Straightening again with lengthening resolve and a deeper calm, he surveyed his surroundings once more. Now he needed to get out of the woods. He leaned to run a hand through the water. It was clear and cool, nearing cold. Probably spring water, he mused as the water drifted over his fingers. Cupping his hands, he took a shallow, careful sip. All he found on his tongue was a slight iron taste but nothing he couldn't handle. He slowly drank then filled his canteen to full. With that done, he splashed his face, cleaning the emotional tracks and dust from his features, scraping the excess off with his fingers and shaking them dry.

As he sat back on his haunches, letting the sun beat down on him absorbing the warmth rather than dreading the hours still ahead for him, he heard it. A click against stone, a movement, and the soft sound of breathing. He looked over a shoulder and was stunned into stillness.

There in the broad daylight of the sun's brightness, not more than fifteen feet away, stood a wolf. A beautiful creature of color and grace. They regarded each other, cautious but curious.

Wolves were not common outside of Yellowstone and he'd heard of no sightings this far west, but there she stood. He was positive it was a female. A slight build—like a runner's body was the first thought that came to mind—and delicate facial features ending in a pointed snout. Inquisitive gray eyes that stared at him in equal fascination.

The remarkable thing about the creature was the coat—a blended near white with roughed patches on her shoulders of golden yellow, with yellow tipped ears.

He swallowed, unable to move as the wolf raised its head, scenting the air with tentative actions. He continued to watch in awe as it whipped around and disappeared into the woods flanking him. He listened as he carefully turned in a crouch but the silence was deafening until he let out the gasp he had been holding.

Holy crap! A wolf! He jumped to his feet, wondering if there were more, a pack. They hunted in packs, but somehow, he knew he was not in danger being as much a curiosity to the animal as it had been to him. He stepped toward the tree line where it had disappeared, wanting to follow, to see if there were others. He stopped himself, shaking his head ruefully. He was lost and needed to keep on track if he was going to get back to his car. He needed civilization, food and a hot shower before he needed to find a lone wolf in the wilds surrounding him.

He looked once more, longing in his heart, curiosity on the tip of his tongue, but reluctantly, he acknowledged he couldn't. Facing the rushing creek again, he judged the flow and decided to follow it until he had to make another decision.

Hours later he was frustrated and angry with himself all over again. And starving, ready to just lie down and let whoever was able to find him. The stream had disappeared underground several hours ago and now he was just walking.

Where was he? How did he get so lost? He should have found some trace of a trail or a path by now. He cursed loudly when he realized that he was just as lost this evening as he had been that morning. He pushed on, drinking from his canteen when the hunger pangs became unbearable. Unfortunately, he was brashly draining his water for that hunger.

He grumbled and cursed, positive he had somehow managed to walk in circles yet again. Even if he wasn't, he couldn't be this lost!

He sat down on a felled tree, his head falling with tired relief to his crossed arms. He barked a shallow laugh. No one would even think of looking for him for another ten days. His vacation was for two weeks and he'd only been gone for not quite four. He looked up searching for the sun. Okay. Four. He was going to have to find a place to sleep again.

Exhausted, he just rested. He'd set a frenetic pace wanting to get back to a hot shower and a good meal. Yet as he sat, his stomach starting to touch his backbone, he realized his mistake too late. He was exhausted, weary, hot. He sipped on his water feeling the lighter weight of the canteen as he beat himself up over his mistake.

He stopped drinking before the urge to drain it became unbearable. No food in almost three full days of serious hiking, just water. At least he wouldn't miss the gym for a while.

The flash of white caught his attention as he lowered his canteen. He blinked, rubbing his eyes, and then dismissed it. He wiped the sweat from his brow, trying to clear his vision when he saw it again.

It was back, or maybe it had never left him. He wasn't sure, having paid less attention to his surroundings at the pace he'd set.

As he felt the heat of the day fall on him, he wondered if his imagination was working overtime. Weren't there legends about visions? Maybe he was having one, in the middle of Oregon.

He almost laughed. He was starting to lose it too. Great.

He capped his canteen and didn't move. He was hot and ached. Starving was just another fact. The flash of white streaked by again, just beyond the trees. Rubbing his eyes harder, he was surprised to find it still there, but it had stopped, just out of sight. He could barely make out the tail, like a white banner against the fading light of the coming sunset. It twitched once when he stood. He didn't move again in case it bolted, but instead, it simply waited. Disbelief had him shaking his head.

What did he have to lose?

"I know I'm imagining this. Do you want me to follow you?" he asked quietly, no longer concerned with who thought he might be nuts, and the tail twitched again. The animal didn't move but he heard a click. He cringed when he realized it had snapped its jaws at him. "I am going crazy," he said under his breath as he carefully followed the tail out of the trees.

He didn't know how long he followed it or how far he had gone when he found himself in a clearing. As the animal stopped at the next line of trees and blended into the foliage, he realized with a feeling of wonder that he was standing at the top of the trail. At the very least, a trail that he knew he could follow. He spun on a heel looking for the wolf, but found he was alone. The wolf was gone.

He searched, half hoping that somehow it would still be there, but knew even as far as visions went, he shouldn't be looking for it at all. Accepting that he had found a way out, he dug a pit and made another small fire, doing it the same way he had the night before and on more countless nights over his life than he could count. He settled down close to the little beacon of light, ready to make the march in the morning for civilization when there was a stirring in the trees.

He lifted his head, the dark line of the trees becoming impenetrable in the falling darkness. Cautiously the wolf moved forward, a limp form in its jaws. It dropped the rabbit carcass several feet from him then began to back away, its gray luminous eyes watching him intensely.

"Wait!" he whispered, unsure why or if it mattered. He realized he was imagining all of this, he had to be. The wolf froze at the sound of his voice. Then it sat back on its haunches and stared at him.

“Why are you here? Are you a vision? A dream?” He swallowed thickly as the animal tilted its head, listening to him. It clicked its jaws at him again with a raw snap.

He smiled at it, not in the least concerned. Visions weren't real. “Sorry. Not my language.” It appeared to him the animal smiled back at him as it stood gracefully. In the distance, there was a howl, long and deep. It caused a shiver to rise over his skin. He watched with acute fascination as the one before him lifted its head and answered with a long soulful sound that reverberated through the night and filled him with wonder.

Without a glance back at him it slipped back into the trees. “Thank you, my white beauty,” he whispered into the darkness. A faint yip reached him on a breeze from the way she had vanished, and then there was silence.

TWO

Six years later

“Paging Doctor Benedetti. Paging Doctor Benedetti. Please call extension two-four-one.”

Bram Benedetti barely lifted his head, his expression intent on the chart he held in his hand as the page echoed down the corridor. When he addressed his patient, his smile was warm. “Mr. Logan. You’re ready to be released. Is your daughter coming to get you?”

Mr. Logan returned the assessing gaze of his favorite doctor, saying with aplomb and barely disguised hopefulness, “I wish you and Phyllis got along better.”

“Sorry. My bedside manner doesn’t have to include family members,” he returned with an easy smile. *And not for cupid intending fathers, either.* He didn’t let his thoughts show on his face. “If you have any problems, make sure you or she contacts me immediately. I don’t want to see you back in here again for something as simple as a missed dose flare up. Understood?” He wrote his recommendations down on the chart as Mr. Logan slipped from the exam table.

“I know. I know. It was my fault anyway.”

“I understand.” Doctor Benedetti’s words were patient for Mr. Logan. It wasn’t the first time he’d mentioned his unwed daughter. “Just take better care of yourself, will you? I like the money, but don’t make me charge you if I don’t have to.”

Mr. Logan’s expression brightened. Bram knew that was one of the things Mr. Logan liked about him, and why he always tried to get him to ask his daughter out. The patient came first.

Mr. Logan shook his hand. “That I can understand,” was Mr. Logan’s reply.

“Paging Doctor Benedetti.”

“I need to get that. Goodbye, Mr. Logan.” Leaving the exam room to answer the page, Bram dropped the chart off at the nurse’s station and he picked up the plain white auxiliary phone on the station desk. He slipped his pen into the pocket of his whites with an unconscious move. “Doctor Benedetti.”

“Bram. It’s about time. I was on hold forever. Why didn’t you call me back? Just because we’re divorced doesn’t mean you can just drop me like a damn container for refuse.”

He cringed as soon as he heard the voice on the other end. The tension knot he’d almost forgotten about in his back reappeared, and it brought relatives. “Rebecca, this isn’t the place. I’m on duty.” He rubbed the tired spot between his eyes.

“Well, when will it be the right time? Tell me that?” she sniped.

He held his temper in check as he told her, “We are divorced. As in not married. Can’t you just let it be?” He fought to keep the tired edge out of his voice. His exhaustion had always been a weakness for her to attack him on.

“No. You know we never should have divorced. You know I still love you.”

He bit his tongue. Even if Helen wasn’t looking at him, she could easily hear every word, and the nurses gossiped worse than crows.

“Rebecca, I will call you this evening.”

“You had better,” was followed by a crisp snap and the welcome death of a silent line.

He looked at the phone then set it down like it was a sleeping snake. “Helen, I’ll be in my office checking messages. Page me if anyone other than Rebecca calls.”

“Yes, Doctor,” came the crisp reply.

He turned his back on her and the motions of the nurse’s station. The white light of the hallways meant nothing to him these days as he cut his path through the working environment. The sound of the carts, the rasp of ventilators, the smell of cleaners and antiseptics. It was ingrained now. After more than ten years of school, internship, and finally his own office with a plaque on the door in the same hospital where he had done most of his training, it had ceased to have an effect on him. Any of it. And he wasn’t sure what to do about it.

He sank into his office chair with a tired frown, seeing the message light on his phone. He knew it had been too much to hope that she hadn't called him there as well. When he checked, there were five messages total. Two, of course, were Rebecca. He erased those without even wanting to hear them in their entirety. He couldn't blame her. He had been the failure, at least emotionally. He had never gotten beyond his original attraction to form something deeper. He had never been able to love her, not the way she had wanted or deserved.

Their divorce had been amicable at best. She hadn't wanted it but realized he'd been miserable. She had relented, probably believing giving him an easy out would show him what she really meant to him. She'd been wrong. Now, she'd become obsessive again. Just like when they'd been dating. Wanting what she couldn't have, because he knew he didn't want her. He'd made a mistake and had paid for it.

The other messages were from his brother, Mitchell. They had grown closer after his father's death, and both brothers had become a stronger support for their mother when she'd needed them at her side. That time was gone but they were still tight as a three person family, a healed family able to move on without his father.

He was reaching forward when the last message started, ready to dismiss it, but the voice, then the words, stopped him.

"Doctor Benedetti, my name is Selene Aiza. You don't know me, but I live in Oregon and recently worked with a colleague of yours who gave you a very high recommendation for a position we are seeking to fill. I work in Bend, Oregon at the medical center and after an exhaustive search would like to discuss this position with you. If you are interested in the details please call me at..."

He leaned back. Oregon? Bend? He hit the replay and listened again. The voice was feminine, soft and clear. His eyes drifted shut as memories of Oregon came to him. The smells, the beauty, the trails.

The wolf.

He blinked, startled as the image crystallized with vivid clarity in his mind. He hadn't thought of the animal or the incident in years. Had it really happened? Or had it been a delusional case of hunger and heat?

He shook his head, clearing his mind. He was sure he had hallucinated it all. By the time he had made his way to where he had left his vehicle, he had been in the woods for four full days with hardly more than a canteen of water and his energy bars.

He lifted his pen back out and wrote down the number, replaying the message again to ensure he had it correct, then erased the message along with the others. He stared at the name and the phone number for several minutes. He knew the important questions could only be answered by calling.

But what about his personal questions? What about his intentions, his own desires?

He rubbed his eyes to clear images and memories. The tension knot between his shoulders was still there, but it was lessening now that he'd had a few minutes of quiet time. When had that become necessary? When had the stress become such a normal part of his day that he could ignore it?

He loved what he did. The hospital he worked in and with was as much his home as the house he lived in, but in the last two years, something had become obvious. Just like his relationship with Rebecca, it wasn't a good fit for him.

Frustration had become a normal part of his everyday life. Meetings and conferences were turning into long periods of grand standing, where only a small amount of time was used for actual discussion of medicine, and just the idea of Rebecca was enough to make his stomach sour. He never should have allowed himself to be convinced by her to settle, because there was no doubt now with time and distance, he had. In that, he was most certainly to blame.

One thing he could remember about that wayward trip with marked vividness was the peace he had found while walking through the wilderness in southwest Oregon. Even when he had been lost, the splendor, the untouched quality had filled him with a peace that he remembered in detail, but hadn't found since.

Was he ready to make a change? If the opportunity was there, in Oregon, was he capable? There was only one way to find out.

Taking a chance, he lifted the plain phone on his desk and dialed the number. The other end answered on the second ring. "Bend Medical Center."

"Yes. Is Selene Aiza available?"

"Let me check. Who may I say is calling?" He gave his name and waited patiently as he was put on hold. He tapped his fingers lightly to the music playing into his ear. He didn't have long to wait.

"This is Doctor Aiza." Her voice was clear and lovely, better than the recording.

He introduced himself, saying, "I'm returning your call. You didn't leave much on the message."

He heard soft, flowing laughter in her voice. "I was hoping saying nothing would be more intriguing than saying everything." He settled back into his chair as she continued. "The reason I called was because of a friend and mutual colleague, Doctor Ross Spinitti. He worked with you for several years if I remember correctly."

He smiled as he remembered Ross. Tall and lanky and gregarious, but a good doctor. "Yes, I do remember him," he said. "I worked with him during my internship and I want to say until just two years ago."

She murmured an agreement. "I believe that is how he described it. He thought very highly of you, and I can assure you, the board thinks very highly of Doctor Spinitti, but that is only to break the ice. The position we have requires a person with certain skills, knowledge and capabilities that our hospital singularly is in need of. The board knows you are specialized in hematology and that is also being viewed as an asset for our location." She hesitated briefly as if unsure of his reaction. "I know this is completely out of the blue for you, but you are the board's first choice."

"It is, at that," he answered. "Being out of the blue, that is." He looked around his office and felt the caged feeling that until that moment he hadn't bothered to acknowledge. There had been no sign of escape, until now. He pushed himself into his chair, relaxing further as he crossed his feet at the ankles.

"Tell me something?" he asked, an odd feeling starting to curl through him. It almost felt like anticipation.

"Anything."

"Is Oregon still as beautiful as it was six years ago?"

Her bright laughter was contagious and he smiled. "Gorgeous. I love it here. I couldn't picture living anywhere else."

"Why don't you give me a better idea of what this position is, then Doctor Aiza, and I will let you know."

"Well, a good point for the position is it isn't hectic for starters, but we do service the entire Cascades area and serve as an overflow center, but that happens only rarely. We do our own lab work even for being a smaller community center and are well staffed and strong on equipment. The position is basically a co-directorship with minimal administration duties. We are searching for a specific kind of personality, a singular individual." Her voice dropped a little, a serious undercurrent to show her sincerity. "I know you've been at home in St. Louis for your tenure, but the feeling is like nowhere else. And the pay is only a little lower than your current levels."

"You know what I make?" he asked, surprised to hear it.

She sounded apologetically embarrassed. "I had to do all the research on you, Doctor Benedetti. Please don't be offended."

He smiled as he pictured her, a light blush rising on the imagined picture of her face from the confession. "How could I be? Your honesty is transparent."

"Thank you," she said. "So, could I interest you in a tour?"

He lifted a glance at his calendar, relaxing more as he shifted in his chair. He was off duty in two days. "Why don't I fly out on Thursday? Is that time enough?"

"I think we can manage for that. I hope we can entice you to call Bend home."

His laugh was light for the first time in years. "I'm willing to see."

Bram's phone rang Wednesday night as he finished packing for his morning flight. He lifted it with a shirt in his other hand. He was relaxed until he heard her voice.

"You forgot to call," came the crisp reprimand.

"Rebecca." He sighed, his gaze flowing upward, begging for divine intervention. He'd even take a lightning bolt at this point. "I'm sorry. I had emergencies for eight hours straight. I couldn't just drop it all." He laid the shirt on the bed as he sat.

"And what was wrong with now? You couldn't think of me at all?"

He grimaced at her fishwife mentality. Had she always been this demanding, this self-centered? If she had, then he had obviously been too easy. He silenced his groan of self-disgust.

"I'm leaving in the morning. I'm packing and I hadn't really thought about it."

"Packing?" came her shocked cry. "Where are you going?"

He refrained from throwing the clutched phone when his temper flared at her outburst. "Jesus, Rebecca! What do you want from me? I don't have to tell you every single thing in my life!"

Her silence grew and spread like a wet cloud. "Bram, I'm sorry. I know we're divorced. I do still love you." Her meek words were a repetitive cover up that he had learned was a short lived respite.

"I can't help that anymore." His voice chilled, no longer interested in appeasing her. "I told you months ago there would be no reconciliation."

"Bram, please," she entreated in that helpless tone he had learned to hate. She was anything but helpless.

"No, Rebecca. Just move on. Leave me out of it. My life is of no concern to you anymore. If I ever really was," he finished.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

He stood again, facing the nearest wall, the hand holding the cordless phone pinched white from anger, pain, and stress. "Never mind, Rebecca. Forget I said it." He butted his head against the solid door frame to his room once, twice. Taking a deep breath and releasing it slowly he told her, "I have to go. I need to finish packing."

"All right," she offered, still playing the meek card. "Will you call me when you get back?"

He stood staring at the emptiness of his bedroom. There was nothing left for him in that room, as much as there was nothing left for him in St. Louis. His life was moving forward. It was time he actually did the same. His voice was final when he answered her.

"No." And he hung up the phone.

He dropped the phone onto his bed with a furious flick of his hand, picking up the shirt he had abandoned for the phone call. He folded it with precise movements, laying it with the half dozen others already in place.

He shook his head in anger and self-incrimination as he replayed the phone call. Why had he married her? She was not the woman he was made for, no matter how much she wanted to be. He knew that. Hell, he thought sarcastically, he'd *known* it, and he'd still married her. So, if not her, who then? He honestly didn't know.

He was successful, hard working, good looking, or so he believed, but not conceited. His brother was far better looking and easier to be around. He had worked long hours and longer years to be a respected hematologist. He had been on more committees than he could remember decoding the connection certain blood diseases and conditions had to the development of cancers. Cancer like his father had died from.

Rebecca had never understood his dedication, his drive. She had chased and cajoled, offered and pleaded until he had just given in and given up, and that weakness had been his downfall. She didn't understand the long hours of commitment. She didn't care if someone had to wait for her petty foibles. Once they had married, she had expected him to be her husband, not a couple, and definitely not a man with a career to answer to.

They had dated for two years, had been married for just over two and now were divorced for over a year, and she still thought she could order him around, that she could control him. He blinked as it sunk in. Six years. Had he really put up with her for so long?

He released a disgusted sound. Why? When he had known his feelings, his own heart and mind and had accepted his path? He sighed, shaking his head at his own thoughts. Because regardless of how much of a pain in the ass she was, he had cared enough to not want to hurt her. He had never wanted to hurt her inside. He folded a pair of slacks, taking care with the crease points, only paying attention to his packing with half a mind as his thoughts wandered from her phone call to what lay ahead. Two of his suit jackets hung in a carrier on the hook inside his closet door and he was nearly done packing by the time he had lowered his blood pressure again.

Thinking about his coming trip, he felt that rush of anticipation again. He was flying to Bend, Oregon. A small-town community with an even smaller center, which had a place for him. Maybe. He still needed to investigate it. Maybe it was time for a change. Maybe he was finally ready for one.

He loved St. Louis. Loved to watch the Cardinals take it out of the park and pray with everyone else that the Rams would make the Super Bowl. He sank down to the edge of the bed lost in his thoughts, picking apart a few truths. How long had it been since he'd even done something as decadent as attend a baseball game? How long had it been since he'd drawn a breath and not felt caged, pressured, and in Rebecca's case, hunted?

His eyes drifted closed as the memories came back to him of his hiking trip, so many years ago. Green firs, rushing creeks. Beautiful sunsets and gorgeous sunrises not blocked by towering skyscrapers, or hindered by the noise of life in the big city. The sweet smell of the wild country. His chest swelled as he inhaled, his thoughts reliving the moments of six years past.

He had set out again, hiking for several days after his first wayward adventure of becoming lost, but he didn't get lost again. He had purchased another compass and with food in hand, had resumed his tackling of nature.

He hadn't seen the wolf again either. *The wolf*. There it was, in his thoughts again. He shook his head in logical denial.

A white beauty of an animal that had somehow, probably, saved his life. The memory still held the feeling of unreality, a vision or a dream. He had wandered, hungry and thirsty when it had appeared almost as if from nowhere. Wolves were intelligent, but not so intelligent as to guide a human to safety when their first instinct was to avoid them if at all possible. How could a wild animal even *know* to lead him to a trailhead to begin with? He shook his head. It was an absurd mixture of unreality and vision. It had to be.

He had convinced himself as the days had passed without sighting the beautiful animal again, that he would have found the trail again on his own. Yet he'd silently admitted, at least to himself, just how far off the beaten path he had been. He could have wandered another day or two easily before he'd realized that he was going in the wrong direction. The wolf had led him nearly due east when he remembered he had stuck to south, and the distance had been immeasurable. He probably would have hit northern California before he would have found any path that would have led him back into the parklands he had intended to walk.

From somewhere deep in his memory the smell of roast rabbit entered his senses and his mouth watered, almost as if the fire was right in his room and he could simply reach out a hand to touch the warm cooked flesh, to taste it. That was the part that argued the vision theory. The wolf had killed it for him, of that he was sure. Why else would it have brought it? How else would he have even eaten? But it boggled the mind. Wolves *did not* feed humans. They did not *save* humans. He couldn't find a single explanation for what had happened that evening. Until that moment with it all crashing into his memories again so clearly, he hadn't really tried. His hand shook with a gentle tremor where it rested on his thigh. He curled his fingers, forcing restraint. Steady breaths helped to turn the memories to mist.

He hadn't spoken of it to anyone, not even to his brother whose experiences equaled his with the great outdoors. He was just as sure Mitch would've loved to pick the whole episode apart, trying to convince Bram he had imagined it all. It was the silent fear that he had dreamed it, which kept him from bringing it up.

Thinking of his younger brother made him smile. Mitchell was a character, as all the Benedetti men were and had been. Mitchell was aloof and charming but smart, a strong conscientious man who was now a firefighter, jumper qualified. At least he had been smart enough to avoid marrying the wrong woman. Janice was as much a sore spot with him, as Rebecca was for Bram. Janice had been the closest Mitch had come to the altar. Bram should've have taken his cues from his brother's reticence, but Bram married first. Just one more thing they had in common to draw them closer.

Once more in command of his thoughts, he stood from the bed to pull the zipper closed on his suitcase and found his tickets on the bed beneath the cover. He picked up the packet, holding it in his hand and realized with a touch of wonder that he had begun to smile. He was relaxed. It felt good to smile for nothing, just once in a while. His flight was early, just after six. With time zones and an unavoidable lay over, he would be arriving around eleven. It would mean a long day for him.

He wasn't entirely sure how he was looking at this yet. He had a guaranteed position in St. Louis, but since the divorce, before if he were to be honest with himself, it hadn't felt right. Not like home. Rebecca and her constant nagging didn't help any. Even with her out of the equation, it didn't change the way he felt.

Suddenly, Selene Aiza's voice echoed in his inner ear. He could hear the smile in her words, her sincere expressions. He wasn't going on vacation this time, but maybe it was time to do something besides just live day to day.

Finished, his bags waited by the door and his clock was set. As he fell asleep that night, he felt expectancy, a thrill he had been missing. He knew in his heart that whatever this offer was, whether he accepted or not, it was the beginning to something new for him. And for the first time in too long, he slept a peaceful, dreamless sleep.