

# LOST CANYON

## CHAPTER ONE

### GWEN

The picture opened on Gwen's computer, revealing a lake framed by pine trees, a backdrop of snow-covered peaks. A small stream flowed from the lake and when she looked very close, Gwen could almost see the water moving, the clouds drifting over the mountains. She imagined herself in the scene—the warm sun on her skin, the smell of pine—and felt her breathing slow, her shoulders ease. Just for a moment she forgot where she was—in a dingy building on 103rd Street in Watts.

Tracy's e-mail had come with the subject line, Cloud Lakes Trip: Last-Minute Details! Although Gwen was about to step out of the office, she couldn't resist checking the message. Besides the photo, there was a bullet-point list of food and supplies, plus directions to Tracy's house. Gwen glanced at the list and looked back at the picture; then she picked up the phone.

"Tracy Cole," came the voice on the other end. As always, she sounded focused and busy. Gwen could imagine her in her workout gear, standing arrow-straight behind the counter at the gym.

"Hey, Tracy, it's Gwen."

"Hey!" Tracy's voice was friendlier now, although she still sounded poised for action—ready to run a marathon, or break up a mugging, or hang glide off a cliff near the coast. "You got my e-mail?"

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"I did, thanks," said Gwen. "It looks like I still need a few things. A sleeping pad, extra batteries. An extra fuel canister. How much is all of this going to weigh?"

"Maybe thirty-five pounds. A piece of cake. You're not having second thoughts, are you?"

"No," Gwen assured her, although she was. What had she gotten herself into? Gwen was a city girl, born and bred—she knew chain-link fences and concrete better than rivers and trees. And she spent most of her time in South LA, where she worked for an organization that provided counseling and after-school programs for low-income kids. Although Gwen had started hiking a year and a half ago, it had all been short and local—she'd never hiked a trail more than five or six miles long, and she'd never spent the night in a tent. This trip would be unlike anything she'd ever done before—a four-day, three-night trip into the Sierra backcountry, a real wilderness experience. She imagined how the pack was going to feel on her shoulders—like carrying a child piggyback, and never putting him down. But she

needed this; she needed to do something different, to see a world that was not shaped by people. “I’m just not sure about carrying all that weight,” she said.

“You’ll be all right. Just load your pack up the next few nights and walk around the block.”

“Okay,” Gwen said doubtfully. She imagined the stares she’d get from neighbors. Backpacking had never been a part of her world. Most people she knew would think of it—if they thought of it at all—as an activity for tree-hugging granola types with excess time and money. It definitely wasn’t anything that black people did—especially not women.

Besides, all of this was easy for Tracy to say. Tracy was strong and fit—a combination of the Japanese sleek of her mother and the Idaho mountain man stock of her father. She’d been a star soccer player, an alternate for the US national team, and had followed that up with a slew of outdoor pursuits—rock climbing, mountain biking, snow-boarding—that, in Gwen’s opinion, bordered on extreme. Now she was a trainer at SportZone, a physical therapy center and gym run out of a converted warehouse downtown, and she also had private clients on the side. Gwen had met her while doing physical therapy for a hyperextended knee, which she’d hurt during a volleyball game at the company picnic. Once she graduated from PT, she’d joined the fitness classes on the other side of the gym, and Tracy was the teacher.

“You know, I have an extra sleeping pad,” Tracy said now. This trip to Cloud Lakes had, of course, been her idea. “Don’t buy one. And I’ve got fuel and most of the group gear too. Is there anything else you need?”

“No, I think I’m okay.” Gwen appreciated the offer, though. She’d borrowed the backpack and a sleeping bag from someone at work—but she’d still had to buy a head lamp, a rain jacket, some lightweight pants, not to mention a sturdy pair of hiking shoes. She wouldn’t be able to pay off her credit card bill that month, but one month of overage wouldn’t kill her. Much worse, she knew, would be to stay in the office all summer.

“Well, all right then!” Tracy said cheerfully. “I’ll see you at nine on Thursday at my place. It’s going to be beautiful, Gwen. Classic Sierra backcountry. Trust me. You’re not going to believe it.”

“I’m excited,” Gwen said. But she was nervous too. “Hey, who are the others again?”

“They’re all clients. A couple of married stock-fund managers, the Pattersons. Todd Harris, the lawyer. And Oscar Barajas, the real estate guy.”

“Don’t I know Oscar?”

“Yeah, he comes to my Tuesday morning class.”

Gwen was quiet for a minute and Tracy broke in again. “Don’t worry! They’re nice people. I wouldn’t subject you, or me for that matter, to spending four days with a bunch of assholes.”

“Okay, okay,” Gwen said, laughing. “I’ll see you on Thursday.”

After she hung up, she sat thinking for a moment. What would she have to talk about with a lawyer and two finance people? But she shook these doubts off. She needed a change of scene, a mind-frame adjustment. There’d been a lot weighing on her this last year, ever since the loss of Robert, a kid from one of her groups. Thank God for this trip. Thank God for Tracy, who made Gwen get out and do things that she would never have done on her own.

Gwen had never really been into exercise. But as she’d lifted barbells and hoisted medicine balls and trudged up the stair machine in Tracy’s class, she was amazed at how much stronger she felt. Muscles she didn’t even know she had grew sore, and then firm. Her excess pounds fell away. For the first time in her life, her body didn’t feel like an encumbrance, or an enemy. And when Tracy invited her to join her twice-monthly hikes in the local mountains, Gwen had jumped at the chance. She’d been on a few hikes with the kids from work, but this was different. There was something about Tracy’s energy, her lust for adventure and her solid belief that any new skill or pursuit could be mastered, that appealed to Gwen. She had needed that kind of optimism, especially this last year. She hoped that some of it might rub off on her.

Gwen grabbed her purse, stepped out of her office, and headed toward the entrance. The building had originally been a hospital for the mentally ill, and that’s what it still felt like. The offices, converted from bedrooms, were windowless and claustrophobic. Half the overhead lights were burned out and the rest flickered unreliably. As Gwen passed through the front lobby, she saw the crack in the ceiling that was the shape of a lightning bolt; one good shaking from an earthquake might bring the whole place down.

She walked out to her car, a ten-year-old Honda. The weather was cool and overcast even though it was summer; she thought, not for the first time, that June Gloom was especially gloomy in South LA. She drove east on 103rd Street past the old train station, past the apartments for low-income seniors, barely glancing at the Watts Towers to the right, whose curling, colorful spires usually cheered her. Beyond Wilmington the broad street narrowed as it entered an area of small, rundown bungalows and apartment buildings, which faced the public housing projects across the street.

At Lincoln High School, she showed her ID to the security guard, who waved her into the lot. Then

she walked across the concrete playground and into the ancient high school, which looked like a 1920s Department of Water and Power building that hadn't been painted since it was built. She made her way down a long hallway, past a custodial crew scrubbing curse words off the walls and graffiti from the lockers, and into the administrative office. There, she was pulled into an inner office while the secretary dug up the papers she needed to sign—the new memorandum of understanding between her agency and the school, program completion forms for some of her kids.

As she went back out to the waiting room, a group of students arrived to sign up for summer school. Two of them were black, the rest Latino, reflecting the change in the neighborhood. Just a few years ago, Watts had still been mostly African American. But last semester, in Gwen's youth leadership group at this school, she'd been the only black person in the room.

"Hey, Ms. Foster!" one of the kids called out. It was a student from the job readiness program that was run by her colleague Devon. "It's Sylvia," the girl said. "Sylvia Morales."

"Oh, hi!" Gwen answered, summoning the upbeat, caring energy she always tried to have with the kids. "I didn't realize you went here. You're a junior now, right?"

"Gonna be a senior next year," said Sylvia. She was a stocky girl, 5'8" or so, and she carried herself with a confidence that belied her surroundings. "I can't wait to get out of this mess."

"Are you coming to Devon's group at the office this summer?"

"No . . ." Sylvia said, and now she glanced back at two other kids, another Latina and a black girl, both standing with their arms crossed and looking away like there was something else they'd rather be doing. "Actually, Lupita and Dawn and I were hoping to be in one of your groups. Sandra was in your leadership group this year—Sandra Gutierrez—and she told us we should join it for sure."

"That would be great!" Gwen said, pleased in spite of herself. "Hi, Lupita. Hi, Dawn. I'm Gwen. It's wonderful to meet you. I look forward to getting to know you next fall." And just like that, facades began to crumble. Lupita blushed and mumbled hello, and Dawn met Gwen's eyes and smiled big. "Just talk to your resource coordinator," Gwen continued. "Or better yet, stop by our office and sign up with the receptionist."

"Will you be around on Thursday?" Sylvia asked. "We could come by after school."

"Actually, no. I'm taking a little vacation." \

"Really? Devon said you're always at work."

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“Only most of the time,” Gwen said, smiling. “But yeah, I’ll be gone for a couple of days. I wanted to get away.”

“Get away from all this?” Sylvia asked, striking a pose like a game show assistant. With the sweep of her arms she took in the office, the school, the neighborhood.∪

Gwen laughed and promised to see the girls the following week, and to save them spots in one of her groups. Now she remembered hearing about Sylvia from both Devon and Sandra, who’d been one of her hardest cases this year. These teens seemed so tough on the surface, but softened when you took the time to see them. Bright kids, all of them, full of potential, and as she walked back to her car, she felt cheered.∪

But as Gwen drove back toward the office by a different route, she remembered what those kids walked back into. This neighborhood felt like a bombed-out city, deserted after a war. Trash was piled everywhere. There were broken TVs and discarded tires, old mattresses, dirty clothes. Greasy food wrappers balled in gutters or fluttered away down the street. Doors and windows were covered with iron bars and particle board. The threat of crime hung in the air like a layer of smog; just last week there’d been a lockdown at the office because of a nearby shooting, and the week before, a man on a bicycle had held up two of her colleagues as they left a client’s apartment. Inglewood, where Gwen lived, had its own share of troubles. But here, it felt like there were no rules at all. You always had to be on guard working in this neighborhood. You had to be prepared for the worst.

And yet, that was exactly why Gwen liked working in Watts—because the kids here had so much stacked against them. When she kept a young boy from joining a gang; when a girl she worked with made it to college, Gwen felt a huge sense of triumph and vindication. She’d had a rocky road herself when it came to school and family. No one had really expected anything from her, and no one expected anything good from the kids she helped. They were kids that other people thought expendable.