



GOSSAMER FALLS

LAST TO FALL

LYNN H. BLACKBURN

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In memory of Donald and Juanita Phipps,
the grandparents I gained at nineteen, when I met my
husband and was immediately “adopted” into their family.
They set the standard for how to love well.
I can only pray to be like them when I grow up.

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PRESENT DAY

Whoever said blood was thicker than water hadn't known about the Pierce family.

Bronwyn Pierce could think of several people she could trust more than her own family, and one of them despised her.

But he was the one she needed now.

He would come. She knew it in a place deep in her core. Despite the pain they'd inflicted on each other for the past seventeen years, he would come.

“This is so messed up.” She muttered the words into the silence of her office, then clamped her mouth shut.

For all she knew, someone was listening.

She propped up her elbows on her desk and rested her face in her hands. Her head ached. Her heart was . . . numb. It had been bruised and beaten so often in her almost thirty-four years that even the magnitude of this current betrayal barely registered.

The light tap on her office door jolted her from her musing, and she barely stopped the scream that threatened to erupt from her throat. Who was wandering around The Haven at three in the morning?

She slid open the middle drawer of her desk and rested her left hand on the small gun she kept there. And wasn't that just a kick in the pants? She was the CEO of an exclusive resort. She prided herself on how the staff protected the celebrities, politicians, and uber-wealthy visitors who rested in blissful slumber in the elegant cabins that dotted the property. They knew no paparazzi would approach them and no one would harm them while they were here.

But she couldn't expect the same level of security for herself.

She gripped the gun.

“Ms. Pierce? Are you in there?” The deep voice of Randall, one of the night watchmen, filtered through the thick door.

“Yes. Come in.”

He eased the door open and took one step inside. “Ms. Pierce, are you okay?”

She understood the confusion on his face. She put in well over sixty hours a week, sometimes closer to eighty, but even she didn't make a habit of being in her office in the middle of the night.

“I'm fine. Thank you.” She didn't owe him an explanation, but she gave one anyway. Or part of it. “I thought of something that needed to be done on this computer.”

It was no secret that The Haven computer network carried some of the most advanced security available and that some information couldn't be accessed from remote locations. Not even by her.

“Gotcha.” Randall's tense smile sent a chill skittering across her skin. “I guess it's in the air tonight. Mr. Pierce is in his office as well.”

The chill turned into an arctic blast. “Which Mr. Pierce?”

“Nathan.”

“I see.”

Randall regarded her with an expression she couldn't decipher. Was it concern? Distrust?

“If it's all the same to you, ma'am, I'm going to stay in this area

for a bit. I'd appreciate it if you'd allow me to escort you back to your home when you're done here."

And that didn't sound ominous. Not at all.

Did he want to see her safely back to her home? Or did he want to take the opportunity to . . . what? What would he do? Surely the situation hadn't devolved to the point where physical violence was on the table.

Her home was tucked away in an unobtrusive corner of The Haven property. Out of sight of the guests and staff, and off-limits to all, but close enough for her to be available in case of emergencies. She'd always appreciated her own private haven at The Haven. But if Randall meant her harm, how long would it be before anyone found her?

She gave herself a mental shake. Randall was good people. He was looking out for her. Nothing more. She hoped.

"Sure. I'll probably be another ten minutes. I need to send a few emails."

Randall lowered his head. "In that case, I'll wait outside."

With that, he stepped back and closed the door.

Now what?

Her cousin Nathan was in his office on the other side of the property doing who knew what at 3:00 a.m. Probably plotting world domination. Or her painful death. Or both.

After she'd run away at sixteen, Nathan became the heir apparent to their family's business. He was the golden child. The future of the family. And then he managed to get himself sideways with a guest and had to hide out in Europe for a while.

While his life was spiraling out of control, Bronwyn's had come together. She finished her degree, worked in the industry in several resorts around the world, and returned to Gossamer Falls, determined to atone for her sins.

Neither she nor Nathan had expected the CEO position to ever be hers, but it was now, and she had no plans to let it go.

Her extended family had never been tight-knit. She'd grown up with competition as the name of the game. She didn't know exactly when it started, but over the past few years, the Pierces had somehow fractured into separate, warring factions. There was no trust. No love. No sense of togetherness.

Lord, how did we get here? And how do I get out of this mess?

She didn't know the answer to the first question, but she knew the answer to the second. Or, at least, she knew the first step on the path.

She twisted back to her computer and typed out an email.

With shaking fingers, she hit send, gathered her things, including her weapon, and walked out to meet Randall.

Even after close to two decades of hostility, she knew that while the one person she needed right now wouldn't speak *to* her, he *would* keep her secrets and do everything he could to keep her safe.

And there was no turning back now. She'd placed the charges and lit the fuse. Her walls were coming down. She had to trust that he'd stand with her when the last one fell.



TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS EARLIER

“Come inside and find your seats.”

Mo listened to the teacher, Mrs. Delaney, and was pleased to see that his seat was beside his sister’s. His cousin, Cal, was one row ahead of him.

The noise level grew and then quieted as everyone settled into their assigned spots.

Meredith tapped his desk, and he turned toward her. She widened her eyes and looked at the door.

Mrs. Delaney had stepped outside the classroom but kept the door open. From his seat, Mo could see her and the principal, and he could hear other voices too. When a small girl peeked around the edge of the door and into the classroom, Mo caught her eye and smiled.

She returned the smile and then her gaze flicked around the room.

“You must understand,” the principal said, “we have a small school, and this is the only kindergarten class.” She pointed to the little girl in the doorway. “If Bronwyn is to attend school here, this is where she’ll be.”

The voice that spoke next was deep and loud enough that Mo heard part of what was said. “We understand, however . . . expect you to try . . . won’t tolerate . . .”

The conversation continued for another minute and then the girl, Bronwyn, was ushered into the room by Mrs. Delaney. The adults who followed—Mo assumed they were her parents—barely said anything, but they glared at Cal. And then at Meredith.

And finally, the mom looked at him.

She glanced down at the name on his desk, then turned to Mrs. Delaney. “Just keep her away from the Quinns.”

Mrs. Delaney’s mouth got all pinched up, and she said, “My students will be expected to interact with all of their classmates, Mrs. Pierce.”

Oh.

Cal turned around in his seat, and the three of them shared a look.

This girl was a *Pierce*.

Mr. and Mrs. Pierce left the room moments later. Mrs. Delaney blew out a breath and closed the door to the classroom. When she turned back to face her students, she had a big smile on her face.

“Okay, everyone! We’re going to have a great day. Let’s start by getting to know each other. Tell us your name, your birthday, something you did this summer, and then a few of your favorite things.”

Mo knew most of his classmates from church and T-ball. He already knew their names and what they’d done this summer. But when Bronwyn introduced herself, he listened.

“Hi. My name is Bronwyn Pierce. My birthday is in October. I went to California this summer, but I didn’t get to go to the beach. My favorite color is blue, and my favorite food is shrimp tacos.”

A few kids laughed at that. Shrimp tacos? Mo had never had

anything but ground beef on a taco. He liked shrimp though. Maybe it would be good?

Bronwyn froze for a moment before she finished in a rush. “I like to swing and ride my bike, and I think I would like camping, but I’ve never been.”

She sat down, and from Mo’s seat behind her, it looked like she was breathing heavily. Cal leaned over to her and whispered, “Good job.”

She gave him a weak smile.

Mo spoke up. “Camping is fun. You’d definitely like it.”

Bronwyn turned around in her seat and grinned at him. “You think so?”

“I do.”

“Do you go camping a lot?”

“No. But we camped by a waterfall in June and roasted marshmallows and hot dogs over a fire.”

“Really?” Bronwyn’s eyes shone. “That sounds amazing.”

Mrs. Delaney cleared her throat, but not the way adults did when they were mad. “Thank you, Bronwyn.”

Mrs. Delaney wiped her eye and called on the next student. Mo decided that she looked happy about something, which was weird since she also looked like she was trying not to cry.

Adults made no sense. He didn’t think he would like to be one. But he had a long time before he had to worry about that.



PRESENT DAY

Mo looked up from his computer and glared at the door to his home. “Go away!”

Cal knocked again.

“I said go away.”

“You’re going to change your tune when I tell you why I’m here.” Cal’s voice held a challenge.

“Don’t hold your breath.”

“Are you going to let me in?”

“Let yourself in.” Mo went back to work.

The beeping on the keypad told him that Cal messed up the first time he entered the door code but got it on the second.

Mo didn’t look up from his screen as Cal entered. “You’d better have a good reason for showing up at five thirty on a Monday morning.”

“Why do you care what time it is?” Cal closed the door behind him, then leaned against it.

Mo’s tiny house didn’t leave much room for guests. Just the way he liked it.

“It’s indecent to show up—unannounced, I might add—before eight a.m. on any day of the week. It’s obscene on a Monday.”

“Says who?” Cal asked.

“Says everybody.”

Cal grunted but didn’t say anything else.

Mo ignored him and continued to type the report he’d been working on since four. When he finished his thoughts, he hit save and swiveled to face his cousin. “Why are you here?”

“I got an email from Bronwyn this morning.”

A pall of tension settled into the small space. Mo fought to keep his voice flat. “Okay.”

“Seems she’s in need of assistance.”

“And that has what to do with me?”

“Everything.”

“Explain.”

Cal pulled his phone from his pocket and handed it to Mo. “Read it for yourself.”

Mo took the phone. The email had been sent from an account that probably would have been caught in a spam filter, except he could tell that Cal had received messages from it before. “What email is this?”

“She uses it when she wants to be sure no one is reading over her shoulder.”

Metaphorically or literally? Probably both.

She’d sent the email at 3:15 a.m.

Cal had opened it around five.

Mo looked up. “Why were you awake so early?”

“Landry woke up. The baby is making it hard for her to sleep.”

“I hear they do even more of that after they’re born. I bet I’ll be able to hear her crying from here.” Mo’s tiny house was only a few hundred yards from the home Cal and Landry shared.

“Quit stalling and read the email.”

He took a deep breath although he wasn't sure why. It wasn't like sitting on his rear end and reading an email was physically taxing.

But for some reason, he had to take another deep breath before he focused on the screen.

Cal,

Things aren't good, and I need help. The kind of help that, oh, say, a super trustworthy forensic accountant could provide. If he should be available . . . and willing.

Could you determine the availability and willingness of someone like that?

I'm sorry to put you in the middle again, and I'm sorry to ask for his help, but I genuinely don't know where else to go. If he could give me just a little bit of time and tell me if I'm seeing things, or if it's a real issue, then I'd be happy to hire someone he recommends to finish the job.

I'm planning to swing by your office around 9:00 a.m.

Beep

Mo read it again. Then a third time. Then he forwarded it to his personal email and handed the phone to Cal.

Cal slid the phone into his back pocket. "So, I guess I'll see you at nine, then."

Mo didn't respond immediately. Would he go?

Bronwyn had frozen him out years earlier, and he deserved it. He'd been ready to leave the past behind them and move on for a while. Clearly she wasn't.

But she'd come to him.

Sort of.

"I'll think about it."

Cal opened the door and walked outside. “You’re both being idiots.”

“What’s new?” Mo asked the empty space.

Cal stuck his head back in. “For starters? She asked for your help. That’s new.”

[REDACTED]

At 8:55 a.m. Mo walked into Cal’s office at SPQ Construction. “Morning, Carla.”

Carla Shaw was technically his cousin-in-law, but she was practically the big sister he’d never had and was one of his favorite people.

Carla came around the reception desk. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

He opened his arms, and she walked into them.

“I’ve been needing a Mo hug.” She squeezed him close before she stepped back. She tilted her head toward the back of the office. “She’s already here.”

He’d seen Bronwyn’s car in the parking lot, but he appreciated the warning. “Thanks.”

Carla rose on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to Mo’s cheek. “I have faith that you two will sort yourselves out.”

“From your lips to God’s ears.” The phrase was a common one, but Mo meant every word. He’d been praying all morning, but he would take all the help he could get. So far, all he was sure God was telling him was to show up today. After that? God hadn’t seen fit to enlighten him.

Carla patted his arm, and he walked to Cal’s office. The door was open. Cal stood at the window. Bronwyn sat at the table Cal used when he needed to go over architectural drawings with clients. Her long dark hair fell halfway down her back in waves of almost

black with a hint of red that he knew wasn't natural. The cut was slightly different from the last time he'd seen her, but he liked the new look. It highlighted her sharp cheekbones.

Her dark brown eyes were in sharp contrast to his sister Meredith's bright blue. Meredith sat beside Bronwyn and looked up when Mo entered. "'Bout time you got here."

He glanced at his watch. "I'm early."

"On time is late for you."

Mo ignored that remark. "What are you doing here?"

Meredith shrugged. "Cal called me."

Bronwyn turned a ferocious glare on Cal. "I'm not sure why."

Cal gave her a beatific smile. "Because we're a team. You're in trouble. We're going to help you. End of discussion."

Bronwyn fumed. "Mer's soon-to-be husband is the police chief. Did it not occur to you that perhaps I didn't loop her in for a reason?"

"Beep, we love you. Stop complaining. We're here." Cal took a seat across from her. "What's going on?"

Mo took that as his cue to join them at the table. He slid into the remaining chair and studied the intricate woodburned surface. And then he waited.

Bronwyn hadn't said a word directly to him in years, but they'd gotten pretty good at sharing the same space and participating in the same conversations. Maybe one day she'd mess up and speak to him.

Although he had a feeling that today was not that day.



Bronwyn stared at the top of the table. In her periphery, she could see Mo's hands. His long fingers were clasped together, and every few seconds he tapped his thumbs against each other.

He'd done that a lot when they were younger. It was his "ready for anything" posture.

Meredith bumped her elbow. "Bronwyn?"

How long had she been studying Mo's hands? Her face heated, and she pinched her lips together. "Sorry. I'm not sure where to start."

Cal leaned back in his seat. "Why don't you start with what made you send that email? What triggered that?"

Bronwyn slumped forward until her forehead rested on the table. "I don't know if I can do this." These three people were—or had been at one time, when including Mo—her best friends. They'd been with her through everything. Everything she'd allowed them to, anyway.

Why was this so hard?

"What if we discuss what we already know?" Mo's voice was low and gravelly. "For example, we know that Steven's arrest for drug trafficking—"

"Don't forget murder," Meredith cut in. "Oh, and kidnapping."

Bronwyn lifted her head in time to catch Mo giving his sister a look she'd seen hundreds of times. It was the "you're lucky that I love you so much because I also find you exceptionally annoying" look.

"Yes, Bronwyn's cousin's illegal and immoral actions have brought The Haven under unwanted scrutiny. What else do we know?"

Meredith chimed in again. "Some of Beep's uncles and cousins want to make The Haven a more prominent resort, possibly removing some of the safeguards that have kept it in the 'secret gem' category for so long."

"And those actions would undoubtedly have a negative impact on the residents of Gossamer Falls." Cal drummed his fingers on the table. "The whole Pierce/Quinn feud began over fears of this

happening, but Bronwyn has always maintained that growing The Haven that way would be a disaster for both The Haven and the community.”

How far would they make it before she had to explain anything?

Mo’s low voice filled the space. “My question would be what has changed recently that caused Bronwyn to reach out? What has she seen in the files that makes her think she needs a forensic accountant? And let’s not forget that she sent that email in the middle of the night, which would lead one to wonder if something specific happened yesterday or early this morning. That’s the real reason we’re all sitting around this table and might explain why she has goosebumps on her arms even though it’s not cold in this room.”

Bronwyn looked at her traitorous appendages. Sure enough, the chill she thought was metaphorical had popped out on her skin.

Meredith leaned against her arm. “Spill. We won’t judge.”

“I’m . . .” Bronwyn closed her eyes and fought against the moisture building there. “I’ve had concerns for a while, but last night, I wondered if my own security team would turn on me. The fear . . .” Her mouth went dry at the remembered panic. “I found some things that don’t make sense to me in several of our accounts. I’m no slouch when it comes to accounting, but I can’t find what’s wrong, but something is. I know our business, inside and out. I have an innate sense of how much things cost, where the money goes, et cetera. And something isn’t right, but for the life of me, I can’t find it. Or why it’s happening. What’s the end goal? Is someone embezzling funds? That would be bad enough, but it wouldn’t be the end of the world. We can find out what’s going on, put a stop to it, and move on. But this doesn’t look like embezzlement to me. I just can’t figure out what it is.”

She stopped talking and glanced at the three Quinn cousins who were more family to her than her own flesh and blood. “And

you're right. The pressure to grow, expand, and ultimately make more money is intense.”

“How intense?” Cal asked.

“The board is looking over my shoulder and questioning every decision. One of my uncles is getting close to the point of micro-managing a few things that he doesn't need to be worried about. You all know that I've sensed an internal movement to force me out of my position for a while. I still can't prove it, and I realize that feelings aren't facts but . . .” She trailed off and wished she'd never sent that email. It sounded so ridiculous when she said everything out loud.

Mo's voice cut through her inner chastisement. “In my experience some people ignore their feelings when they should listen to them. It's true that feelings can't be used in a court of law, but that doesn't mean they don't have value. Sometimes we know things with our feelings before our brain catches up and supplies the facts to explain them.”

Bronwyn couldn't make herself look at Mo, but she wished she could throw herself at him and tell him thank you. He'd always understood her better than anyone else. Sometimes better than she understood herself. How was it possible that now, years later, he still had the words to express her emotions?

Meredith nodded in agreement. “Bronwyn has always been the most intuitive of us. I'd forgotten that. But if she's picking up on something hinky, it's there.”

“I can't accuse anyone of hinky behavior, Meredith.”

“No.” Cal narrowed his eyes at her. “You'll need proof. And that's why you need Mo.” He turned his attention to Mo. “Can you evaluate her accounts and find what's got her spooked?”

Mo nodded slowly. “The Haven's system is solid. Unless things have changed, the main computers are on a private, hardwired network.”

“We’ve stayed at the forefront of cybersecurity. We’ve had to.” Bronwyn tapped her phone. “We have cell phones, and they have Wi-Fi, but I’m the CEO and even I can’t access our records unless I’m in my office or the accounting office. We guard our guests’ privacy. Those records include extremely personal data that could, in some cases, ruin careers if they got out.”

“So what you’re saying is that in order for Mo to check out your system, he’d physically have to be on-site.” Cal walked over to his desk and grabbed a thermos. “That might be difficult to explain.”

“Not really.” Meredith grinned.

“How would you do it?” Mo asked Meredith.

“Simple, really. We all pay Bronwyn a visit. She always comes to us so this time, we go to her. We hang out for a while. And maybe while we’re there, she asks Cal to look at something in her office.” Meredith grinned at Bronwyn. “Didn’t you tell me the other day that you wanted a new desk setup and you were hoping someone would help you with that? Like, someone who does beautiful custom work? A local craftsman?”

Bronwyn hadn’t expected to laugh today, but she did now. “Did I say that?” She’d never said anything of the sort.

“Well, you haven’t yet. But you will before we leave today. Then we’ll all traipse over there. Mo will come along because even though he’s always sitting at a computer and needs to be out in the sun more, he does have some woodworking skills. Then we’ll all go in your office.”

“And while you’re there . . .” Bronwyn could see it.

Mo held up a hand. “For the record, the kind of work I do doesn’t get done in a few minutes. This isn’t TV. Real-life investigations take time. Hours and hours of time.”

“But does it take hours and hours to copy a hard drive?” Cal asked.

Mo narrowed his eyes. “No.”

“So, we go in, and you duplicate everything on the computer and put it on something portable. You bring it back home and work on it. Problem solved.” Cal brushed his nails against his shirt. “That was easy. Why didn’t you think of that on your own?”

“Yeah.” Meredith grinned. “All these years of supposedly being the smart one on the team and you can’t come up with something so elementary. You’re slipping, bro.”

Mo looked at the sky. Bronwyn could almost hear him thinking, *Lord, grant me patience.*

“Would that work?” Bronwyn asked the question to the group even though she knew Mo was the only one who could answer.

“If we did that, it would still take me several days to go through it. And if I find something”—Mo glanced at Meredith—“hinky, then I would need to access more files. Eventually, I’d need to be on-site again. And I don’t think I heard Bronwyn address the issue of her physical safety earlier. Did any of you? Because if she’s already concerned about that, having me show up and start poking around is going to throw fuel on the fire.”

Three pairs of blue Quinn eyes settled on Bronwyn.

She broke. “I’m so scared. Maybe it’s all in my head, but I think someone might try to kill me.”



FOUR

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS EARLIER

“Can Bronwyn come?” Eight-year-old Mo Quinn looked at his mom and did his best to be adorable.

His mom’s face fell. “Sweetheart, I wish she could, but I don’t know . . .”

“Her parents aren’t even going to be home.”

“Where will they be?”

“New York. They travel a lot.”

“Yes, they do.” She sounded sad. “I would have her here in a heartbeat, but . . .”

Mo was willing to beg. He wouldn’t do it for just anyone, but for Bronwyn, he’d do anything. He wanted her at his birthday party. “Can we at least try?”

“I’ll talk to your father.”

That was the best he could hope for. “Thank you, Mama.”

“You’re welcome. Now go find Cal and do something outside.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He tried to find his cousin. He ran over to Cal’s house and knocked on the door, but no one answered. Meredith was spend-

ing the day shadowing the town dentist because she was weird that way.

He rode his bike to Papa and Granny Quinn's house. Granny and Aunt Minnie were getting ready to go into town, so one quick phone call to his mama later, he joined them.

"What's got you so down today?" Granny asked as they made the drive into town.

Mo shrugged.

"That wasn't an answer, young man."

Mo looked out the window. "I want Bronwyn to come to my birthday party."

"I see." Somehow, when Granny said that, Mo believed she really did. Granny was old but smart. And she was nice. But she didn't put up with nonsense.

"Did you send her an invitation?" Granny waved at someone as they drove by.

"Mama said we could, but she said Bronwyn's parents might not let her come."

"Your mama's smart."

"She is."

"Why do you want her to come to your party so much? Are there going to be any other girls there?"

So maybe Granny wasn't quite as smart as Mo had thought. "She's my best friend, Granny. Of course I want her there. And Meredith will be there. Besides, Bronwyn's not like other girls."

"She isn't?"

"No."

"What's different about her?"

Mo stared at Granny for a few seconds. He had to think of how to say it. "She's not annoying. Most girls are."

"I see."

Mo looked at Granny and caught a weird look on her face.

“Well, it’s completely understandable why you’d want her at your party,” she said. “Maybe her parents will say yes. And if not, I might have to make a phone call or two.”

Three days later, Bronwyn ran up to Mo. “My mom and dad said they didn’t care if I came to your party, but your mom will have to come pick me up and take me back home since they won’t be home. Do you think she would?”

Mo didn’t have to think about it. “Yes!”