

CHAPTER I:
Of Cabbages and Kings

“ . . . more things in heaven and earth . . . than are dreamt of . . . ”
— William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

Gwen Alton clenched her knees together, an involuntary reflex to the butterflies in the pit of her stomach as the 767 lifted off Kennedy’s runway. Then she took a deep breath. As the altitude increased, her spirits soared.

Eight hours to Barcelona, an overnight flight. If I can sleep, I’ll wake up in Spain.

But try as she might, she couldn’t rest. Too many thoughts crowded her mind. She lifted the window shade, hoping to see the last of Manhattan’s lights, but already their flight was over the Atlantic. All she saw through the port window was her reflection.

Mirror, mirror . . .

Shoulder-length blond hair framing her face, hazel eyes stared back. She smiled her signature half smile, cynical, suspicious. Even in the dim light, her left eyebrow rose quizzically in a perpetual look of skepticism. She laughed at herself.

Story of my life. Take nothing at face value. Maybe that’s why I went into photojournalism. Through a camera’s lens, the focal point’s clear. I can see what’s real.

As she closed the shade, her engagement ring flashed in the dim light. Its glimmering twinkle captured her attention. She turned her hand this way and that, staring, mesmerized by its sparkle, by its significance.

Art. She took a deep breath, recalling. *Was that only two hours ago?*



“You really didn’t have to drive me to the airport.” Gwen watched him maneuver through rush hour traffic. “I know you’re busy with that conference call tonight.”

“Glad to do it.”

She tried once more. “I could’ve taken a cab.”

Art took his eyes off the traffic long enough to give her a benevolent smile.

“You’re going to be gone ten days. I wanted to see you off.”

“You could’ve said goodbye after the two o’clock—”

“Privately.” Again he glanced at her, an amused glint in his eye. “Not in front of the publications team.”

She snickered as she glanced out the window. Grand Central Parkway was at a crawl.

“Traffic’s heavy. For a change.”

“Why don’t we stop for dinner, wait until it subsides?”

“At this rate, we’ll probably get to the airport at the same time.” Gwen gave him a nod. “Good idea.”

A half hour later, they were seated in front of a roaring fireplace at a table for two.

“Since you’re going to Spain, why not begin your journey right here with a Spanish sparkling wine?”

“Sounds great.”

He turned toward the waiter. “We’ll start with Cava.” Then he turned back to her, gentle eyes glowing warmly in the firelight.

She loved it when he gave her his full attention. No one else ever had. She studied his face. Light-brown eyes, thick eyebrows, cropped dark hair, pointed ears, as if he was always alert, always listening to her. Always watching out for her.

She took a deep breath. *I feel safe with him.*

“So you’re determined to make this pilgrimage?” he said.

“I am.”

“Even in late October?”

“It’s the only way to combine the Christmas in Barcelona with the *Camino de Compostela* stories. And don’t worry about the weather. It’s not like I’m crossing

the Pyrenees. Besides, I'll be staying in posadas, not sleeping in albergues or hostels." She held up her cell. "Plus, I'll be in touch daily."

"We could've let another photojournalist take this assignment."

"This fit in perfectly with my schedule." Smiling, she shook her head. "Actually, it's something I feel compelled to do. What's ironic is how things fell into place."

He watched her, a hint of a smile playing at his lips. "Isn't it, though?"

His tone perked her ears. "What do you mean?"

"Your Cava, sir," said the waiter, bringing a chilled bottle in an ice bucket. He opened it with a flourish, presented the cork, and poured a taste.

"Perfect." Art took the bottle from him. "Thanks, I'll pour."

"Are you ready to order yet?"

"Give us a few minutes, would you?"

As the waiter left, Art filled their glasses.

"What did you mean about the schedule?" She stared pointedly at him.

The hint of a smile morphed into a sheepish grin. "Since you were set on taking this pilgrimage, I talked the editorial department into making it a paid assignment. We'll incorporate your Camino story in one of the spring issues and your Christmas story in next year's December issue."

Gwen sat back in her chair, scrutinizing him. "I should've known things dovetailed too smoothly." She pursed her lips, pretending to be annoyed, but found herself grinning with him. "So you arranged it?"

He shrugged and then held up his glass. "To dual purposes converging."

She raised her eyebrow and nodded. "I like that." Clinking her glass against his, she toasted.

As she tipped her glass, she noticed movement in her peripheral vision. He slowly slid something across the table toward her. She set down her glass and stared at the purple, velvet box. Then narrowing her eyes, she examined him.

"What's this?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Look."

She crinkled her forehead as she mentally debated. Slowly, she reached for the box and opened its lid. Nestled in velvet was the largest diamond she had ever seen.

"What do you think you're doing?" She peered up at him through long lashes.

"What do you think?"

"Will you stop with the questions and give me a straight answer?"

“Will you?”

Gwen shook her head as she dipped her chin, chuckling at his forensics. She fingered the box, thinking.

He's a good guy. I like him, respect him, even admire him . . . but love him?

As he took her hand in his, he drew her back to the moment, forcing her to concentrate.

“We’ve been dating nearly a year now, exclusively for the past few months. Don’t you think it’s time we took it to the next level?”

She swallowed, recalling how her cube mate, Suzanne, had summed him up. “He’s only the CEO of a publishing empire, not to mention editor in chief of *Trails n’ Treks Publications*.” Suzanne had given her a sly wink. “You could do worse than Arthur Pendred.”

Then Art stared at her with his full intensity, his expressive, light-brown eyes homing in on hers, engaging her. “You know how I feel about you.”

Deep into unfamiliar territory, she smiled uncertainly. Flattered, her reservations began slipping away like bad dreams in the morning light.

He smiled back, his eyes crinkling into his characteristic smile lines.

He's so appealing when he looks at me that way. Cocking her head to the side, she did a double take. *And he reminds me of someone. Who?*

“I think we can make a go of it.” With his other hand, Art took the ring from its case and slid it on her finger. “I want you to know I’m here for you.” He kissed her fingertips. “Wear this until you come back, until we make . . . a more permanent commitment.”

Normally not shy about speaking her mind, Gwen remained silent. She blinked back unexpected tears, gripped by dueling emotions. For twelve years, she had struggled to prove she could make a success of herself. On her own, no family, no husband to help. It had been lonely, daunting.

Now realizing what she meant to Art, she was equally beguiled and baffled. She loved him, but as a friend.

Is that enough? He understands me, accepts me for who I am, but shouldn't I feel more?



Was that only two hours ago?

She pulled the plane’s blanket around herself and, fluffing the tiny pillow, turned away from the window. She found herself nose-to-nose with a snoring

woman, leaning into her space. With a gasp, Gwen sat up straight, now wide awake. After switching on the overhead light, she reached in her bag for her iPad.

Might as well get a head start on the article, jot down my thoughts since I can't sleep.

Instead of the iPad, her hand connected with the brochure. Even before she pulled it into the light, she knew it by its shiny texture and dog-eared corners.

I ought to recognize it. I've handled it enough these past two weeks.

She reread the *Peregrino-Paths* brochure for the hundredth time since she had discovered it in her father's lockbox.

Dad . . .

She recalled her father visiting her in Manhattan two weeks after her mother had passed away. He had told her about renewing an acquaintance with an old friend, that he was flying to Florida to visit her.

"You're eighteen now. I won't interfere in your life, so don't interfere in mine."

She had been dumbstruck. Still reeling from her mother's unexpected death, she suddenly found herself a virtual orphan in Manhattan.

She remembered two weeks later, a month after her mother's death, when he had invited her to his wedding in New Jersey. From the start of his second marriage, Gwen had been *persona non grata*.

Barely civil at the ceremony, his new wife, Milly, hung up if Gwen called and banned her from visiting his house, the home where she had grown up. Even when her father had phoned her, the calls were stilted, with Milly breathing heavily into the extension.

This had continued for two years, until one night her father called her, inviting her to Thanksgiving dinner. Although surprised, Gwen had accepted, hoping relationships were finally beginning to warm.

Then, the night before Thanksgiving, he had called, stammering, his breathing jagged. "The plans have changed. I . . . uhm . . . instead of your coming to New Jersey for dinner, why don't I stop by your apartment for a late supper Thursday night?"

Her jaw dropped. Blinking, she tried to wrap her mind around what her father was saying.

"You're calling the night before Thanksgiving to uninvite me?"

"No . . . uhm . . . I . . . uh . . ." His speech stiff, he stuttered.

"Milly's listening in, isn't she? I can tell by your voice." Gwen scoffed. "You're afraid to call me, let alone invite me to your house. You don't let me visit you,

and Milly hangs up if I call you. You make me feel like the 'other woman.' This isn't a family. It's a farce."

She listened to him slam the receiver. Her chest heaving, Gwen stood there, phone in hand, vowing never to speak to him again.

Ten years passed. Then her aunt Irene had called.

"Your father's been diagnosed with cancer and wants to see you."

Though dreading the reunion, she drove to New Jersey that same morning. Walking into the house that had been her home for the first eighteen years of her life was like seeing an old friend. One she had missed for the past twelve years. The memories of her mother, of her childhood, overwhelmed her. Then she saw her father's second wife, glaring at her from the sofa.

No welcome, no hello. Instead, cigarette in hand, Milly thumbed her nose at her.

Silently fuming, Gwen strode past her toward her father's bedroom.

"Not there!" Milly gestured to what had been her bedroom. "There."

The door was open. Tapping on its frame, Gwen tentatively entered the small room. Intended to hold a single bed, it was cluttered with oversized furniture.

What a cramped life Milly's allowed him. She looked at her father, grayer, more grizzled than she remembered. He needed a shave, but his hazel eyes still had their twinkle.

"Hi."

He looked up. "Glad you could come. Sorry I can't get up."

Her jaw fell open. *Is he that ill?* She swallowed, trying to regain her composure.

"Don't worry, stay where you are. I'll come around where you can see me better." She stepped sideways, squeezing between the chest of drawers and double bed.

"Pull up a seat."

She looked around. The only chair was half tucked under the desk, the space too cramped to pull it out and turn it toward the bed.

"That's all right. I'll just stand." She struggled for something to say. "How do you feel?"

"Considering the doctor diagnosed it as lung cancer, I—"

Voices arguing in the next room drowned out his words.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?"

Shoes tapping on the linoleum, a toddler ran into the room and climbed on the bed. Gwen saw Milly's gray head peek around the door.

“This is Alice, Milly’s granddaughter,” he said.

Gwen grimaced. *Not even a moment’s privacy. What else can Milly steal?*

Speaking loudly for Milly’s benefit, she purposely turned her head toward the door. “I couldn’t hear what you said. So how are you feeling?”

When she turned back, she saw her father was reaching for his characteristic cigarettes and lighter.

He gave her a sheepish smile. “I was trying to quit.” He shrugged as he lit up. “But what’s the point of stopping now?”

The fumes of his lighter and cigarette brought back unwelcome memories. She suddenly felt nauseous.

“How old are you?”

She cocked her head as she studied him. *How could he forget the age of his only child?*

“I’ll be thirty, two weeks from today, on Father’s day.”

Grunting in bewilderment, he shook his head. Then his eyes fixed on the toddler. “Seems like only yesterday you were her age.”

From the other room came the sound of a vacuum cleaner starting up. The decibel level rose as it approached and then entered the tiny bedroom.

“Don’t mind me,” a woman shouted over its roar. “I can work around you.”

As the woman pushed the vacuum closer to her, Gwen had no alternative but to sit on the bed and lift her feet. There was no room to move, nowhere to go.

“Are you still living in Manhattan?” he shouted over the vacuum’s drone.

She nodded. “Same eastside apartment for the past ten years.”

“Come again?”

Repeating, Gwen shouted her words.

Finally, the woman worked her way out of the room. Still the vacuum roared in the background.

“Maybe you’d like to see my apartment? I’d be happy to pick you up, if you like.”

With the vacuum droning in the next room, a sharp rap at the door caught their attention. Gwen recognized her father’s half brother Ed from another of her paternal grandmother’s marriages.

“Clark, how ya’ doing?” Then he fixed a stern eye on her. “Who do we have here? Gwen? Is that you? High time you visited your dad!”

“It’s the first time I’ve been inv-”

“Who’s this?” asked Ed’s wife, squeezing past him. Then she looked from Gwen to the toddler and back again. “Is this your little girl? Did you have a baby?”

“No, that’s my granddaughter,” said Milly from the doorway. “Who’s hungry? I’ve got sloppy joes in the kitchen.”

Bantering with Milly, Ed and his wife filed out. Gwen sighed. *Maybe now we can talk.*

The toddler picked up the lighter and began clicking its top, trying to light it.

“Alice, no.” Clark took it from her.

“Clark, you ready for lunch?” called Milly from the door.

“Well . . .” He looked sheepishly at Gwen. “I . . . uh . . . uhm . . .”

She recognized the labored breathing. He was afraid to speak in front of his wife.

Milly gave him a stern look. “I’ll bring your sloppy joe.”

As his wife left the doorway, he sucked hard at his cigarette.

The woman who had vacuumed brought in a paper plate. “Alice, here’s your lunch. Don’t spill it on the covers.” She stood by the bed, arms crossed, eyes narrowed, scrutinizing their every gesture, openly listening to their every word.

Gwen leveled her eyes at her father. “Nothing’s changed, has it?”

“You see how it is,” he said quietly.

Handing him her card, she stood up. “Maybe we could talk another time?”

“Yes.” He nodded enthusiastically. “Yeah, that would be better. Much better. I’ll call you.”

Milly pushed past Gwen and slapped a paper plate into Clark’s hands. “Here’s your sloppy joe. Eat it while it’s hot.” She gave Gwen a pointed look as she stood between them, arms crossed. “Don’t let your lunch get cold.”

When the phone rang a few days later, Gwen knew it was her father, even without waiting for Caller ID.

“Gwen?”

She tried to keep all emotion out of her voice. “Yeah.” It had been a long drive back to Manhattan, and she had had time to do a lot of thinking. “Doesn’t it bother you that your second wife won’t let us talk?”

“She thinks you’re trying to change my will.”

“What?” Disgusted, she counted to five. “Is that the same reason she’s hung up on me every time I’ve called?”

“No, she . . . she said you hung up on her every time she answered.”

She shook her head at the lack of logic. *Why try? Reason isn't possible.* Gwen took a deep breath. "Why did you call?"

"You left so early, I wanted to talk to you."

"Left?" Closing her eyes, she exhaled, trying to blow off steam. "You mean your wife drove me out."

"Things got hectic when Ed and his wife appeared."

She heard the click of his lighter as he lit a cigarette and then closed the lighter against his thigh, as she'd seen him do a thousand times. She listened to him inhale.

Enervating. That's the word. He drains me emotionally.

Again she counted to five. "When I was eighteen, two weeks after Mom died, you made it clear. You wouldn't interfere in my life, and you didn't want me interfering in yours."

"You see how it is."

"This is the life you chose. *You* chose, no input from me for the past twelve years." She took a deep breath. "Our visit today was a sad joke. We were constantly interrupted, watched, never allowed to talk."

"Well, it's too late to change the way things are."

"You seem to think that's acceptable. It's not. The way we communicate isn't normal. I can't visit or even call you."

"We're talking now."

"Only because you called me."

"What difference does it make who called who? The fact is, we're talking." His tone brightening, he wheedled. "You don't mind, do you?"

She recognized that tone of voice, and it irked her. It was really a statement, not a question, as if her feelings were irrelevant. She breathed shallowly, remembering all the band competitions and photo exhibitions he had missed, even her high school graduation, and always with the same words. "You don't mind, do you?" He had always had something more important to attend. Something had always taken precedence over her.

"Yes, I do mind. In fact, I don't like it one bit."

"Remember who you're talking to. I'm your father!"

She remembered that tone, too. He had always used that authoritarian voice to command her attention. *Father.* Though biologically true, the term was ludicrous. It curdled her blood.

“You don’t act like a father. You don’t treat me like a daughter. I feel like the red-haired bastard at the family picnic.” She pressed her fingers to her temples, trying to stave off the sudden headache. “I wish you well. I truly hope you recover and live a long life, but after twelve years of this farce, I don’t see the point in perpetuating the myth that we’re family.”

Two weeks later, on Father’s Day, her thirtieth birthday, her aunt Irene called again.

“Florida Floozy just called. Your father’s in the ICU.”

Gwen froze. Of course, she’d known the day would come. Since her mother’s passing twelve years before, she had lived in dread of the moment the other shoe would fall. Especially since his second marriage, after they had become estranged, she had shrunk from the thought.

Two weeks ago, his death had not seemed imminent. He had aged, but he had not looked like a man with two weeks to live.

Wounded pride. She took a deep breath. At the time, it had seemed more important to stand up for herself, but now? Now that the time had arrived, it was hard to accept.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes, I . . . I . . . did she say how he’s doing?”

“Remember who we’re talking about? *Mil-dread*, the Florida Floozy.”

Mil-dread, the Florida Floozy, her aunt’s nickname for her father’s second wife. Gwen’s nostrils pinched as she inhaled sharply.

“Did she have anything else to say?”

“Just that he’s on life support, ‘if anyone cares.’” Irene blew a derisive snort. “Trailer trash to the end.”

Gwen immediately called Art. “An emergency’s come up. My father’s in the hospital, and I have to leave work.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

The concern in his voice broke through her shell of regrets and resentments. *He’s here for me.* As his words resonated with her, she took a deep breath, feeling reenergized.

“No, this is something I have to do alone,” adding in a shy whisper, “but I really appreciate your asking.”

In that instant, a thousand thoughts had jumbled through her mind. The only two men in her life, Art had never met her father. She’d only recently started dating Art seriously, and she had not seen or spoken with her father in twelve

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years, other than the awkward visit and his follow-up phone call two weeks prior. Art's place in her life suddenly took on deeper significance.

The plane's turbulence jolted Gwen back to the present. Roused from her thoughts, she stretched and yawned. Then her eyes fell on the brochure in her hands. Remembering the first time she had seen it, she smiled, recalling happier times in third grade, coin collecting.