
Chapter 1

Washington State, 1908

Papa's pride and joy, a 1903 Cadillac runabout, popped and jumped and rumbled along the road. Early-morning sunshine glinted off the brass of the headlamps. Overhead, unfathomably ancient fir trees made a cathedral ceiling with glimpses of deep blue sky between the branches. Bounced and jostled against the luxurious black leather of the seats, Augie reflected that the weather was not cooperating with her mood.

Gathering purple-black storm clouds. Hail. Pouring rain. Darkness. Any or all of the above would complement Augusta Ackermann's sour heartsickness, unlike this insipid sunshine, these playful zephyrs, the timid pale purple harebell blossoms peeping out to greet the sun. Insufferable, all of it. Augie harrumphed.

"What was that?" Papa asked over his shoulder as he steered his beloved runabout down the road.

Augie sighed, and then grumbled, "Nothing, Papa."

"Nothing?"

Eighteen-year-old Augie rolled her eyes. “I’m just a little sad.”

Papa shook his shaggy head. Whether the shake of the head was in sympathy or annoyance or some combination of the two, Augie couldn’t say. He took a deep breath, opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it and closed his mouth. They puttered onward without speaking.

Bees buzzed by. From the bushes, a doe and her fawns watched Augie and her father rumble past. Out here in the Lakes District, southwest of the city, the air smelled of flowers and greenery. Yes, it was beautiful. But would wildflowers and cool green trees and the gentle lapping of wavelets on the rocky lakeshore comfort an aching heart?

Augie’s heart was, at that moment, an open wound.

“Here we are,” Papa said with forced jollity. As much as Augie resented her parents’ bafflement at her recent heartsickness, and as much trepidation as they expressed when she told them she wanted to spend the summer at Uncle Philip’s summer cottage if he’d let her, she knew Papa and Mama only wanted her to be well and contented. If a summer as a cottage-dwelling recluse was what it would take to get their formerly blithe and energetic Augusta back to her old self, well, then Gus and Matilda Ackermann would do what they could to help.

Papa parked the runabout. Augie remained in place in the back seat of the open car, taking in the sight of Uncle Philip’s cottage and the lake beyond. She hadn’t seen the site until now but had burned with curiosity ever since Phil announced at Christmas that he’d bought himself a lot on Rau Lake. *A sweet little cottage on the shores of a lake, with one’s own beach and lots of old trees and ferns and things—how lovely*, Augie had thought as the family shared sugared nuts and spiced plums and their cook Ann’s famous Christmas punch.

When Geoffrey broke her heart, just two weeks ago, one of the first coherent thoughts to emerge from the maelstrom of

disbelief and sorrow was, *if I can escape to the lake and be alone for a while, maybe I can recover myself.*

Uncle Philip, sleeves rolled to his elbows and red suspenders on display, lounged on the porch of his recently completed cottage. He looked hale and hearty, calm and happy to greet his brother and niece. As Papa hopped out of the runabout to retrieve Augie's trunks, Philip waved and caroled a greeting.

"Ahoy there, Gus!"

"Phil," Papa huffed. The exertion of freeing Augie's trunks from the straps that held them in place at the back of the car was reddening his face and throwing Augustus Ackermann's gray hair into greater-than-usual disarray. A thorn of guilt pricked at Augie's heart. She should help her father.

Uncle Phil intercepted Augie before she could exit the runabout. Gallantly, her uncle offered a hand to help her down.

"Thank you," Augie murmured.

Philip tipped his imaginary hat and winked at Augie, just as he'd done when she was a girl and they'd share a joke over Christmas pudding. The kindness of her parents and her uncle was overwhelming, so much so that Augie felt herself to be a wretched thing, selfish and unlovable. But she managed a small smile of gratitude.

A brief expression of concern showed that Phil noted the change in his niece's demeanor. He was too much the gentleman to comment on it, which Augie appreciated. Perhaps when Papa and Mama spoke to Philip about the possibility of Augie's tenancy in his brand-new cottage for the summer they had explained the situation with Geoffrey, and Uncle Philip wanted to treat the subject delicately.

Geoffrey.

The simple act of recalling that once-sacred name brought a tremble to Augie's lip and a burning tear to her eye. She took a deep breath and tried to be brave. "How are you, Uncle?"

"Quite well, youngster. And yourself?"

Augie looked at the ground. "As well as can be expected, given the circumstances."

Papa, huffing and puffing, called to his brother. "Phil! A hand, please?"

Augie watched numbly as her father and uncle maneuvered her two trunks from the Cadillac to the cottage. She knew there were only three rooms: a tiny sitting room, a tiny simple kitchen and a teeny-tiny bedroom. Her trunks might take up half the space in the bedroom, but that was all right. She'd brought her bathing costume, hoping that by midsummer her heart would heal sufficiently to allow her to enjoy a little swim in Rau Lake, and a few other articles of practical clothing. Most of the rest of Augie's luggage consisted of books and writing materials.

The morning had been cool, but as midday drew closer the day was growing warm. Philip invited Augustus and Augie to share his lunch. They would dine together in the miniature kitchen before he and Papa departed, leaving Augie to the cottage, the lake, the fir trees and her wounded heart.

Papa and Uncle Philip joked and chatted, catching up on family gossip and business news. Phil sliced a lovely kielbasa and fried it up with onions and sauerkraut on a stove so small as to look like a toy, especially with a big man like Philip Ackermann looming over it. Apples, cheese, a hunk of brown bread plus onions, sauerkraut, and sausage made a simple, nourishing meal. If only Augie had an appetite.

She picked at the food while her father and uncle conversed, and it was an odd relief to be near them but to be left out of the conversation. Company without the demands of polite participation was soothing. At length, the food was eaten and the men leaned back in their simple, rustic chairs and sighed contentedly. Even through the fog of her grief Augie found herself nearly smiling to see the two men so similar, so obviously brothers.

Philip and Gus exchanged glances.

Uncle Philip cleared his throat. "So, my youngster, you're

quite sure you'll be safe and sound in the cottage? Alone? All summer?" He studied her with an expression of friendly skepticism.

Augie couldn't manage direct eye contact so she gazed out the kitchen window to the lake beyond. The lake was still as glass, untroubled and serene. She remembered the name, *Rau*, meant rough, referred not to turbulence of water, but to the jagged rocks and boulders lurking just beneath the surface. A small island, studded with bristling black-green fir trees, glowered from the middle of Rau Lake. If she could lure her absent muse back into service, Augie hoped to write many poems inspired by the lake, the island, the towering trees.

"Augie?" Papa asked gently.

"Sorry, sorry." Weakly, she explained, "It's just so lovely out there. I got distracted."

Uncle Philip smiled indulgently. "Can't say that I blame you. I found the view so entrancing I bought this lot on the spot. 'Lot on the spot' – hey, how's that for a rhyme? Maybe I'll give the youngster a run for her money with the poetry, eh?"

Augie managed a polite little laugh. "I'll be just fine here, Uncle."

"If you're sure," he said.

Papa simply shrugged. "You try talking her out of it, Phil. Her mother and I argued ourselves hoarse but our Augie can be stubborn."

Meekly, Augie protested, "I think I'll feel ever so much better at the end of the season if I can spend some time alone with my thoughts."

Father and Uncle shrugged in a unison that would be comical if Augie was in any mood for comedy.

Uncle Phil said, "I trust you fully, youngster, don't mistake me. The cottage is small – cozy, I like to think – but sturdy, built to last, and the doors and windows lock. Coyotes shouldn't

bother you much but if you see one make a big noisy scene and frighten it away.”

Philip went on to describe as best he could the nearest neighbors. A handful of other wealthy families bought lots around the same time as Philip, and some had already built their vacation homes along the shores of the lake. His closest neighbors had recently completed the grandest lakeside mansion yet seen in the Lakes District, but Phil didn't know them well. For the most part there were still so many ancient trees left alone, and there was so much distance between each lot, that it was possible for a soul to feel entirely alone in the woods even though downtown Tacoma was only ten miles away. There was plenty of civilization between the city and Rau Lake, but the illusion of isolation was thorough.

Papa promised he and Mama would visit in a week with additional provisions. His eyes were sad as he kissed Augie on the cheek and caught her up in a hug. Papa's next stop would be Union Station downtown, where Uncle Philip would catch the train that would carry him eastward to Chicago. It was a strange bit of fortune that business called Philip Ackermann away for the next several months, from Chicago to Philadelphia, from Philadelphia to New York, and from New York to London, before returning to Tacoma in late August. Perhaps Fate had taken pity on brokenhearted Augie and cleared the way for a summer of solitude.

Philip retrieved his own bag, the majority of his things were being sent to the station directly from his stately house, his permanent residence, in the Old Town neighborhood of Tacoma, and said, “I can't say it won't be a bit of a relief to have someone staying here and looking after the place while I'm gone. I'm a bit put out to be torn away from this spot just as the cottage is ready to move in, but such is life. Such is business.”

Hearing this made Augie feel a bit better and she smiled.

Heartbroken or not, she'd rather feel useful than otherwise. "I'll do my very best, Uncle."

"I know you will. Be good." He too gave her a peck on the cheek, followed by one of his vigorous Uncle Phil handshakes, which were always a memorable experience, and then the men were gone and Augie was alone.

She sat on the rough-hewn stool that was the only furniture occupying the porch and closed her eyes. *Please let nature and solitude heal me*, she prayed silently. High overhead, a bald eagle cried. Augie shuddered with an unwanted but undeniable sob and yielded to the inevitable. She sobbed and sobbed and finally wailed: "Geoffrey, Geoffrey – why?"