

“Yo, sweet thang. Don’t run away.”

A guffaw spluttered from the bushes.

A higher voice chimed in. “Mmm. Look at that ass. Mama, you make me so hard.”

*Shitshitshit.* In her hurry to catch a run before sunset, she hadn’t unpacked her running belt, the one that held her pepper spray. Her thudding heartbeat picked up speed, and so did her long legs. Asshole kids hiding in the bushes, harassing women. She almost flung a few choice words back at them, but that usually just escalated things. Better to ignore them and keep on running.

“Come back, Blondie. I just want a little taste.”

Footsteps behind her. Just one set but closing fast. She gulped air and lengthened her stride. Her quads burned, and her sides ached, her reserves nearly spent.

*I’ll never run without pepper spray again.*

The guy was almost on her, puffing like a bellows.

“Babe, there you are. Hold up.” This voice was deeper and lacked the mocking tone of the others.

Without slowing, she risked a backward glance. A tall bald guy. Serious runner, judging by his gear. His face dripped from exertion, but his broad smile held no threat. He tilted his shaved head toward the bushes and winked.

She slowed, and he pulled up alongside her. His voice rang out, unnecessarily loud. “I stopped to tie my shoelaces, and you disappeared.”

*Hard of hearing? Near-sighted?*

He threw a glance over his shoulder, then lowered his voice. “You okay?”

Understanding dawned. *He’s rescuing me.*

“I’m good. Thanks.” She jogged to a stop and bent over, hands on her knees, gulping air. He waited beside her, facing the bushes she’d fled, his breathing hard but steady. Expensive running shoes. Above his big feet rose long, well-muscled legs encased in snug shorts and—God help her—the finest ass she’d seen in a long, long time. High and firm and muscular, with an adorable hollow at each side that made her fingertips itch to trace its contours. He kept his back to her as he scanned the trail. And what a back it was, outlined by his sweat-soaked T-shirt, narrow at the waist and broad at the shoulders. He ran his long fingers over his shiny shaved head, then turned to face her.

Late thirties, she guessed. High cheekbones, long, aquiline nose, straight, pale brows, and deep-set eyes, blue as the summer twilight. A shadow of golden scruff covered his sharp jawline. His lips spread in a slow smile, transforming his friendly, bony face into something dazzling.

Their eyes met, and a spark jolted her, strong and sharp and aimed straight at her center.

*Uh-oh.*

She'd felt this spark before with Carlo, her college boyfriend, the one who loved her hard and fierce for two years before dumping her just before graduation. Instant attraction like this spelled trouble, the last thing she needed. Especially now.

She gave her head a little shake. *Just a nice, friendly guy. No need to panic.*

"Thanks for stopping. Those guys—"

A voice rang out from the bushes. "Blondie, where are you?"

Then another. "Come back here and show me some love."

And a third. "You know you want to."

His easy grin slid into a scowl. "'Scuze me." He sprinted toward the voices. At his approach, the shrubs exploded in a flurry of rustling.

"Shit, it's Mr. Garvey."

"Run!"

Scuffling sounds followed, along with cursing. A moment later, the tall guy emerged, his arms crosshatched with welts and scratches, clutching a plump, pimply teenager by the back of his shirt. The kid squirmed in a vain effort to escape. He couldn't have been more than fourteen. Eyes bulging, he blinked up at his captor, then at Laurel, both of whom towered over his greasy head.

The man leaned in, his handsome face thunderous, and snarled in the kid's ear. "What do you say to the lady?"

The boy lowered his gaze. "I'm sorry, ma'am."

He gave the kid a shake. "And?"

"It won't happen again."

*Not so brave now, are you, little macho?* She swallowed a snort of laughter and glared at the kid.

His eyes brimmed with tears. "Please don't tell my dad, Coach. He'll kill me."

For a moment, she thought the kid might wet his pants. The man glared like an eagle clutching a rat in its talons. He relaxed his grip. "Get out of here."

The kid scrambled back into the bushes.

A tickly, nervous giggle escaped her throat. "Coach?"

"Cross country. North Eugene High. Home of the Highlanders." He chuckled. "And a few low-lives, like Justin and his buddies." He shuffled his big feet on the pavement, then fixed his blue, blue eyes on hers. "I'm Doug, by the way."

She extended her hand. "Laurel." His palm was warm, his grip firm but gentle.

He held her gaze so long she filled the awkward silence with embarrassed blathering. "Great name for a tall girl, right? Like a tree."

She calculated his height. Six foot six? Or seven? Six feet tall in her bare feet, she seldom met a guy who towered over her like this. He made her feel delicate, for once.

She cleared her throat. "Are you going to tell his dad?"

He tapped his lips with his forefinger, then grinned. "Nope. His mom. She works in the school cafeteria."

"Ooo. A lunch lady. They're tough."

When he laughed, his craggy face lit up with a playful energy that made her want to—what, exactly? She wasn't looking for a new boyfriend. After her last break-up, she'd promised herself to go three whole months before dating again, time to reset her priorities, find her center—stuff like that.

She cleared her throat. "Well, thanks for being my pretend boyfriend. Best fifteen-minute relationship ever."

"Let's make it a bit longer." The corners of his wide mouth lifted, and a by-God dimple winked in the hollow of his cheek.

"Oh, um..." In her belly, a swarm of fireflies began their jittery, glowing dance.

"It's nearly dark. Let me run you back to your car."

The fireflies winked out, leaving her oddly disappointed. "Actually, I came on foot."

"Okay, I'll run you home. Which way?"

"It's not necessary, really."

His open, earnest smile tugged her toward surrender. *Maybe just a little flirtation to pass the time until I move to San Francisco?* She gave herself a mental kick. *Nope. Gotta be ready for a fast exit.*