



Prologue

CITY MICE

One

ORANGE LAKE, NEW YORK

SIXTY MILES NORTH OF NEW YORK CITY

STARTING TO GASP AS she climbed the increasingly steep slope of the tangled hiking trail, Mary Catherine was about to take a breather when the tree line opened. Glancing out over the open ridge, she immediately halted in her tracks, as what was left of her breath was suddenly taken.

Off to the right, the flat lake and majestic foothills of the Catskill Mountains glowed in the soft morning light like a priceless Hudson River School landscape come to life. Mary Catherine stood for a moment, mesmerized by

the exhilarating vista, the distant golden hills, the mile-long expanse of silvery blue water, smooth and perfect as a freshly tucked-in sheet.

Only for a moment.

Two geese floating by the near shore of the lake took frantic, honking flight as a large projectile landed in the water beside them with a tremendous, booming slap.

“Youkilis tries to tag from third!” Eddie Bennett yelled as the baseball-size rock he’d just chucked sent violent ripples over the serene water. He dropped to his knees as he threw his arms up in dramatic triumph. “But the Yankees’ new center fielder, Eddie the Laser Beam Bennett, throws him out by a mile. Ball game over. Pennant over. Thuuuuh *Yankees* win!”

“Mary Catherine!” protested one of the girls from the front of the long, single-file line of children already on the move through the trees farther down the trail.

There were ten of them in all, six girls, four boys. Being a mix of Spanish and Asian, black and white, and ranging in age from seven to sixteen, they were often mistaken for a small Montessori school.

But they weren't, Mary Catherine knew. They were a family, believe it or not. A large, raucous, often aggravating, but ultimately always loving family. One she found herself smack-dab in the middle of again and again for some reason.

Who was she kidding? she thought as she hauled Eddie up and sent him scurrying ahead of her along the forest path. She knew the reason, or at least the main one. His name was Mike Bennett, the NYPD detective father of these ten crazy kids, stuck back in the city on a case. Which meant she was on riot patrol without backup here at the Bennett family lake house. At least until the weekend.

This latest frenzied fiasco of an outdoor adventure was actually courtesy of the two littlest ones, Shawna and Chrissy: a first-ever Bennett family vacation breakfast picnic. But it was Jane, the Girl Scout, who had turned it into a full-blown nature walk with her Orange County field guide. An activity Ricky, Eddie, and Trent were determined to tease into oblivion at every turn, of course.

Less than a minute later, Mary Catherine

watched helplessly as, midway down the hiking line, Ricky Bennett suddenly hopped up on a rock and began making drumbeat sounds with his mouth. It was a rap beat, Mary Catherine knew. The very same one the thirteen-year-old had driven them all crazy with on last night's two-hour ride up here.

"Uh-oh. Here we go. More dissension in the ranks," Mary Catherine mumbled as she hurried forward through the column of kids.

His brother Trent, seizing the moment, immediately jumped up beside Ricky and joined in the fun with a manic, high-pitched, scratching-squeaking sound.

"Y'all, I'm sick of this wood. Get me back to my 'hood," Ricky rapped in a bellowing voice before the two knuckleheaded boys collapsed in bursts of laughter.

"Mary Catherine!" fourteen-year-old Jane shrieked this time.

Mary Catherine finally arrived from the rear of the file, forcing a scowl across her face to hide her smile.

She thought the boys were actually pretty funny but, of course, being an experienced

nanny and nobody's fool, she would take that secret to her grave.

"Boys, you will cease this instant," Mary Catherine said to them as sternly as her lilting Irish brogue would allow. "Nature walks are about relaxation. We'll not have your human beat-bashing nonsense."

"It's beatboxing, Mary Catherine," Ricky said helpfully, between giggles. "Human beatboxing."

"I'll box you about your human head and shoulders in about three seconds," Mary Catherine said, pulling his hat down over his face. She whirled around and busted Eddie making faces over her shoulder.

"And for you, Eddie Andrew Bennett," she said, poking his chest, "another rock near one of Orange County's fine feathered friends and we'll see if that portable PlayStation of yours can throw Youkilis out from third!"