



Falling in love
wasn't on her to-do list.

Heartwood

CATHERINE LANE

Chapter 1

NIKKA PUSHED THE FLOWERING CACTUS plant to the side of her engraved pencil holder and pulled the picture of her cats, Lucy and Desi, closer to her phone. There, that was better. No. She couldn't suppress the grin. It was perfect.

By big business standards, the small cubicle on the tenth floor was nothing special. Almost pathetic even. One hundred and twenty feet filled with a cheap melamine desk, an office chair with no arms, and a view of other lawyers bent over files and phones. But to Nikka it was the golden ring of the carousel of intellectual property law. For now, at least.

She had made the jump from the hinterland of the ninth floor to mid-level associate in just three years. A record at Truman and Steinbrecker. But after sitting at her new desk with new responsibilities for just ten minutes, wild aspirations rose up in her.

Nikka glanced down the windowed hallway that led to the partners' offices. Somewhere on that hallowed ground were breathtaking views of San Francisco Bay and Lea Truman's office. If she worked even harder, she, too, could make managing partner and have that million-dollar view. The to-do list materialized in her mind: *find her niche, take initiative, cultivate a mentor*. She would...

"Oh shit." A clerk's voice drifted across the low wall to her left.

Lea Truman strode down the hallway, a look of consternation plastered to her thin face. “All right, everyone. Stand up.”

The whole cubicle farm rose as if they were in a flash mob dance. Nikka struggled to get up without sending her chair spinning into her file cabinet.

“Who here has a car?”

Half the people on their feet raised their hands.

Nikka looked around and slowly added hers to the raised arms.

“Who has it here in the parking lot downstairs?”

Several hands dropped back down.

Unbelievably, Nikka had braved the city traffic this morning since she had wanted to break in her brand-new Subaru Outback. Was this a good or bad thing?

“A GPS?”

Now only Nikka and an unfamiliar man with red hair and a trendy beard were still in the running. A small, triumphant smile played on his lips. His body tensed, ready to spring forward at the next question, like a contestant in a quiz show, poised to press the buzzer.

“And a full tank of gas?”

She had filled up just that morning, following her father’s advice to never let the gas tank fall below the halfway mark.

The man’s arm flopped to his side. Everyone in the cubicle farm swung to look at Nikka, some with envy, others with pity.

Her father’s words rose in her mind. *Winners embrace opportunity, big or small.* She fought down the nausea rising in her stomach and turned to the managing partner with her head high.

Lea Truman met her gaze with a hard stare and waved her over. “Nikka, right?”

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Nikka nodded vigorously.

“All right. Let’s go.”

Nikka grabbed her purse and her keys and tried to pump confidence into her reply. “Yes, Ms. Truman.”

“Call me Lea. I’m your boss, not your headmistress.”

“Yes...Lea.” Nikka cringed. *Make a good impression* should have been number one on that to-do list.

Lea motioned over an assistant whose arms were piled high with files and a silver laptop. The assistant thrust it all at Nikka, who juggled the bundle for a harrowing second before pulling it safely to her chest. Lea took control of the remaining manila envelope from her assistant’s outstretched hand. “Call Ace’s Town Car Service and tell Mr. We-can’t-be-there-for-thirty-minutes he and his company are fired. We’re late. Come along.”

Nikka hung back, repositioning the papers and the computer into a more comfortable load, until she registered with a jolt that Lea was talking to her and scurried after her to the elevator.

Lea punched the down button as if she owned it. Maybe she did. There had been a rumor on the ninth floor last year that she had actually bought the building.

Once inside and only inches apart, Nikka took stock of her boss. Tall and thin, almost to the point of wiry, Lea radiated power. Nikka had been this close to her once before, when she was hired. Then, there had been a handshake that had crackled with energy, but now that same power hit her in a wave. This was what success looked like, and if she was being honest, what sexy looked like too. Boss or no boss, Lea was hot. Ice-blond hair fell in a trendy razor cut over high cheekbones and sharp blue eyes, and even the age lines around her mouth gave her an alluring air of experience.

“What floor are you parked on?”

“Oh, C. Level C.” Nikka dropped her gaze. This was work, not a date. Although since she could count the number of dates she had been on in the last three years on one hand, she was surprised she could remember the difference.

Nikka shifted the bundle in her arms so she could get the keys out of her purse before the doors opened and not waste a precious second. Even before they were out of the elevator, the beeping from the pristine white Outback greeted them from a nearby parking space.

“Better than I had hoped.” Lea peered through the car’s tinted back window. “There’s a computer plug in the center console, right?” She opened the door before Nikka had a chance to answer. She shoved over a yoga mat, hopped in, and held out her arms for the laptop and files. “Glad to see the ride out there won’t be a total waste. Get in, and I’ll give you the address.”

As Nikka pulled up her navigation device, her heart sank. Lea didn’t want an associate to run ideas by; she just wanted a chauffeur. How was she going to find opportunity in being used for a full tank of gas and a GPS? Her father didn’t have a saying for that.

When Lea paused to boot up her laptop and slip the charger into the plug between the front seats, Nikka asked, “What city?”

“Steelhead Springs.”

Nikka had tapped the S and the T into the console when her heart flipped over in her chest. Steelhead Springs? No way! Wasn’t that the official name for the Springs, a tiny town on the Tall Tree River about two hours north of the City? Maybe this day wouldn’t be a complete waste after all. The Springs was the home of Truman and Steinbrecker’s

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celebrated client—famous lesbian author and recluse Beth Walker.

Holy shit.

Gigantic, huge opportunity.

* * *

Maggie Chalon slipped her paring knife into the radish, carving the last delicate petal of the intricate flower design. She dropped the edible rose into ice water to keep while she cut the tomato for the sandwich. She didn't know why she bothered. Her little works of art were never appreciated. Hell, a good day lately was when the sandwich came back with two bites out of it.

"Is lunch ready? I need to take it up." Vivienne stuck her head into the kitchen. As usual, a nametag reading *Vivienne Tenney, Physician Assistant* rode above the left breast pocket of her polyester scrub top.

Why the hell didn't she take that relic from another job off? It wasn't as if they were working with dozens of new patients or staff members who didn't know her name.

"Yep. Almost ready." Maggie placed the rose radish next to two elaborate pineapple happy faces. "How is she feeling today?"

"Anxious. Irritable. It's not a good day, the poor girl," Vivienne said, but there was no kindness in her voice. She pulled two twenties out of one oversized pocket and slid them over the counter with a wrinkled finger. "Beth asked for broccoli soup tonight for supper. Be a dear. Zip over to the farmers' market and get the ingredients, will you?"

"We have what we need here." Maggie waved to the huge subzero fridge behind her. It sat like a monster from the future in the retro kitchen.

Vivienne pursed her lips, adding even more wrinkles to her face. “Beth especially asked for fresh broccoli.”

“Really?” Never once in the six months that Maggie had been Beth’s personal chef had she made a request.

“Yes. That’s a good sign.”

“I guess.” How would she know? Maggie hadn’t seen Beth Walker in those six months either.

Although she shouldn’t be surprised. That tall lawyer, Lea, had been completely upfront when she had hired her. “Vivienne will be your only contact in the house while you’re there. Are you okay with that?”

“Sure, sure,” Maggie had said even though Lea leaning in to make her point made her skin crawl a little. Frankly, she would’ve said anything at that point to land the job.

Lea had scanned her face. “Other people I interviewed asked why.”

“Okay, why?”

“My client has a long history of being very, very private, and sadly now on top of that, she is tottering toward dementia. Strangers confuse her, and her routines must be set and predictable.”

“Okay.”

Another long look. “We’ll run a background check. We’ll find out if you’re in trouble.”

“I’m not sure you can call it trouble exactly.” Maggie had jostled her head around, trying to look cute. She got a lot of first dates with that look, why not a job? “I work for my ex, and it’s great and all. But I’m not sure it’s the best situation for either of us.”

Lea had glanced at her phone rather than answer, so Maggie had changed tactics.

“No worries. Lauren will give me a great recommendation. Does Beth like sweets? I make these little cake pops that...”

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“Lauren?”

“I thought with this being Beth Walker and all, *that* wouldn’t be a problem.”

“It’s not.” Lea had nodded and leaned back. “Girl trouble. I totally get it. You got the job.”

The firm had run the background check anyway.

“It’s a beautiful day.” Vivienne brought her back to the present as she grabbed the tray with the sandwich. She plucked the rose radish off the plate and tossed it into the sink. “Take your bike to the market. Make a workout of it, as you like to do.”

Dark thoughts, and not for the first time in the last few weeks, circled in her mind. Vivienne would rather complain about her wasting time biking to town than breathe. Suddenly, she was pushing an outing?

“Thanks, I will.” Maggie tried to infuse lightness into her voice.

Vivienne didn’t fool her. She wanted Maggie out of the house. The job, which had never been standard, had just spun from following weird rules to ignoring something that smelled rotten. It looked as if now was the time to start asking why.

* * *

Nikka eased her foot off the gas just as they passed the Steelhead Springs sign—Population 14,534—at the edge of town. She had floored the gas pedal most of the way, even though the salesman had told her to break the engine in gently.

Tall coastal redwoods grew on either side of the two-lane highway, and a picturesque river cut into the woods on the

left. Signs advertising homey bed-and-breakfasts and womyn retreats popped up along its bank.

“Oh good. We’re finally here.” Lea snapped her computer shut in the backseat. She hadn’t said a word since they had crossed the Golden Gate Bridge over an hour and a half ago. The trip for her had been a steady stream of work as she jumped from cell phone to computer to tablet with rapid-fire precision.

Nikka, on the other hand, had spent the same time stealing glances in the rearview mirror and crafting succinct yet thoughtful answers to any work question that might come up. She wouldn’t get a second chance to make a first impression. Whatever this case was, she wanted in.

“Have you ever been here before?” Lea asked.

“Yes, once in college. A friend and I came up for a weekend.”

“Let me guess. You had just read *Heartwood* in some women’s studies class and wanted to check out the scene.”

“Something like that.” Stupidly, she hadn’t prepared for personal questions.

Lea had only gotten part of the truth, though. Nikka had read Walker’s seminal book at UC Berkeley. That much was true, but the real reason she had come to the Springs all those years ago had more to do with Alexis than the book. Alexis, the soft butch who had stolen her heart and her virginity that weekend in the Springs. Alexis, whom she had dumped by text message rather than tell her parents she was gay. Alexis, whom she unsuccessfully had tried to find years later when she had finally come out.

“Beth Walker made this town, you know.” Lea waved a hand at the colorful storefronts. The author’s face and blown-up versions of her book covers stared back at them from the

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windows as they drove. Rainbow banners hung down from streetlamps, advertising a dramatization of *Heartwood* at a local coffee house. It seemed as if the town had made Beth Walker.

“You wouldn’t recognize this place before Walker,” Lea said. “In 1960, Steelhead Springs was just another quiet retirement community up the coast. The only thing they had going for them was the steelhead trout that ran the river from October to April. Then Walker became famous. Not for *Heartwood*, of course. It was for that kids’ series...about a magic composition book that grants wishes. I’ve never read them.”

“*Don’t Waste Your Wishes*. They’re fantastic.”

“Right,” Lea said, but *right* sounded more like *whatever*. “Then someone, probably from *Heartwood*’s publishing house, let it slip that Walker was the author of both. I mean, that’s what I would do. The lesbians started turning up in the Springs, looking for her. By then, it was the late eighties; enterprising women jumped at the chance to make a buck, so they turned the town into a destination for women.” She pointed to a bustling town center. “Damn. I wish I had thought of it.”

Nikka nodded, but she didn’t need the lecture. Anyone who had read the book and knew even a little bit of queer history recognized that Beth Walker had captured exactly what it was like to be a dyke in the sixties. From the male oppression and sexism to the hidden life style to wild sex on the banks of the Tall Tree River. More importantly, what it would be like to live free of all that persecution here in an idealized version of Steelhead Springs.

“*Heartwood* is a seminal book in so many ways,” Nikka said.

Lea dove back into her files without comment.

Nikka bit her lip. Were there third chances for a first impression? Because at this point she had blown chances one and two.

They were smack in the middle of the town when the navigation device said, "Turn right in five hundred feet."

Nikka signaled and eased carefully into the crosswalk.

Whoosh! A woman on an old mountain bike cut right in front of her, missing her front bumper only by inches.

"Oh my God!" Nikka slammed on her brakes. The car skidded to a sharp stop, and the smell of burning rubber filled the air.

"What the fuck?" Lea cried as her files and computer flew in different directions in the backseat. A packet of legal papers appeared under the front passenger seat.

"She...she came out of nowhere." Nikka pointed to the woman zooming away, her long athletic legs pumping furiously. The biker hadn't even seen them or, at least, hadn't turned around to acknowledge the chaos she created.

Lea stared at the retreating woman until she rounded a bend and peddled out of sight. "Let's continue. Carefully. Can you get us the rest of the way without killing anyone... especially me?"

"Yes, Lea." Nikka fought the urge to switch back to Ms. Truman.

For the rest of the journey, only the cold voice of the navigation device broke the heavy silence as Nikka made a series of lefts and rights. They traveled away from the river and into a beautiful grove of old-growth redwoods.

"Your destination is on your right."

Nikka pulled up to a black security gate rising up out of nowhere in the middle of the trees. She stuck a hand out

toward the keypad so she could tap the code in as soon as Lea gave it to her.

Instead, Lea slid out of the backseat and strategically positioned herself in between Nikka and the keypad. Several quick pats and the gate swung open to reveal a long asphalt drive and a soaring estate of wood and glass.

Nikka rolled her car slowly up the driveway, excitement growing in her belly. She was about to meet the Beth Walker. *I'm a big fan*. No, that was way too generic. *Ms. Walker, you taught me who I was*. Better, but a little embarrassing in front of her boss. No matter. She still had time to get it just right.

She killed the engine right by the front door and hurried around the car to open the door for Lea, who was hunting through the jumble of files and papers scattered all over the backseat.

“For God’s sake.” Lea slid her hand around searching and creating even more mess. Finally, with a huff, she pulled the thin manila envelope that her assistant had given her from the opened armrest. “Could you clean this up while I’m inside? There’s nothing private in the files. Just depositions, so just put them back together as best you can.”

What? She was staying outside?

Lea cocked her head as if she had heard her thoughts and smiled thinly. “Walker doesn’t see anyone she doesn’t know and trust. She’s only gotten worse since her brother died. You didn’t think...”

“No. Of course not.”

But they both knew that she had.

“I shouldn’t be long.”

Nikka stood back by the car, watching the front door open just enough for an older, horse-faced woman to peer around it. As soon as she saw Lea, a wide smile hit the woman’s lips but died just as quickly when she noticed Nikka.

“My ride.” Lea shrugged and slipped in through the opening.

Nikka’s stomach constricted. She had driven two hours and put unnecessary miles on her brand-new car to become *the ride*? She was going places in this job. She would bet her bottom dollar on it, but apparently not just yet.

Nikka soon crouched in the backseat, her behind up in the air as she rummaged around her car, looking for the runaway files. First, she rescued the one from under the car mat and then another from the back cargo area. How on earth had it gotten there? That girl on the bike should really pay more attention or at the very least have thrown up a wave of apology.

She pulled all the files together and stacked them in a neat pile by the computer. That was all Lea had asked her to do, but curiosity got the better of her, and she pulled the depositions to her. Lea had a new case. Different people’s voices jumped off the pages, telling their stories. An aging pop singer was suing a soft drink company for using an imitation of her voice in a commercial. The question was always the same. Imitation or inspiration?

Nikka bit her thumbnail. Previous cases on voice imitation claims had supported the celebrities, but one of them was up for appeal. If it was overturned, it would be a game changer. Nikka grabbed her to-do list out of her purse and penciled in *check on BMW appeal* under *get cat food* and *cancel dentist apt.* She tapped on the paper with her pencil point. Lea hadn’t asked her to join the case...not yet, at least.

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Maggie pedaled up the driveway so furiously that the broccoli, bouncing around in the basket at the back of the bike, almost tumbled out. If she hurried, maybe she could find out why Vivienne wanted her out of the house.

A white Subaru blocked the drive. They almost never had visitors. She'd called it! Something was most definitely up.

She jumped off the bike to walk the last few feet to the car. There was someone in the backseat, messing with papers. Someone not important enough to go inside. Someone like her. Maggie rapped on the window with her knuckles.

The woman inside jumped and dropped whatever was in her hands. She took one look at Maggie and swung the door open, almost hitting her and the bike.

"Hey! Watch it." Maggie stepped back.

"Seriously?" The woman slid out of the car. "You almost kill me and my boss back in town, and you're telling *me* to watch it?"

Maggie glared at her. Who was this lunatic?

That short black skirt and maroon silk blouse screamed corporate office, probably from the City. But she was way too pretty to waste her life away in a cubicle. Dark hair tumbled in thick waves to her shoulders, and her eyes were almost the same color. On second glance, all sorts of different colors gleamed in her irises.

"Sorry? I'm not following you."

"On the main road back in town. You cut us off. Ring a bell?"

Maggie shook her head. A girl could get lost in those eyes.

"Really? I screeched to a halt. You pedaled away like nothing had happened. I—"

The front door opened with a whoosh, and Lea Truman, wearing a cat-that-ate-the-canary grin, darted outside.

Following Lea onto the doorstep, Vivienne stood almost on top of her.

The pretty woman fell quiet as everyone stared at each other.

Maggie broke the silence first. "Lea, I didn't know you were coming."

Vivienne whispered something to Lea that didn't drift down to the driveway.

"That's okay. Go inside. I'll take care of this." She patted Vivienne on the arm.

Vivienne caressed the place where Lea had touched her and slipped back through the door.

"I see you got the broccoli." Lea pointed at the basket on Maggie's bike.

"I did, and I'm glad you're here. I want to talk to you about Beth."

Lea glanced at the driver. Maggie did too. Of course Lea would hire a smoking hot assistant. Or had she brought the woman out as a diversionary tactic? She was totally Maggie's type. Hell, she would be anyone's type.

"She's not—" Maggie began.

"Nikka." Lea came down the steps. "Could you go inside and give this to Vivienne, the woman who just stepped back inside?" She pulled a scrap of paper from her pocket and folded it twice. "Just go into the foyer and call for her."

"Okay." A wrinkle formed between Nikka's brows, then immediately smoothed out. She gingerly grabbed the paper and headed for the door.

Lea waited until the door clicked shut before stepping closer to Maggie. She was a good four inches taller with

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her overpriced high heels, and she glared down at Maggie. “What’s this about Walker?”

Maggie rose up on her toes to split the difference between them. “She’s not eating lately.”

“Vivienne hasn’t said anything.” Lea smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“For weeks now, my meals come back barely touched. Whether Vivienne has mentioned anything or not, something has changed up there. I’m worried. And you should be too.”

Lea crossed her arms against her chest as her face took on a pinched expression.

Maggie cringed. Dammit. Too assertive. If she wanted to keep her job, she was going to have to tone it down.

“Beth’s an old woman. You know how it is. We’ll get her Boost or Ensure or whatever that nutritional drink is called.” Lea turned away from her. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to get—”

Let her go. There are other ways. But almost without conscious thought, Maggie’s hand shot out to stop Lea’s retreat. “Look. I’m not a nutritionist, I know, but Beth’s not eating enough. And seventy-seven’s not that old.”

“Thank you for caring enough to tell me, but you’re right, you should leave the medical evaluations to Vivienne. The professional.” Lea glared at the hand on her arm.

Suddenly, it wasn’t just about the poor woman tucked away in the depths of the house. It was also about the woman right in front of her. Maggie had never liked a bully. “Is everything on the up and up here?”

Lea raised her eyebrows. “Of course it is.”

Maggie fought back the urge to shake a finger in Lea’s face and demand real answers.

“When I hired you, I thought I expressly stated that you shouldn’t ask why. Are you asking why now?”

Lea was giving her a way out. She absolutely should take it. It would be so much easier to walk away...to not do the right thing. But Maggie had never been one to take the easy path. Why start now?

“Damn right I’m asking why. There’s definitely something going on up there.”

“Well, then...” Lea shrugged. “You’re fired.”

* * *

Nikka took in the foyer with one glance. Natural wood and stone ran together, creating an air of permanence and calm. Irises stood tall in a glass vase under a skylight, and a stairway to the second floor opened up on the left.

“Vivienne?” Nikka called softly.

No answer.

Nikka wasn’t an idiot. She knew the folded paper in her hand was probably blank. Lea had sent her away because she wanted to have a private conversation with that lunatic on the bike. There was so much energy surrounding that girl, she could almost feel it in here.

She had to deliver the paper even if it were a grocery list. But where was Vivienne?

A muffled noise drifted down the stairs. In any other house she wouldn’t trot upstairs uninvited, but this situation left ordinary in the dust. Nikka swallowed hard and headed up, her heels making soft taps on the wooden rungs. “Vivienne?”

Another sound, a cross between a moan and a groan, came from the room at the end of the hall. It was definitely a woman’s voice. Her heart jumped in her chest as she came closer. What the hell was she supposed to do now? She couldn’t barge in.

“Excuse me. Vivienne? Are you in there?” she said for the third time, her hand poised over the door handle.

“Oooh,” the woman cried out.

Nikka couldn't let that go. She twisted the handle and swung the door open.

In the middle of the room, slumped in an easy chair, was a small woman with snow-white hair and black rim glasses. Wrinkles sagged around her eyes and mouth. She looked far older and much more tired than all the pictures that Nikka had seen in town. But there was no mistaking it. That was, without a doubt, Beth Walker.

The old woman squirmed in the chair and fixed Nikka with a look that seemed to run right through her. “Please, help me...”

“Are you okay? What's wrong?”

Beth struggled to get up. She favored her right ankle and immediately lost her balance. “Help me!” She teetered—one arm on the chair, the other stretching out to Nikka.

Nikka rushed forward to grab Beth's arm before she crashed. Jesus. The poor woman couldn't have weighed ninety pounds soaking wet. “It's okay. I've got you.”

Beth raised her head and met Nikka's gaze. Behind the glasses her eyes were a deep blue and her pupils were dilated. They latched onto Nikka's. Her body shook as she struggled to get her words out. “Help me. I have to get out of—”

Vivienne skidded into the room. Her face and neck turned red all at once. “What's wrong, dear? Are you having trouble getting up? I told you to wait until I came back.” Her tone was sickly sweet until she hissed at Nikka. “Get out. You don't belong up here.”

“She needed help.”

“That's why I'm here.” Vivienne drew the words out until they were as sharp as knives. She bent down, wrapped

her arms around her patient, and lifted her into a standing position, bumping Nikka away.

“I... I...” Beth opened her mouth, but one quick look from Vivienne made her snap it shut.

“You’re making her upset. You need to go.”

Nikka backed up a step, but her gaze never left Vivienne. Something about all this didn’t feel right. As her father would say, this woman was talking to the right, but looking to the left.

“Ms. Walker? Are you all right?” She tried to find Beth’s eyes.

Vivienne shifted her in her arms and conveniently turned Beth away from the door.

Beth didn’t struggle.

“See, she’s fine. Just the flu.”

As an instant dislike for Vivienne rolled over her, Nikka stood her ground. A little stare-down wasn’t going to spook her.

But a sharp horn, blaring from outside, made her jump. A summons from Lea was a whole other ball game.

“Shit,” Nikka said under her breath. She took another long look at Beth Walker’s back before hurrying from the room.

What had just happened up there? Was Beth Walker asking for help getting out of the chair? Did she really have the flu? Or was it more?

It wasn’t until she slid into the car that she remembered the paper still in her hand. Oh crap! After a quick check to make sure Lea wasn’t watching, she dropped the note to the car’s floor. Please let the paper really be an excuse to get rid of her.

“Let’s get going.” Lea sat calm and cool in the backseat, ready for the trip home. “Traffic’s going to be a bitch.”

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Nikka looked around. There was no sign of the woman with the shaggy hair and nice legs. “Right.” She pushed the ignition button and tried to shove the last ten minutes out of her mind.

Even before they had hit the end of the drive, Lea tapped her cell phone. “Hi. It’s me. I got it.” She paused. “Yeah, it’s looking really good. A few things we need to clean up, but yes, very good indeed. We can absolutely move forward.”

Then Lea ended the call, and they rode in silence.

Unlike the trip up, Nikka wasn’t hoping that Lea would engage her in conversation. Lea could have recited the entire US Constitution and its amendments, and Nikka would have only heard the two words that kept circling around in her head.

“Help me.”

Chapter 2

February 1960

A SMALL BELL JINGLED AS the front door of the Good Neighbor real estate office swung open.

Beth cringed inwardly at her desk. The bell was a happy sound, but its tingling reminded her that her life was not her own. At this moment it belonged to the Thompsons, a plump dentist and his wife from San Francisco, who were looking for a weekend house in the redwoods. She hurriedly slid loose papers of writing into her desk drawer, revealing a folder from the office. On its cover, *FERN HOUSE* in big, black letters sat over both a photo of a house in a forest and a business card with a golden tooth.

“Yoo-hoo.” A man’s deep voice filled the room. “We’re here!”

The husband and wife standing, no lounging, by the door were most definitely not the dowdy Thompsons. The man—tall, dark and handsome—sporting a tie and perfectly tailored pants. He stood next to an elegant blonde with a fresh-scrubbed glow and a crisp, pink seersucker dress.

Wow! Beth almost choked on her own breath. She was a stunner.

The man raised his arm in a wave toward Beth. “We don’t have an appointment, but we were hoping that...”

“Oh my goodness.” Rachel turned out of the kitchenette and skidded to a halt. “You’re James and Dawn Montgomery.”

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“We are!” James grinned.

“I’m the office secretary.” She turned to Beth. “Oh my goodness. You didn’t recognize them?”

Beth shook her head. She had been too busy taking in the curve of the woman’s neck for their fame to register.

Dawn shrugged, and even that slight movement overflowed with style. “It’s always better that way. Not to be recognized. We’re just regular people.”

“Are you kidding me? You’re Hollywood royalty! I’ll get Mr. Armstrong, our boss.” Rachel giggled and ran into the back office.

A second later, Hank, tucking in his shirt with one hand, darted into the front room, his other hand already outstretched. “I thought Rachel was pulling my leg, but you really are the Montgomerys. What on earth are you doing in Steelhead Springs? Shouldn’t you both be in Hollywood, filming a movie or something? I’m Hank Armstrong, by the way. I own this place.” He pumped James’s hand repeatedly until James finally had to twist away.

Beth suppressed a smile at Hank’s exuberance and glanced at Dawn, who was staring straight at her. Their gazes met, and Dawn raised her eyebrows slightly as if to say *See, I told you so. Better not to be recognized.*

Beth gave in to the smile and waited for Dawn to drop her gaze.

She didn’t. In fact, she seemed to be staring deeper into her eyes, as if she wanted to root around in all of Beth’s secrets.

Beth’s heart began to pound. She looked down at the tile floor.

“...driving by and liked the look of the town,” James said.

Dang it. She had missed a whole chunk of the conversation. Heat blazed on Beth's cheeks.

"Bless my soul. You want to look at houses here? In Steelhead?" Hank's voice cracked. "But we're in the middle of nowhere."

"That's exactly what we need right now." James wrapped his arm around Dawn and kissed her on the temple. "Do you have any houses we can look at?"

"Well..." Hank wrung his hands. "We're a little low on inventory at the moment. How about a nice one-story on the river? It has a huge deck and..."

"No, something a little more private. In the woods, I think." James glanced around the office and seized on the folder on Beth's desk. He pointed to the picture of the house. "Something like that. No, exactly like that. We want to look at...Fern House."

Hank grabbed the folder, slid Dr. Thompson's business card off the front, and shoved it deep into his pocket. "Just so happens, it's available. Should we go look at it?"

"Yes, siree." James was already out the door.

Hank tripped over himself trying to follow. "Call the Thompsons and reschedule."

"But they'll be here any—"

"Just take care of it." Hank waved off Rachel and shut the office door almost in her face.

"How?" Rachel turned to Beth.

"I don't know." Beth grabbed the keys with the 741 Fern Drive tag from her desk. "I'll be right back. He's going to need these."

Outside, she silently handed the keys to Hank and pushed down the desire to take one last look at Dawn.

"Maybe your girl could tool out with us?" James stood by his convertible Cadillac El Dorado, leaning casually on

one of the car's huge, red fins. "The missus and I may want to hit the road once we've seen the house."

Hank couldn't flip his keys fast enough to Beth. "Drive my car out there. Okay?"

"If *your girl's* going," Dawn said, "I'll ride with her. I've had enough wind in my face for one day."

Beth's heart jumped in her chest. Dawn wanted to drive with her? She edged over to Hank's Ford.

James fixed his wife with a look, started to open his mouth, but then seemed to think better of it. "Stay close" was all he said in the end.

Beth slid into the driver's seat with her gaze riveted to the road ahead. Leaving Rachel to deal with the Thompsons on her own was bad, but she couldn't remember the last time adventure had come calling. And in the form of a gorgeous Hollywood movie star? She wasn't about to pass that up.

The two-car procession wound through sleepy streets. Beth tried to see the town from an outsider's perspective—a wood-clapped drugstore, a post office, and a lumberyard filled with roughly hewn logs. *See What We Saw* was painted on a homemade sign in the last window.

Beth's temperature rose even though the cool winter air tumbled in from the vent, and her slick palms slid against the wheel. This place couldn't be farther from Tinseltown.

Dawn had scooted in beside her without saying a word. The silence was comforting at first since Beth hadn't a clue about how to talk to a big-time movie star, but now the quiet was so heavy it almost weighed the car down.

"That's some car. I've never seen one in person." Beth jerked her head at the red Cadillac gliding in front of them. Her voice sounded odd to her own ears, but loads better than the silence. "Does he like it?"

“Probably more than me.” Dawn shot Beth a glance. “You’re not going to blab that to the tabloids are you?”

The idea was so ridiculous, Beth chuckled. “Definitely not. That’s not my style.”

“No. I don’t think it is.” Dawn relaxed against the seat back. “You have me at a disadvantage. You know my name. But I don’t know yours.”

“It’s Beth Walker.”

“So, Beth Walker. What’s your story?”

Beth chuckled again. “Me? I have no story. I’m a nobody.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

Beth glanced over and caught Dawn staring at her again. They locked gazes once more, and this time Beth’s lingered so long that when she finally looked back to the road, she was only inches from the Cadillac. She slammed on the brakes with a jolt. What on earth was going on here? What was it about this woman that made Beth lose her way every time she looked at her?

And even when she didn’t.

She almost drove right past 741 Fern Drive, skidding into the dirt road at the last minute. She followed the Cadillac, and both cars bumped their way up the drive.

“I can hear Jimmy right now. He’s telling your boss that he won’t buy the house unless the owners pave over the driveway.”

“Hank will do it himself, on his hands and knees if necessary. He’ll do anything to sell you this house. He has people believing that he’s the celebrity in this town. If you buy the house, he’ll milk it for all that it’s worth.”

“It might happen. Jimmy can be very capricious. He makes decisions with his gut in just seconds and not always with all the right information. The only thing he thinks

through thoroughly are his film roles.” Dawn smoothed down her hair and brought her hand all the way down her neck to rub it for a second. “My God, sometimes I think I’ll grow old and die before he’ll sign the contracts. Do you take in many films?”

“No, not really.”

“Why not?”

“Steelhead doesn’t have a movie theater, for one. But mostly I spend my free time trying to write.” The words were out before Beth could bite them back. Why on earth had she said that? Even her own family didn’t know she longed to be a writer, and here she was blabbing to a stranger that she had just met.

“I won’t tell anyone.”

Scary. How did she know what Beth was thinking?

A sudden tingling ran up her arm.

Dawn had dropped her hand on Beth’s forearm and gave it a little squeeze. “Seriously. If you keep my secret, I’ll keep yours.”

Secrets? What was Dawn talking about?

Thankfully for Beth, the house loomed up in front of them, and she didn’t have to answer. James had stopped his car right by the front door, leaving Beth just enough room to scoot around to park by the garage. By the time they joined the men, Hank was already into the hard sell.

“Look at those trees.” He bowed reverently to the small grove of California redwoods just beyond the house. “They can live over two thousand years and grow to around three hundred and fifty feet. Down by the river is the actual Tall Tree, which is where the river got its name. We can go visit it if you want. That one, they say, is taller than the Empire State Building.”

James's eyes widened.

"Your boss is very good," Dawn said so only Beth could hear. She stood so close to her it seemed that this was yet another confidence they were sharing.

"Now, the architect who built this house was a student of Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin West in Arizona. You'll see that the house complements the forest and nature outside. He mined the harmony between them to create a grace only seen at Falling Water in Pennsylvania. Shall we go inside?"

"Ooh. There's his first mistake," Dawn whispered.

Sure enough, James slapped his thigh with his hand, and a popping noise echoed through the trees. "I'm not buying a work of art, Hank. I'm buying a pad for me, my wife, and the couple of ankle biters we plan to have. I don't give a flip if nature and the house have a party. I just want a place that we can hide from all the craziness in Hollywood. Can we do that here?"

"Yes. Yes, you can," Hank said. "Come inside. I'll show you."

James tailed after Hank as he unlocked the front door and stepped inside. Fresh air poured out from the stone and wood foyer as an invitation to enter.

Dawn shuffled her feet but didn't make a move to follow.

"Don't you want to see the house too?" Beth asked.

Dawn shook her head. "It doesn't matter what I think. Hank did well. Jimmy's going to buy the house. I was never really part of that equation."

Beth glanced over, but this time Dawn didn't meet her gaze. Apparently, *why* wasn't a secret that they were sharing.

* * *

Heartwood

Beth thought about Dawn almost constantly over the thirty-day escrow. She found herself working obscure references about the star into conversations with her family, doodling Dawn's name onto loose pages instead of writing, and even driving all the way to San Francisco one rainy Sunday morning to see her latest release, *Woman About Town*. When Hank announced that the couple was coming up to get the keys to the house personally, Beth's heart flipped over and her knees went weak. She had to grab hold of the back of her desk chair to steady herself.

In her saner moments, she kept telling herself she was being silly. She had spent all of one afternoon with the woman. Their worlds were miles apart. Dawn was a bona fide movie star, and Beth was a real estate assistant in a little town no one had ever heard of. And to top it all off, Dawn was married to hunky James Montgomery, no less. There was no way in hell that America's Sweetheart was even giving her a second thought as she flitted off to parties and premieres in Los Angeles.

When the day finally came, Beth took extra care with her appearance. She grabbed a new shirtwaist dress out of the closet and slid it over her body. The black stripes made her look taller than her five foot two, or so her mother had said, and the tight belt accentuated her best feature, her nice, flat waist. She fluffed up her short brown hair and pulled a few pieces down by her ears, trying to bring a pleasing roundness to her face. A splash of lipstick and she was done. She nodded at her reflection in the mirror. Beth Walker wasn't going to win any beauty contests, but the villagers weren't going to chase her out of town with torches either.

"You look nice." Rachel gave Beth a little wave when she entered the office. She had cleared her desk and was

arranging a pitcher of something fruity, glasses, and a plate of cookies on its surface.

“What’s going on?” Beth asked.

“Oh, you know Mr. Armstrong. He hired Michael from the *Sentinel* to come over to take a few pictures when he gives the Montgomerys their keys at two o’clock. And then Mrs. Armstrong found out. So now, I think, her bridge club and a couple of Mr. Armstrong’s fishing buddies are coming too. Oh, and Sheriff Tom said he might stop by as well.”

By two, the office was jammed full of people who just happened to be in the neighborhood. By three, the cookie plate held only crumbs, and by four, only Beth, Rachel, and Hank remained. Everyone else had gone home, grumbling that Hank had pulled one over on them. He didn’t know any movie stars, and this was just one of his crazy stunts to get more attention. At four thirty, Rachel gathered the glasses of what had turned out to be strawberry lemonade and brought them into the kitchenette. Beth rolled up her sleeves and began to scrub them clean.

The jingle of the bell broke through the heavy silence. Beth couldn’t see who it was, but she knew the deep voice instantly. “Sorry we’re late. Anyone still here?”

Hank couldn’t scurry out of his office fast enough. He flung a glass of lemonade that reeked of mostly vodka through the kitchenette doorway into Beth’s hand.

“You’re here. You’re here! I thought maybe you had changed your mind.”

“Nope.” James puffed out his chest. “Once I’ve signed, I never back down from a deal.”

In the kitchenette, Beth took a deep breath. Was Dawn here too? She hadn’t heard her voice or any evidence of another person. She almost didn’t want to look. If Dawn wasn’t there,

the disappointment would hit her like a sledgehammer. She rolled down her sleeves, ran a hand through her hair, and stepped into the room.

There she was standing off to the side, quietly rocking back and forth on her heels. Dressed in a tailored red suit, she looked as if she had just stepped off a Hollywood photo shoot. She was scanning the room, and when she lit on Beth, she stilled. A smile crept to her lips, and she raised a hand in greeting.

Had Dawn actually been looking for her? Beth shyly waved back. Relief flooded her chest, making it hard for her to catch a breath—a sledgehammer either way, apparently.

“Do you want some cookies? My wife made them especially...” Hank turned to only crumbs on the plate. “Do we have any more cookies?”

“No, Mr. Armstrong.” Rachel’s bottom lip trembled.

“What?”

“No matter. We don’t eat cookies.” James laughed and spun Hank back toward him. He leaned in, focusing all of his attention on Hank. “I’m under contract with my studio to lose weight for my next picture. I’m a warrior in Alexander the Great’s army, fighting for glory and money so I can rise up in ranks and marry the woman I love.”

“It sounds amazing.” Standing only inches from an A-list movie star, he swooned like a teenager. Now his bottom lip was trembling as well.

“The studio and I want to ride the *Ben Hur* wave of success. Actually, it’s almost a copy of the film without all the religious stuff. It’s a really good role for me. My shirt is off for over sixty percent of the film.” He flexed, and his pecs jumped beneath his shirt. “Yes, siree. I’m ready.”

Dawn stepped out of James’s shadow and strode over toward Beth. “We’re both only going to be here for a couple

of days, but I was thinking that maybe you'd want to come out to dinner tomorrow."

Beth, dumbfounded, couldn't speak.

"To celebrate and all."

"Yes. I would love to." Beth found her voice and rushed the answer out before the stunning woman in front of her changed her mind.

"Good. Around six? You know the house, of course." Dawn stepped back to James's side. She took his arm as James regaled Hank with more stories about the film. He glanced at his wife and smiled offhandedly.

Beth spent the next twenty-four hours spinning the conversation around in her head. The exchange had only been a couple of sentences, but surely there was more to it than an honest invitation to dinner. What had she missed? Maybe there was some paperwork to bring out. But both Hank and Rachel told her everything was filled out. Maybe it was a housewarming party, and lots of people would be there?

She knocked on the door at 741 Fern Drive exactly at six. One hand held a purple flowering rhododendron plant, the only flowers she could find in February, and the other clutched a bottle of champagne that Hank had given her at Christmas.

James opened the door and craned his head around her. "That yours?" He pointed at the black Chevy truck in the driveway.

"Ah...yeah. I bought it two months ago." The truck gleamed from a wash just that morning—one of the few things that made the job at Hank's worth it.

"Good." He took the champagne and grinned. "Come in. Come in."

Heartwood

Beth shook off the odd question and followed him into the living room. Even though she had been involved in selling this house first to the Thompsons and then to the Montgomerys, she had never been inside. The dynamism of the room hit her immediately. Waxed stone floors drew her gaze to the fireplace at the far side of the room. The stones of the hearth were left plain and when coupled with the highly polished floor, Beth imagined she was flowing down a river to an outcropping of natural rocks. Not to be outdone, the back of the room cantilevered out into the redwood forest behind the house.

Hank might be a brownnoser through and through, but he knew design. This house really was a tour-de-force of organic architecture. No wonder the Thompsons had threatened lawsuits when Hank had withdrawn their offer.

Dawn sat by the fireplace in a striped wing-tip chair, wearing capris and a thin scarf. Her curls fell loose and soft around her face.

Beth had to look away she was so lovely and then gasped. There was no one else in the room!

“It’s just the three of us.” Dawn’s ability to read Beth’s mind was unnerving to say the least.

James handed her a flute of the champagne she had brought. “But we’ll have lots of fun anyway.”

“Don’t mind him.” Dawn got out of the chair to join them and took the plant with a smile. “I’m glad you came.”

“Me too.” Beth forced the words out more to be polite, even though up to five minutes ago, spending time with Dawn was one of her greatest desires. But now with that wish playing out as an intimate dinner with the Montgomerys, anxiety rolled in her stomach. What was happening here didn’t fit any of the possibilities that had danced in her head

all day. Mostly, she had envisioned standing off to one side of a grand party and watching the excitement all around her. She shook her head to clear it only to note that furniture filled every room.

“How did you get the place together so quickly?”

“Oh.” James laughed. “We have people for that.”

“And they also delivered dinner. Should we eat before it gets cold?”

Beth followed them into a dining room that could’ve easily been a spread in *House Beautiful*. A long, polished table was set for three at one end—china with domed covers, wineglasses already filled with a rich, red liquid, and simple green salads off to one side.

When she sat down, a delicious smell of puffed pastry greeted her.

James, delighted by the theatrics of it all, ran around, pulling the covers off with loud ta-da’s.

One bite and Beth’s nerves completely melted away. “This is one of the best things I’ve ever had. Is this Beef Wellington? I’ve only seen it in magazines.”

“There’s this little bistro in the City,” James said, his mouth already full. “No one does it better.”

“Mmmm.” The night was full of mystery. How they had gotten it here and kept it so warm and fresh was beyond her. But another bite told her she really didn’t care. These people didn’t have to abide by the same rules as everyone else did. And here she was sitting right beside them.

“We don’t eat like this every night,” Dawn said. In fact, she wasn’t really eating at all. She poked at her food with her fork, taking only a small bite of the baby carrots every so often.

Was she sick? She looked positively glowing.

Waving his fork around while he spoke, James launched into tales of his last picture and the crazy director at its helm.

Beth laughed so hard she almost fell off her seat. Maybe it was the wine talking, but somewhere in the middle of a story about the director trying to convince him to wrestle a live lion, his charm spilled over and filled the room. No wonder Dawn was attracted to him.

After dessert—a chocolate cake so moist that it melted in her mouth—James leaned back in his seat and twirled the nearly empty wineglass in his fingers. “This was fun, Beth. But I’m sure you’re wondering why we invited you out here.”

“I am. A little.”

“We need to ask you a favor.”

Beth looked to Dawn, who nodded ever so slightly.

“You see, Dawn needs to take a break from Hollywood for a while. Live up here while I shoot *Conqueror of the World*. I’ll be overseas for months, and she can’t come with me. I need to know that she will be right-o here, away from it all.”

“Okay.” Beth waited for James to continue. He didn’t. He just sat in his chair nodding slightly. “And how does that involve me?”

“We want you to look after Dawn while I’m gone. You’d have to run errands, do whatever she needs here, and generally make sure the people in town give her privacy. She can’t drive. So we need a driver, obviously, and a Girl Friday, but we also thought it would be better if it was someone people in Steelhead already know.”

Beth glanced back and forth between the two. Her mind spun in a million directions.

“I would stay, but you see I’m taking a big chance with this film. No salary, just a cut of the profits, so I’ve got a lot

riding here. Otherwise I wouldn't leave Dawn, of course, but I got to think about my future." He looked at his wife. "And my future's our future, right, sweetie pie?"

"Jimmy, she doesn't care about all that." Dawn wrinkled her nose as if the beef had suddenly gone off. "Look. Here's the thing. The hours and the money are great, but the best part is that you wouldn't have to work at the real estate office anymore. You'd have enough time to do something else on the side. Something you wouldn't have to hide in drawers."

Beth flinched. How could Dawn know about that? Her mind leap-frogged over that puzzle and straight into writing almost full-time. Excitement gripped her. She had been wrong before. Becoming a real writer was her deepest desire. Friendship with Dawn was just icing on the cake.

Were they really offering her a way to do both?

"Why do you need someone to take care of you? Are you sick?" That would explain the dinner of only carrots.

"No." James downed the rest of the wine in one gulp. "She's not sick. She's pregnant."

Seriously? She studied Dawn with this new information. She didn't look pregnant. Not that she would know. None of her friends, even the few who were married, had kids.

Dawn met her gaze and nodded. "That's why we wanted a house up here, away from it all. And he's right. I'm going to need help." She tilted her head and gave Beth an Academy Award-winning smile. "So what do you think? Could you take me on?"

Chapter 3

“YOU HAVE TWENTY MINUTES TO get your stuff together and leave.” Vivienne spat the words at Maggie like bullets. “And don’t be taking any equipment that doesn’t belong to you. In fact, I have a full inventory upstairs. I’ll get it so we can compare notes before you go.”

“I bet you do, bitch,” Maggie muttered once the kitchen was empty. She banged open a green enamel cabinet and pulled out a black case containing all her *stuff*—as if ergonomic knives, peelers, and zesters costing a small fortune could ever be called *stuff*. Tools maybe, fine instruments definitely, but never just *stuff*. Jaws clenched, she unfolded the case to reveal one empty slip.

The paring knife was missing. She had been using it right before Vivienne rushed her out to get the broccoli. Back when she actually had a job. It still had to be here somewhere.

Maggie rooted around in one drawer and then opened the dishwasher. Where the hell was it? The kitchen was clean except for the plate in the sink. As usual lately, Vivienne had returned Beth Walker’s sandwich completely untouched and had dumped it there.

Old woman, my ass. They’re hiding something. I just know it.

Picking up the plate, she found the paring knife. It had been hiding under the dish right by the radish that Vivienne had tossed away earlier. She grabbed it, swiped down both

sides with a kitchen towel, and slid it back where it belonged. The case was full, and since there was no way in hell she was staying for Vivienne's last power play, she marched out of the room. She had her hand on the front door, ready to jerk it open, when she froze.

She was fired. She couldn't be any more fired. Should she...?

She might as well.

Clutching the case to her side, Maggie started up the stairs. When her boots slapped the wood, she crept up on her tiptoes to kill the sound. At the top, she stiffened. There were closed doors up and down the hallway. Which one? She had to pick a side.

She went left and peeked into the first room. It was empty, so she tiptoed to the next one.

The door was ajar, and scuffling noises drifted toward her, sounding as if someone was flipping through papers.

She held her breath and scooted forward.

Vivienne's broad back hunched over a file cabinet.

Two quick steps and Maggie made it past her.

A dim light came from beneath the door at the end of the hall. That must be the one.

She pushed the door open just an inch and paused. When no poison darts shot out at her, she swung it open the rest of the way.

It took a second for her eyes to adjust to the light.

A small woman lay on a hospital bed at the far end of the room. She wasn't moving. Maybe she was sleeping really deeply, but Maggie couldn't see the rise and fall of her chest. She had to get closer.

Maggie glanced both ways before stepping into the room. Stepping up to the bed, she whispered, "Ms. Walker, are you okay?"

No response.

Maggie drew a finger along Beth's wrist, feeling for a pulse. There it was—regular, if a bit slow. She was alive, but that didn't mean she was okay. Maggie circled the fragile wrist with her whole hand and shook it gently.

"Ms. Walker? Ms. Walker?"

Her eyes fluttered open at her name but, within a beat, closed again.

This wasn't an ordinary nap. She almost looked drugged.

Maggie scanned the bedside table. A pill bottle on its side and a bunch of pills lay scattered on its top. A few had even fallen to the ground. Vivienne didn't strike her as the clumsy type. What if Beth had tried to do something stupid? She reached out.

"Leave her alone!"

Maggie jumped back about a foot as Vivienne spun around the corner.

Beth let out something between a moan and a sigh and rolled over, away from them both.

Maggie fought the urge to rush back to the bed and shake Beth awake. Instead, she thrust her knife case out toward Vivienne and tried to look innocent. "Sorry, I thought I was supposed to come up here to show you what I was taking."

"I was coming down to you!" Vivienne waved the inventory list in the air.

"Oh, sorry." Maggie shrugged and took a small step back to the bed.

"No, you don't. You need to leave!" Vivienne herded her to the door. She waved her hands aggressively; the list in her right hand snapped in the air with the movement. "First I catch that other girl snooping around up here and now you."

The other girl? Maggie filed that tidbit away for later and motioned to Beth. "What's wrong with her?"

“Nothing. She’s just sleeping.”

“That isn’t just sleeping. Do you think I’m an idiot? What are those pills?” Maggie tried to dart back to the bed.

Vivienne lurched and cut her off at the pass. “Everything’s fine, and you need to lower your voice or we’ll wake her. She always takes a nap this time of day,” Vivienne said, but her voice had a pinched quality to it. She directed Maggie to the door and, as soon as they were outside in the hall, shut it tight.

“So you’re staying with that. She’s napping?”

“I am. And now you need to leave. You no longer work here. If I have to, I will take more stringent measures.”

A crazy vision of bonking Vivienne over the head with her knife case and rushing the room rose in Maggie’s mind. But then what? Sitting by Beth’s side until she woke up? Shaking her violently awake until she gave the woman a stroke? She had to go about this much more systematically. “Okay. Okay. I get it. I’m going. Just promise me you’ll get her to eat.”

“That’s no longer your concern.”

“Yeah. I get that too.”

Vivienne grunted her response and jabbed Maggie’s shoulder with a thick finger to get her moving toward the stairs.

* * *

Outside, straddling her bike, Maggie took one last look at the house. It sat serenely in the forest, the afternoon sunshine streaming onto its roof. From this perspective, Maggie could actually believe that everything inside was on the up and up. That the little old woman was napping and

that Vivienne, working all on her own out here, was just really rough around the edges. It certainly would be easier to ride down the driveway and leave it all behind if she believed that. No good could come from her digging around anyway. Her gut had gotten her into trouble before. Lots of times, actually; she just couldn't help herself.

No longer my concern? We'll see about that.

Maggie pedaled rapidly through town, cutting around cars and tourists, barely missing some by inches. Finally, she skidded up to the shopping center in the middle of town and clambered off her bike. She wheeled past The Lumberyard, the Springs's trendy gastro-pub. Women of all shapes and sizes spilled out onto the terrace with pint glasses of craft beers and sunburns probably from a day on the Tall Tree River. Two shops into the mall, Maggie leaned her bike up against the colorful storefront of Made From Scratch and popped inside the bakery.

Lauren, her ex, handed a red velvet cupcake to a giggling couple whose arms were wrapped so tightly around each other they might as well have been one organism. One of the women reached into her pocket for money while the other took the cupcake. Cooing, the second woman fed little bites to her partner as they walked out.

"Were we ever like that?" Lauren stared after the departing couple.

"God, I hope not. They're way too into each other." Maggie watched as one woman slid a hand into her partner's back pocket. "But that might have been the problem."

"Yeah, that and a few other things." Lauren laughed and threw her an air kiss. The laugh turned into a true smile. "What do you need, Mags?"

"Do you have any Lemon Lovers left?" Maggie scanned the case below the counter. "I don't see any."

“There’s a few in the back. How many do you need?”

“Just one.”

“Going to see George?”

“Yeah. It always gets me in the door.”

“Do I even want to know why this time?”

“No.”

When Lauren headed toward the back of the store, Maggie watched her. Her graceful walk was by far her best trait. Even now Maggie found it mesmerizing. They had been good for a while, but never great. And when they both realized that truth, the parting had been remarkably easy.

Lauren returned with a small blue bag and handed it to Maggie.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Hey, you teaching out at the gym tonight? Chris still hurt?” Lauren asked.

“Yeah. You coming?”

“Probably. I’ll see you there if I do.”

Maggie was halfway out the door when she eyed the empty space in the case where the Lemon Lovers should have been. She spun around as an idea jumped in her mind. “Lauren? Can I have my old job back?” She hurried the words out, but not as fast as the heat flooded into her cheeks.

“Oh, Mags, what happened with Beth Walker?”

Maggie shrugged. “It didn’t work out.”

Lauren raised an eyebrow.

Maggie shuffled her feet in response. Lauren always made her feel a little too much like a kid with her hand caught in the cookie jar. Usually, Lauren was right. That had also been part of the problem.

“I don’t know,” Maggie said. “The bitchy physician’s assistant or whatever the hell she is, we didn’t really get

along. And today I might have let fly a few things to the boss lady from the City that I shouldn't have."

"Well, there's a shocker."

Rolling her eyes, Maggie opened her mouth to tell Lauren what she had seen upstairs, but then she changed her mind at the last minute. "So what do you think? Is there a place for me here?" She slapped the blue bag against her leg nervously.

"You know you're going to have to get up early again?"

"I do."

"So will you? I mean repeatedly, not just once."

"I will." She cringed at the harsh edge to her voice and tried to beat down the embarrassment over her situation. Several deep breaths later she said, "Five o'clock sharp. I'll be the model employee." When that didn't get her anywhere, she added, "Lauren, I'm in a bit of a tight spot here. What do you say?"

Lauren bit her lip while her gaze darted around the store. "We're good friends now, and I'm not sure that our working together is the best idea."

Maggie nodded. She understood. She had left Lauren a little bit in the lurch when she quit last time.

"You know you change your mind at the drop of a hat. Have you really thought this out? This is what you want?"

Maggie nodded a little too quickly.

"I'd be crazy to say yes. But I'd be a fool to say no too. You're the best pastry chef I've ever met, and I shouldn't tell you this, but my sales fell by twenty percent when you left. Besides, Pick of the Litter has just ordered a hundred of those doggie cake pops. No one decorates them as well as you do. So what do you say? You want to start right away?"

“Absolutely!” She grinned. “But I got something to do first. I’ll be right back.” She opened the front door again. “Thanks, Lauren. I owe you.”

“Okay. I’ll be here...waiting... As always.” Lauren pursed her lips.

She was right. Maggie couldn’t blow this. There wouldn’t be another chance. Maggie rushed up to Lauren and threw her arms around her. Lauren felt big and solid, like the rock of Gibraltar, in her arms.

“I really mean it. I won’t let you down this time. Thank you.”

Lauren squeezed tight and then pushed her away, laughing “Okay. You goof. I’ll see you later. Just don’t leave me hanging.”

* * *

Leading with the blue bag, Maggie marched down the hallway at the Steelhead Springs sheriff’s station. She stuck only her hand into an open door and waggled the bag back and forth.

“That better be a Lemon Lover, and it better come with no strings attached.” Her brother’s strong voice flowed into the hall.

“You got it half right.” Maggie grinned and scooted into the small office.

Her brother sat behind a big desk with a Deputy George Chalon nameplate on the edge. Paperwork was spread so thick on its surface, no wood showed at all. George let out an exaggerated groan as his hand jutted out for the bag. “Yes, please.” Sinking his teeth into the cupcake, he groaned again. This time with happiness. “Oh, I’ve really missed these.” His

mouth was full to overflowing. “I think I was sadder than either you or Lauren when you two broke up.”

“Yeah. I think so too.” Maggie slid out the extra desk chair and sat down. She watched her brother tear into the cupcake with a smile. Like all chefs, she enjoyed watching people eat with gusto, especially when the recipe was hers. For a few minutes the only sound in the room was contented chewing.

George licked his fingers and stuffed the cupcake wrapper back into the bag. “Why do I feel as if I’ve just made a deal with the devil?”

“All you have to do is listen.” Maggie scooted the chair closer to his desk. She told him the whole story right from the beginning when Lea had told her never to ask why to that afternoon.

“But she was alive, right?” George asked when she had finally stopped talking.

“She was. But not really responsive.”

“Because she was sleeping.”

“Well, yeah, I guess. But what about those pills? Why would they be spilled all over the table?”

“Did you see a medical chart?” Her brother avoided the question.

“No, of course not.”

“So you don’t know what they were. They could have been prescribed or vitamins. Did you see any sign of distress other than her sleeping deeply?”

“George—”

“This may come as a shock to you, Maggie, but you’re not a doctor.”

She rolled her eyes. “You got to believe me. There’s something not right out there. I know it.”

Her brother just pursed his lips and shook his head.

“George, seriously, I’m not making this up.”

“Cuz you certainly don’t have a history of that type of behavior. You never imagine scenarios that aren’t true.” When Maggie sent him a questioning look, he threw up his hands. “In third grade you were convinced that Mrs. Marsh was selling secrets to the Chinese, remember? You got suspended for three days when they caught you spying on her in the lunch room.”

“Oh, come on. I was just a kid.”

“Or what about last month when you decided that that valet guy at Roscoe’s was driving the cars while we ate.”

“To be fair, he quit before we could make a final determination.”

“Maggie, everyone knows that Beth Walker is a recluse. No one has seen her in town for decades. Since she bought Fern House in the eighties I think. Besides, there’s never been a hint of trouble out there, and her own brother told us all that she was heading downhill, both physically and mentally, before he died.”

Maggie swallowed while she considered how to handle this. George was Beth Walker’s best hope. “Make fun of me all you want. But I know that I’m right this time.”

“Are you sure this isn’t about that physician assistant out there? You know how you get when you’re excited or when people get in your face. I’ve heard you tell Mom more than once that Vivienne’s a bitch.”

“That’s not the word I used. And, yes, I’m sure this isn’t about Nurse Ratched. George, can you just this once trust me and look into it?” George was her best friend. When they had been kids, he’d always had her back, and to have him not believe her now stabbed at her heart.

Heartwood

He sighed and rolled his head around in a half-nod. “Okay. I’ll poke around in this a little bit. Let’s get this clear, though. I’m not going to put my neck on the line, but I’ll see what I can dig up.”

Maggie pursed her lips.

“It’s the best I’m willing to do.”

“Okay. It’s a start.” And it was. If she was being honest, Beth Walker might have only been sleeping. She knew lots of people took sleeping pills or pain pills by their own choice. Maybe she had overreacted.

And George was right too; the bad vibes had really come from Vivienne and Lea, and now that she had no access to the house anymore, this wasn’t going to be an easy fix. She could kick herself for not being more aggressive when she had the chance. But life wasn’t lived on should’ve’s and could’ve’s. Only in the now. She had to be sure for her own sake as much as Beth Walker’s.

“You coming out to Mom’s for dinner tonight?” George broke into her thoughts.

“No, Chris’s hurt, so I’m taking his class over at the gym. You want to come out there and climb some rock walls instead? Get away from Sarah and the girls?”

“I’d love to, but Sarah would kill me.”

“Then don’t. Despite what you may think, I can only handle one crazy scenario at a time.” She held out a closed fist for her brother, who bumped it immediately. “Thanks, bro.”

* * *

Nikka pulled into the garage of her condo building well after dark, tired but clearheaded. Somewhere on Highway

101, she had mostly convinced herself that she hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary up in Steelhead Springs. Just a woman who needed extra help with her daily routines and was plainly asking for it. Nikka had no room in her plans for a woman in need of real help. Besides, the crumpled-up piece of paper on the car's floor mat started to loom larger and larger in her mind. What if it wasn't just an excuse for Lea to have a private conversation with the crazy bike woman? What if she had really wanted her to deliver it to Vivienne? Nikka liked her days wrapped up in neat packages. The loose end of the note niggled at her.

She wasn't used to spending so much time behind the wheel, and when she pulled herself out of the car, her muscles tensed. She whispered a promise to throw more yoga into her daily routine and squatted down stiffly to pat the driver's side floorboard. Where was that note?

She found it tucked under the mat, just its corner peeking out. A careful unfolding revealed a phone number written out in pencil.

Oh shit. This might have been real. She actually may have wanted me to deliver this.

In the elevator up to her condo, the question of what to do raced around in her brain, bouncing back and forth between possible solutions. She could say nothing, and if it came up, maintain that she had given the paper to Vivienne. The mistake must be on Vivienne's end. Or she could come clean and admit that she had been so flustered by the whole experience that she had dropped the ball.

I'm screwed. Either way she came off like an idiot and certainly not future partner material. Maybe there was another solution. Her fingers itched for her iPad. She needed to get on MindNode as soon as possible to create a

brainstorming chart and systematically figure out how to get out of this pickle.

Desi and Lucy greeted her at the door with loud meows, and she immediately grabbed the kibble out of the cupboard in the laundry room. She dug deep into the container and remembered that she had to buy cat food. They purred and wrapped themselves around her feet until the tinkling of kibble dropping into the bowl told them that dinner had arrived.

She hit the blinking play button on her answering machine as she dumped her briefcase onto the dining room table. Neat stacks of mail, files, and legal pads spoke to office work more than fine dining. She slid into an ergonomic office chair at the head of the table and grabbed her iPad out of her briefcase.

“Nikka.” A thick Russian accent poured out from the machine. “It’s your father. I want to know how first day went. Call back.”

“Nikka, this is Dr. Robin’s office just confirming your dental appointment on Thursday. Your mouth guard is ready. Hope to see you then.”

“Nikkkkaaaa! We’re at the bar. Come on down. There’s a hottie here we all think you should meet. No excuses this time. We’ll be here until ten.” Her old college roommate yelled over chatter in the background.

“End of final message,” the mechanical voice said.

There it was, the state of her life outside of work in three messages—a father who was a little too involved, a propensity to clench her teeth, and absolutely no love life. It wasn’t pretty.

Despite herself, she wondered what the girl at the bar might look like. Tara knew her type almost better than she

did. Athletic, legs that didn't quit, a shaggy bob with soft, sweeping bangs, maybe brown eyes a shade or two lighter than her hair...

Wait a sec... That was the crazy bike lady from the Springs. What on earth?

All thoughts of heading out to the bar died instantly. Besides, even if Tara's choice was that sexy, she'd also probably be a sports fanatic. She knew she was stereotyping in the worst kind of way, but the girls who turned her on in bed usually turned her off once they threw off the covers and started talking about football or baseball or whatever sport was in season.

For now at least, she had sworn off love. There would be plenty of time for that when she made junior partner. Besides, a drawer full of anatomically correct toys thankfully had no opinions on penalties against a defenseless receiver on the football field.

She typed a new title, *Phone Number Fiasco*, into MindNode and started plotting any idea that might help. A half hour later she was no closer to a solution than she had been in the elevator, but just creating the mind map with its different colors and spiraling nodes had calmed her down. Besides, the two yoga poses of Downward Dog and Happy Baby were calling her name.

* * *

The next morning, she walked into the tenth floor at Truman and Steinbrecker, nursing an upset stomach and no clear plan of action regarding the note. As soon as she rounded into her cubicle, the man with the red beard popped up.

Nikka stretched out her hand to play nice. “Hi, I’m Nikka.”

“I have a full tank today.” He eyed her like the competition.

“So do I.” Nikka glared right back. “And the inside track from yesterday.” She might have a nervous stomach, but only she had to know that.

She pulled her chair up to the desk and looked for the red blinking light on her phone. It wasn’t lit. That was one hurdle behind her. At least she wasn’t going to be called on the carpet before her day even started. She still hadn’t decided what to do about the phone number and instead dove into the case files on her desk.

At lunch, she stayed put to look up that appeal on the BMW case. It hadn’t come down yet, so she called the dentist to cancel. Two things to cross out on her to-do list. Already she could feel the spike in endorphins even before she slid her lucky metallic pen across the entries. It was why she went old school and hand-wrote her to-do list. No Todoist or Wunderlist for her.

She hunted around in her purse for the paper but couldn’t find it. In the end she had to make a new list, and true to the rules of the to-do list manifesto, she couldn’t put down something she had already done. Damn.

Around two, the phone rang shrilly, startling her. She was thigh-deep in work, drawing up a trademark contract for a lead attorney, and wasn’t ready for the voice on the other end.

“Hi, this is Alison, Lea’s assistant. She would like to see you. Can you come to her office?”

“S...sure. I’ll be right there.” Nikka put down the phone with a shaking hand. When she stood up, thin ribbons

of pain ran through her stomach again. Here it was. The moment of truth. To tell or not to tell.

She stepped into Lea's office focused on exactly what she was going to do and stood in the middle of the room while Lea finished up a phone call.

"That's unfortunate, but all you have to do is keep it together up there for a few more days. Don't worry. I'll take care of her."

Nikka almost felt sorry for the "her," poor person, and straightened the hem on her skirt for the third time since she'd entered the office.

"Yes, and then we'll go out and celebrate... Sure, that place with the craft beers... Yes, I promise."

As soon as Lea dropped the phone back into the cradle, Nikka made her move. "Look, Lea. I need to tell you what happened yesterday when you sent me into Beth Walker's house with that note."

Lea raised an eyebrow. "All right."

"I meant to give that note to Vivienne, but I stupidly stumbled into Ms. Walker's room. Vivienne was nowhere to be found when I went in, and I heard noises. And I just assumed... You were absolutely right. Ms. Walker isn't at all well, and I think I startled her. When Vivienne came in, she went straight to Ms. Walker to help her, and in the commotion I forgot to give her the paper."

Lea leaned back in her desk chair and folded her arms across her chest.

She thought she would feel better after the confession, but pain jabbed her in her gut again. Lea was wrong. This was exactly like being in a headmistress's office. Or so she imagined. Her parents had never had the money for a ritzy private education.

“Why didn’t you tell me that when you got in the car?”
Lea asked.

“There’s no excuse for that except I wanted to make a good impression. I’ve worked here three years, and all I’ve said to you in all that time is ‘thank you for this opportunity’ when you hired me. I didn’t want the next statement to be something like I can’t even deliver a piece of paper. It’s silly, I know, but there it is.”

Lea just stared at her, her hard gaze traveling up and down for a long, long moment. So long that Nikka had enough time to mentally pack up her things at her new desk and start composing her phone call to her father to explain how she had lost her new position in just over twenty-four hours.

“Well, the silly thing is you did.”

“Sorry?” And when Lea didn’t answer, she asked, “Did what?”

“Make a good impression.”

“How?” Nikka looked around. Was she being punked?

“I think I have something of yours.” Lea handed her a piece of paper with *TO-DO* written in bold letters at the top.

Nikka felt the heat on her face as she plucked it out of Lea’s outstretched hand. No wonder she couldn’t find it. When that crazy bike woman startled her, she must have dropped it into the depositions, but how on earth was this particular OCD compulsion impressive?

“Despite what you may have thought, I didn’t call you in here to grill you about the note. Actually, I called you in here to ask you about something on that list. The BMW appeal. Did you look it up?”

“I did. It’s still pending, but if it—”

“Yes, I know. I’m tracking it too.” Lea tapped the files on her desk. “This whole case hinges on the result, and I have to

say, I'm impressed that from just cleaning up your car, you recognized that as well."

Nikka stood up a little straighter. "Thank you...Lea."

"So I checked around a little this morning. Word in the office is that you have a first-rate legal mind, a flair for innovation, and a knack for tying up loose ends."

Nikka nodded, trying to mentally jump ahead of the compliment. Where was she going with this talk?

"You've seen for yourself what kind of shape Beth Walker's in. There was an accident in her past that has always made her physically fragile. And I'm afraid that she's tottering in and out of dementia. What a shame that such a great author would end up like this. And so we need to rally around her. If times get any tougher for her, I want to make sure that her revenue stream is in place."

In her mind's eye, Nikka put all her belongings back on her desk. "What do you need me to do?"

Lea got up and walked around her desk to lean on it, bringing herself down to Nikka's level. "It involves some time out of town. Can you get someone to look after your cat for a while? I assume that's who the cat food was for."

"Yes, I can." The heat in her cheeks rose again.

"Good. I need you to go back up to Steelhead Springs and be my ears and eyes on the ground. Walker's brother was a horrible businessman. He never negotiated any real licensing deals. Just Mickey Mouse contracts that practically invited the town to take advantage of Walker."

"Got it."

"We need to tighten up the commerce in that town and make sure that poor Beth gets the money she deserves from all those trinkets that are being sold up there. You'll have to be a bit of a hard-ass with the mom-and-pop stores up there. Will that be a problem?"

“No. The law speaks for itself.”

“It certainly does.” Lea nodded once. “Glad you’re on board.” She got up and walked to the glass door, calling to her assistant, “Alison? Is the paperwork for Steelhead Springs ready?”

Nikka watched in wonder as Lea crossed the room. Everything around her boss had suddenly come into focus. The custom-built modern furniture, the breathtaking view of the bay, the sheer size of the office—she hadn’t seen any of it before. When she crept in, she had been so nervous. Now, her possible future materialized right before her eyes.

On board? She couldn’t get any more on board if Lea had hung down a ladder and pulled her up herself.

Alison jumped up from her desk and handed Lea a file. She checked it and then passed over a long, numbered list of all that Nikka would have to accomplish up in the Springs.

“Just put a to-do at the top here, and you should be right at home.”

Nikka searched Lea’s face. Was she being snide?

A smile flashed for an instant at the edge of her boss’s mouth. Nikka’s stomach flipped over one last time and was silent.

Look at her. Joking with the boss.

Lea slid one hand down the file. The other, she placed lightly on Nikka’s arm. Her touch made Nikka’s whole arm tingle. “And here’s my private number. Call me if anything comes up.”

Nikka let her gaze fall to the bottom of the page. Wait a sec...

That was odd. The exact same number on the note. Why would Lea ask her to give Vivienne her private line? Wouldn’t Vivienne already have it? She immediately dropped

the thought like a hot potato. She was in the inner circle. It was nice and warm in here, and she'd be crazy to open that door and let the cold air in.

File in hand, Nikka strode down the hallway back to the cubicle farm as if she owned the place, a much different walk than the one a few minutes ago.

The red-bearded man threw her a questioning look as she passed.

She gave him a shit-eating grin and a knowing wink as she grabbed her purse and her keys.

Let him sit there and wonder.

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HEARTWOOD

BY CATHERINE LANE

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