

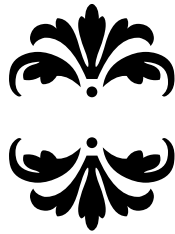
Second Chances



ALANA LORENS



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SECOND CHANCES

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Dedicated...

...with thanks to those who serve in the armed forces, on land and on sea, close to home and far away, keeping the rest of us safe. You pay a price for your service, whether in loneliness, sacrifice, pain or nightmares, and we don't always remember to honor what you've done. May you find a happy and rewarding outcome in your life to repay your efforts.

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CHAPTER 1

It really was pink.

Inessa Regan stared at the terse document she'd taken from the cream-colored envelope left on her desk. Sounds of the busy office outside her door faded, and blood rushed to her face until it was as florid as the paper in her hand.

She leaned against the desk, her breath sucked away. The words blurred through tears she couldn't control. No matter how polite the language or painfully insincere the partners' mild apology and explanation, the result was the same. After ten years practicing law with the firm of Venda and Spinelli, Inessa was out. Cold.

A pink slip.

That burned her the most, took that punch in the gut and twisted the fist deep. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to find a piece of paper that shade of rose in an office with sophisticated navy-on-cream stationery. Intentional, then.

Bet it was the young blond bimbo Franco Venda hired.

Inessa was sure old Franco's wife hadn't approved that girl.

Back when Inessa, a nondescript brunette with thick thighs, interviewed, the wife had chosen her as "non-threatening." *That's me—proud winner of the Least Likely to Appeal to Anyone contest.*

She'd started as a summer intern, although no spring chicken. Thirty-two years old, just out of law school, no husband, no children, no agenda other than paying back the obscene amount of money she'd borrowed to finish. She was grateful for the opportunity, worked long, hard hours, and would have stayed in the old brick building till she died.

Apparently, someone had a different idea.



Once the nausea and panic receded, she shut the door before her dignity dissipated altogether, setting her back against it. The words on the note still floated before her closed eyes. If she opened them, she would see the beige walls, the mauve carpet, her over-sized desk where active files were stacked in baskets.

Her wood veneer file cabinets held memories of so many families whose lives she'd touched—parents, children. Grandparents, even, more of those saddled with otherwise unwanted offspring as the years passed.

Some she'd helped bring together. For others, she'd filed the papers that tore them apart. In family law, often the end of the case found everyone unhappy. The drama took a toll on emotions and wallets.

Even so, family law wasn't a lucrative practice in a city like Pittsburgh. Hollywood, maybe. Not here. Her client receivables didn't match those of the personal injury and corporate guys. Family law was the redheaded stepchild of the business—everyone knew that. None of the other eight attorneys at Venda and Spinelli even dabbled in domestics anymore, so all the emotional offal ended up right on this desk.

Her knees feeling a little steadier, she returned to the desk, dragged her fingertips lightly along the polished oak surface. Soon it would be someone else's problem. She realized she didn't even care whom. It wasn't *hers*.

At least it was Friday afternoon, so most of the old-timers had left early; her embarrassment would be relatively private. Even Franco was gone for the day. Would she have pleaded with him to change his mind? Her throat closed up at the thought.

The partners had announced cutbacks at a firm meeting a month before. Two attorneys would be let go, not for any defect in their work but because of the recession. Inessa had suspected she might be a target. Something cold had crept around inside her when no one would look her in the eye. Still, she'd held out hope her longevity and devotion would be enough to spare her.

But it hadn't. No different than the long-term browbeaten wives she'd defended in her legal career for whom when their husbands decided the marriage was done, it was done. *Here's a few bones for you. Now, get out.*

How could they just kick her to the curb after she'd given them sixty hours a week for ten years?

Bastards.

If they wanted her to go, she'd go. Now. While she was still angry. It would keep her from breaking down and begging them not to dump her, desperate, not knowing where her next check was coming from.

She emptied several file storage boxes onto the floor and filled them with the contents of her desk drawers and closet. Only her personals—by the terms of her contract, she couldn't take the files into which she'd breathed life.

A quick tap on her door, then it swung open before she could respond. The Blonde. Her real name was Karen, but Inessa always thought of her as The Blonde. The faux-innocent smile didn't fool Inessa for a moment.

"What do you want?"

"I just came to see if there was anything you need," The Blonde said. Her gaze scoured the contents of the open boxes on the floor. Her presence intruded on Inessa's private space like a blunt object pressed against a plastic bubble, a slow, persistent bulge of contempt. She remained till the perception of the bubble popped, igniting Inessa's sharp resentment.

"I need you to get out." Through a jaw tight with a controlled urge to disturb that pretty, thin face, Inessa turned away and forced herself to continue placing her things in the boxes.

"Of course. I'll let Mr. Spinelli know you'll be leaving today." Her bright tone held amusement, close to mockery. Inessa detected a moment of hesitation; then, The Blonde walked out, leaving the door open.

Inessa glanced at the portal, relieved her office didn't face onto the secretarial pool. The fact they hadn't posted security in her doorway meant they didn't even give her enough credit to think she'd bother taking anything valuable. Or maybe they hoped the bad news would be so devastating, she wouldn't be able to muster the spirit to steal anything.

Oh, yeah? You think I'm just some submissive little girl you can expect to bend over and take it?

A sudden impulse grabbed her; she tucked one of the firm's heavy-duty staplers in her box. *There's ten bucks off your bottom line. So there.*

All the same, guilt like a hot red neon light seemed to flash in that box till she took out the stapler and dropped it back on the desk. Pathetic.

The last thing she packed was the severance check. Not a bad amount for blood money—enough to pay the bills for six months, even with the student loan, and the mortgage on her cottage by the lake. Perhaps even enough to find another job before she was completely broke.

Perhaps.

She piled the three boxes onto a wheeled cart, resentment bubbling inside. A final look showed her all that remained unclaimed were her

khaki Chico's jacket, a broad-brimmed straw hat she'd worn weeks before and her knockoff Gucci bag. So be it.

She left the office door open as she pushed the cart out to the elevator, bathed in the laser-stares of the secretarial staff and the office interns, and rode two mortified stories down to ground level. The building security guard grinned as she passed through the lobby.

"Have a good day, ma'am!"

"You betcha," she muttered before passing into the tenuous April sunlight outside.

The trunk latch on her aging Lexus stuck, but a bump of her generous hip persuaded the creaky metal to open. The detritus of her evaporating professional life seemed inexplicably small and sad in that hollow space.

Inessa shook her head and slammed the lid then climbed into the driver's seat and floored the gas pedal, getting some small satisfaction as a hail of gravel pinged off the building's perfectly tinted windows.

CHAPTER 2

I nessa marched through her yard to her back door, her frustration and hurt now a full-blown blaze of anger.

“Get out of here!” she barked at the neighbor’s cat, a gray puffball who continually tried to establish squatters’ rights on her back porch. The animal scrambled away as she stepped onto the weathered wood.

She tossed her unexamined mail onto the kitchen table. *Bad news? Take a number, honey. I got it in spades.*

Implications of the blushing dismissal had continued to drop like jagged boulders as she’d navigated westbound Friday rush-hour traffic. Ripples of reality followed. What she’d have to cut now. What she’d have to sacrifice over the months to come. Forbearance on the student loans. Paperwork. More paperwork. Unlike her office paperwork, though, none of it would pay a dime.

The prospect of no income scared her to death.

Even her cheery yellow-themed kitchen failed its purpose; she moped through the double doors to the pantry and studied the four shelves of colorful contents, wanting something, anything, to soothe her shattered nerves. Finally, she reached for the back of the top shelf, where she’d stashed a bottle of Beringer Bancroft Ranch Merlot 1997. When she’d bought the expensive wine upon graduating from Duquesne, she’d vowed to save it for a special occasion.

How much more special can you get than the first time you get fired?

She opened the wine and let it sit for several minutes before she poured the deep-red liquid into a stemmed glass. She paced, brooding.

She could beat herself up about it all night, but in all likelihood, none of this was her fault. She wasn’t one of the Old Boys of the firm. Her specialty didn’t generate six-figure judgments. The rolling dice of the economy had just bitten her on the hind end.

No point lamenting something you couldn't control. Making plans to run over the blonde bimbo could wait. *Play Scarlett O'Hara. Think about it tomorrow.*

Ready to ditch consideration of law, lawyers and law offices for the day, she ducked into the small bathroom with its vanilla-scented candle and tropical décor, slipped off her pantyhose and unpinned her hair from its now-disheveled up-do, running her fingers through to loosen the hair so it draped over her shoulders. Her jacket she hung on the back of the bathroom door. Then, she stepped out onto the canopied porch in her short-sleeved blouse and full-cut navy skirt.

Dusk settled in with a cool breeze that raised the hairs on her arms, but she didn't intend to be out long. She picked out several different strains of birdsong, a sure sign spring was well entrenched and summer was coming.

Her garden, a potpourri of mixed flowers in no particular arrangement, had taken hold, and early buds awaited a few more days of sun before exposing their tender recesses. In the months to come, butterflies and other insects would swarm the twenty-foot square, but for now, the possibility of lingering frost held them at bay.

Carrying the wine with the care of an Olympic torch, she sank into one of her blue-cushioned rattan chairs. She lay back, eyes closed, taking in the sweet whistles of the birds, and breathed lilac-scented air to erase the day from her mind.

"Hey, Nessa? Nessa! You here?"

The shrill voice from off to the left announced the cat's owner, her neighbor Ann Sontag. Before Inessa could protest she wasn't up to company, Ann pushed through the small swinging gate, crossed the yard's path of gray paving stones and climbed the two steps to the porch, her baggy flowered scrubs a shot of bright color in the fading light.

"There you are! I heard your car come in. I don't want to intrude, but..."

But you're going to anyway.

"This will only take a minute, and it's truly important." With a nearly repentant smile, Ann looked over her shoulder. "Kurt? Come on in, honey!"

"Ann, really, it's not a good time..."

"Believe me, you'll understand why in a minute," Ann said softly. "Come on, Kurt!"

Inessa's gaze flicked to the opening in the fence. The man waiting there stepped through, approaching with apparent reluctance. When he wavered at the steps, Ann took his arm and helped him onto the porch.

“Inessa Regan, this is Kurtis Lowdon. Kurt, this is Inessa Regan, the lawyer I told you about. She is *fabulous*! She can draft up what you need in no time at all!”

Inessa studied the man, taking in his thin frame, shadowed brow, and very close-cropped blond hair. Something about him wasn't right. She set her wine glass aside and waited for one of them to explain.

“Sorry to disturb you,” he said. His apology was followed by a boyish grin, and that's when the oddity of the picture came together. He moved and stood like an old man, but he had to be less than thirty, perhaps just college age. “Annie insisted.”

“It's her way.” Inessa managed an answering smile, shreds of courtesy tugging at her conscience. “I usually don't see clients outside the—” Realizing she was about to say “office,” the irony stopped her. “Well, seeing as I don't have an office, I'll have to make different arrangements.”

“No office?” Ann's brow twitched, but she hesitated only a moment before barreling right on. “You can help him, though, can't you, Nessa? Kurt's just finished his second round of chemo. He wants to make sure his life is in order—just in case, you know? I told him not to worry, that everything's gonna be perfectly fine, but he's so stubborn, you know, like men are, and thinks it all has to be written down in black-and-white...”

Ann babbled on, but Inessa didn't really listen. She looked into Kurt's blue eyes and recognized there knowledge of his imminent mortality. His smile, however, was undimmed in spite of it. She felt like an ass for indulging her self-pity over an employment setback.

“Nice to meet you,” she said at last, leaning forward to shake his offered hand.

“Same here.” The warmth of his regard jolted through to her toes as their hands met. He glanced down at her feet. “Never met a barefoot attorney before. I guess I thought you were all born wearing wing-tips.”

Nonplussed, Inessa finally laughed.

“Aha! My new marketing brand. ‘The Barefoot Attorney.’”

“It could work.” A mischievous streak sparkled in his eye. “When can I meet with you? Time is of the essence, as you people say.”

“I don't know. I'm not even sure where.”

“Nothing wrong with right here, if you ask me. How about tomorrow? I'll bring breakfast?”

That smile. Hard to resist. He and Ann together were like an oncoming city bus. Best get on, or get run over.

“Umm, well, all right. Sure. Nine a.m.?”

“Perfect. Thanks.” He squeezed her hand again and stepped back.

“Great!” Ann gushed. “I just knew this would work out! And so convenient, too. You’re a saint, Nessa.” She stamped a foot on the porch as the gray cat poked its head up out of the bushes. “Moonbeam! Get your butt back home *now!*” The animal vanished into the growing darkness. “Come on, Kurt, honey.”

She took his arm, and they walked away, Ann talking a mile a minute. The young man paused to wave before he closed the gate.

After he was gone, his smile lingered with Inessa, stirred something deep within her. She tried to get hold of herself. *Inessa Lin Regan, that’s nonsense. You’re old enough to be his mother.*

Well. Maybe an older sister.

Maybe.

An unexpected bubble of joy trickled up inside her. As night settled in and the stars flicked into visibility one by one, she finished her glass of wine slowly, looking forward to breakfast for the first time in years.

CHAPTER 3

The alarm went off the next morning at the usual time; Inessa realized as she rubbed her eyes that she'd set it out of habit. *Fifty-three. Time to...do nothing?*

She rolled over into her white linen sheets and thick white comforter and closed her eyes again. No use. Once she was awake, little twitters of alarm and resentment began pinging off the inside of her head again, like a sparrow trapped in a box. The day was off and running.

Her worn suede slippers waited next to the bed, their fake fur lining crushed after seasons of use. She grumbled getting into her periwinkle fleece bathrobe then flipped on the KDKA early morning television news before dragging weary feet to the kitchen. The coffemaker pot already held the morning elixir—coffee, half hazelnut, half decaf.

Absently, she poured in some sugared chocolate creamer then wandered back to the bedroom to sit on the end of her well-padded mattress to see what tragedies had afflicted the Pittsburgh area overnight. The chatty female anchor's delivery couldn't keep her attention, though, as the reality of the prior day waved its red flag in the back of her mind. *Hey! Remember me? Your own major life crisis, now off and running? Your imminent financial ruin? Starving to death?*

Then she recalled she had a guest coming for breakfast at nine.

Who was this young man, anyway? Ann had seemed almost intimate, called him *dearie* or *honey*, or something—that much Inessa recalled. Not one of Ann's kids, because they weren't local. About the same age, though. Of course, it was twilight when they'd come. The light could have played tricks with her eyes. He could be thirty-five.

She had to confess to herself quite a bit of curiosity about how Ann and her young friend were connected. Surely they weren't...? That

would be scandalous, wouldn't it? What did they call those women? Panthers? Cougars? *You go, girl*. Although she didn't know her well, she wouldn't have expected Ann to be so bold.

He's dying.

No, *undergoing chemotherapy*, she reminded herself. The hope must be that his cancer was treatable. Second round—that meant they hadn't kicked it first round. But they were still pursuing the devil, so the course of treatment must not be doomed to failure. A wise choice on his part, in any event, to make preparations and arrange his affairs.

She understood people with a practical bent. Some things you could control, some you couldn't. Better to take those you could and grasp them firmly to avoid becoming lost in life's currents. Inessa wondered idly whether Kurtis had a partner or children, someone for whom these arrangements would be important.

The news anchor repeated the morning's top story about a murder-suicide, and Inessa gave thanks neither of the dead had been a client of hers. Sometimes you got a break.



Walking through the small cottage she called home, she realized she had no space to even consider using for a professional meeting. There was nothing wrong with the back porch for a social gathering, but the idea of a client conference with her herbs and watering jar standing by just didn't seem right.

The partners at Venda and Spinelli had always emphasized that there was something of performance in orchestrating client encounters, and that an unprofessional appearance would taint one's association forever.

Nevertheless, she decided she could function without the four walls, the staff and the law library for as much work as Kurtis Lowdon needed. What were Venda and Spinelli doing for her at the moment? Not a hell of a lot. She had a legal pad, and pens, and a fresh pot of coffee. That should be good enough.

As a long-term practical matter, though she might like her clients, she didn't really want to invite them into her personal space. Opposing parties were even less welcome. She'd have to get an office in the city.

The thought of striking out on her own swirled her insides into roller-coaster-drop nausea. Even on the worst days at Venda and Spinelli, she'd never mustered the courage to leave when her alternative was the uncertainty of solo practice. Never.

This morning's appointment was an anomaly, and in all honesty, more of a favor to her divorced neighbor of five years than a

real client. Inessa dusted off the glass-topped rattan table on the back porch for the tenth time, irritated as much at herself as anything. Why was she wasting time morbidly assessing her desperate options? Having a home office was a moot point. She would likely score a new position with another firm soon, another mid-level associate's job where she could comfortably go to work and go home without administrative headaches. She'd do what she was told, meet with clients in whatever office she was given. She didn't need much. Just a regular paycheck and her bills paid on time each month. That's what mattered.



Wearing a sedate black suit, her hair tucked into a tortoiseshell clip, Inessa was waiting by the door before Kurtis pulled his silver pickup into the driveway. She opened the door to the front yard, a small but neatly trimmed area of grass crossed by a gently curving line of square paving stones and small clumps of tulips past their prime.

The young man, very casual in jeans, sneakers and a Steelers sweat-shirt, moved as he had the night before—a little slow, a little stiff. She watched each measured step, her smile carefully controlled at a welcoming intensity.

“Good morning, Mr. Lowdon.”

“Call me Kurt, please. Though if you'd rather, I'll call you Ms. Regan.” His eyes, a misty shade between blue and gray, studied her appearance, seemingly baffled as he pulled a white paper bag from his large leather briefcase. “I think I liked you better barefoot.”

Inessa hesitated, unsure how to respond. Her lips parted, air passed between them, but nothing came out.

The young man grinned at her discomfort and leaned closer, looking over her shoulder into the house.

“I brought breakfast, like I promised. You like strawberry or peach?”

The thought of warm pastries drifted through her mind.

Kurt smiled that sunny smile, eyes twinkling.

“Best breakfast ever, from Quiet Storm. Soy yogurt with fresh fruit, homemade granola on the side.”

Soy yogurt? Seriously? She tried not to visibly twitch.

“Oh.”

“Not what you were expecting, right? I eat pretty healthy these days. Every little bit helps, you know.” He gestured with the bag. “You want to eat here on the front step? Or you want to try the back?”

Embarrassed, she stepped aside, gestured him in.

“I'm sorry. Not used to having clients here. Would you like coffee?”

“Never touch the stuff anymore. I brought some organic juice.” The smile persisted, taking any sting from the words as he walked past her, through the small house to the space where they’d met the night before, pausing to survey the garden before he chose a seat.

“No coffee?” She sat across from him. “I think I’d perish.”

“I guess we all choose our poisons, isn’t that right?” He set the leather case on the wooden floor and opened the white bag, bringing out two thick paper bowls, plastic spoons, and a small bottle of orange-tinted juice, the label proclaiming the goodness of carrots and apples.

“You strike me as a peach person.” He popped the plastic cover off one of the bowls, revealing freshly sliced peaches on top of creamy whiteness, and slid it across to her. The scent of the peaches made her stomach rumble. It sure looked like yogurt. Maybe even ice cream. Soft, melty...bean-based ice cream. She bit her lip to keep from making a face.

Kurt opened his, strawberry slices almost completely covering the yogurt underneath. He scattered one packet of granola on top and took a bite, licking the spoon with delight.

“Amazing. Just amazing. Believe me, after you’ve done chemo, it’s a real blessing when food smells good again.”

And don’t I feel like a fool.

“Of course.” She picked a slice of peach off the top of her bowl, enjoying its tart sweetness. His smile encouraged her to try the yogurt. *Not bad.*

“The granola really makes the meal—seeds, wheat germ, dried fruit, everything.” He handed her the small paper package.

“All right, all right!”

He was certainly persistent. She laughed and mimicked his addition of the cereal to her bowl then tried the concoction.

“Tastes...healthy.”

“Then I have succeeded.”

Kurt toasted her with a spoonful then finished every bit in his bowl, sitting back with a contented sigh. Inessa picked the fruit off the top and ate some of the rest before picking up her pen. The silence had grown long. She needed a retreat to her comfort zone—the words, the questions, answers, documents, solid responses and solutions.

“So, Ann said you need papers drawn up?”

“Yes.” He reached into his case and pulled out a beige file folder. “She’s been worried about me. In all honesty, I’ve been a little uneasy myself.”

Inessa wasn’t sure if he was teasing her, despite the spark of mischief in his eyes.

“I imagine so. You and Ann...?” She trailed off, not wanting to pry, but curiosity still burned.

“Me and Ann?” Kurt broke into laughter. “Oh, hell, no!”

Inessa’s cheeks went hot in a fiery rush.

“I’m sorry, I just...last night she seemed so familiar, like the two of you were very close.”

“We’ve known each other for a couple of years. You’re aware she’s a nurse at UPCI?”

Inessa probed her memory. *Did I know that? Maybe.*

“Right. Oncology, I think. Oh!” She nodded as sudden understanding bubbled into her brain. “Of course.”

The University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute had a stellar reputation. Ann must be good at what she did.

“It takes a special kind of person to work with cancer patients. Some days, none of us have hope, you know? Ann...that woman could talk the ears off a donkey. I swear she was the only thing that got me through the worst times.”

Inessa’s opinion of her chatty neighbor rose several more points.

“So, she’s confident you’re getting better?”

“That’s what she says.” He riffled through some papers. “However, I believe in hedging my bets. So, I want a living will. Just in case things go bad. And a regular will, too.” He shoved the papers across to her. “My mother’s set for life—my dad saw to that. So, I haven’t put her in the will. She understands.”

Inessa glanced through the even, precise handwriting. He wanted to leave a piece of property on the east side of the city and his personal belongings to a sister, Marjie. He also left a handful of investments to the Cancer Caring Center. There were no provisions for a wife, ex-wife or fiancée.

The terms of the living will were stringent. In the event of a terminal condition, Kurt had chosen to refuse everything except nutrition, water and pain relief. He wanted ‘DNR’—Do Not Resuscitate—and no medical interference with the natural death process if there was little chance of his survival. Inessa was surprised he hadn’t given the medical community a little more leeway, but if this was his second time through, she had to believe he was better aware of the circumstances than she. Perhaps the treatment was worse than the alternative.

“Most people are moving to a durable power of attorney for health care,” she suggested. “Your designated representative can make decisions on the spot. Whoever you choose needs to be very familiar with what you want and why, so they can make informed decisions on your behalf if you’re not able to.”

“I’d be glad to give you exact directions,” Kurt said. “If you’ll serve.”

“Me?” Something tightened in her chest. He was asking her to take on a lot of responsibility, without a lot of information. Surprised, she put down her pen. “Kurt, I’ve only just met you. Are you sure that’s a wise choice?”

He didn’t look in her eyes, gathering the paper bowls and used spoons, tucking them inside the bag for disposal.

“Ann assures me you are an honorable woman. I think it makes sense to have someone more detached, less emotionally invested in my life, to make those decisions if push comes to shove. Especially...well, not important right now.” He shrugged, smile fading. “I don’t want to cause my friends or family the pain of being in that position, Ms. Regan.”

“Call me Inessa,” she said. If he trusted her enough to ask her to make a life-or-death decision for him, the least she could do is be friendly.

“Inessa, then. Will you be my representative?”

She nodded slowly, watching a pair of robins poke the edge of the garden for worms. She’d been asked to be executrix of a will before, but never this. As he said, however, she could operate from an objective place, weigh the pros and cons, and advise the doctors without the emotional ties of a family member. Hopefully, she could guess the right path.

“I can. How soon do you need the documents?”

“I hope I don’t *need* them for a long time.” His heart-tugging smile returned. “But I’d like to have them in place as soon as possible.”

“You’re in luck. I find myself with quite a bit of time on my hands.” In response to his curious look, she explained her situation. “I’m sure I’ll find a new position in the meantime. Don’t worry, I can get this put together by the end of the week. I’m not one of those attorneys entirely dependent on staff.”

“A woman of many talents.” His grin widened. “Annie was right. I owe her big time.”

Inessa felt like a much younger woman for a moment. Was he flirting with her? She took a glance at the paperwork. He’d stapled a photocopy of his drivers’ license to the last page so his signature could be verified. In his license photo, his hair was almost to his shoulders, blond and full, and the camera had captured his smile exactly. His birthdate was July 11. On that date, this year, he’d be thirty years old.

He reached over and covered the picture with one hand. His fingers were well proportioned, but scarred.

“Don’t tell anyone I took a good picture at the DMV. They’ll be jealous.”

She chuckled. “I’ll try to keep the rumors under control.”

“So, you’ll call me when you’re ready?” He put his remaining papers in his case and stood up. “Here’s my number.” He leaned over and scribbled on the top of his notes. “Breakfast again? Or if you’re more adventurous, we could try something with tofu and flax seeds.”

Was he teasing her?

“Or maybe a real steak. Seriously.”

“Think out of the box, woman! Each step you take gives you the opportunity to change your life for the better.” He winked. “Call me.”

He left the porch, taking the long way around to the front. Inessa heard his truck start; then the engine sounds pulled away.

Might as well get to it right away. After another unhealthy cup of coffee. With cream. And sugar.

She laughed at her choice of poisons and took Kurt’s papers inside to get started.

CHAPTER 4

The other immediate project Inessa tackled was securing a new position. It turned out to be harder than she'd expected. A couple weeks of cold calls yielded nothing. She resorted to contacting friends in the legal community, and when that gave her no hope, she finally tapped her closest friends. The bottom line turned out to be the bottom line—the market couldn't afford her.

This painful reality was summed up over a large Cobb salad by her Duquesne classmate Leslie Stalwhit. Even the familiar warmth of the Doubletree's Bigelow Grille, with its maize-colored walls and polished hardwood floors, failed to cushion the blow.

"Inessa, in the current economy, partners can hire some slob right out of law school for thirty K or less to file divorces and litigate custody."

This can't be happening.

The usually delicious salad dressing turned sour on her tongue.

"But I've got a reputation. I can bring in clients. Hell, I carried over one hundred active files at Venda and Spinelli. It's not like family law clients ever get out of litigation after one encounter. One thing after another till their kids are grown, you know that."

The note of desperation in her voice pained her. She'd rehearsed this pitch in front of the mirror several times, until she could make it without choking up. It was one thing to ask managing partners at other firms that she hardly knew. Having to beg her friends for help shredded what little of her self-confidence remained.

Leslie's chin-up smile extended no comfort.

"I do know. I'd love to have you in with us, but there's just no way. Frankly, even if you brought a stable of clients with you, we all practice in the same field. Whatever you make would be money out of our pockets." She stabbed at a hunk of lettuce, and Inessa wished

for just a guilty moment that it were old Franco Venda's heart. "I'm really sorry."

"Yeah. Everyone is."

Inessa added another spoon of sugar to her iced tea and stirred it, watching the other restaurant patrons with envy. They had places to go and people to see—and she had squat. Her appetite dwindled as she stared down at the salty bacon and smooth avocado she normally scooped right up, and she pushed her plate away. The overeager waitress swooped in to grab it.

She'd debated calling her former boss, wondering whether, should things get better, they'd ask her back, but she hadn't picked up the receiver. No reason to think he'd overrule a partnership vote. Damn Franco. If he'd had half a spine...

Even after ten years, resentment burned that she'd never been nominated for partner. She'd remained a high-paid associate, subject to the whims of every partner in the firm. Maybe that's what Leslie wasn't saying. If Inessa's work hadn't been good enough for her to rate partnership status, no one else would want her, either. Damaged goods.

She sighed. "Everything else going well?"

Leslie's brow unfurrowed now that she didn't have to hear Inessa complain about her joblessness, or feel she had to do something about it. She launched into personal detail about life and practice. Inessa half-listened, thinking she'd have to cut back on these \$15 salads in order to make her severance check last.

If I don't, I'll be reduced to eating nuts and twigs out of the back yard. I'll invite Kurt Lowdon. He'll be impressed.

Thinking about Kurt's sunny attitude cheered her some, and she saved a little face by picking up the check. She still caught Leslie's last pitying over-the-shoulder look as her friend left the restaurant, right before her cheery wave.

Don't you worry about me. I'll take care of myself.

Somehow.

Before she drove out to the lake, she tortured herself by driving past the office, to discover whether the lot was full, who might be coming or going. Just something familiar.

The only person she saw was that backstabbing blonde, climbing out of a blue sports car. Worse, The Blonde spotted her. The smirk on her face sent a chill through Inessa, raising goose flesh despite the warm sun on her skin.

Great. Now she'll go tell everyone I'm mooning around the place.

Suddenly, a hermit's life eating nuts and berries didn't sound so bad.

Humiliation forced a quick retreat home. She locked the doors and grabbed a container of Ben & Jerry's Chubby Hubby out of the freezer and a spoon. Fortified, she curled up on her bed to spend the afternoon flipping through movies she'd already seen, distracted enough at last by the perils of Julia Roberts to mindlessly consume the whole pint.



The next morning, the empty carton stared back at her from the bedside table, damning evidence of her lack of control.

Scowling, she tossed it into the white wicker wastebasket. Chubby Hubby, indeed. She'd had one, back a decade or so—a Chubby Hubby. Her last serious loss of control. She'd married Jimmy "Buck" Shorter one night because he'd asked her—and no one else had by the time she was twenty-seven.

Just went to show those old sayings had real truth behind them. Marry in haste, repent at leisure. Turned out old Buck had proclivities for gambling and otherwise blowing money on women, drugs and anything that appeared to be the gateway to a quick buck. He quickly took control of the household money, and went through her cash, her savings, and maxed out her credit cards. In one short year, she went from being someone with a secure future to a woman on the edge of bankruptcy.

Her recovery began in a weekly group at the local shelter for battered women. While Buck hadn't ever hit her, the relationship had deteriorated until the dynamics were much the same as with any other abuser and victim. She gradually got some gumption—enough to hand Buck a one-way bus ticket to Las Vegas. His stuff she pitched onto the front lawn.

He didn't say a word, just collected the clothes and shoved them into plastic grocery bags then headed down the street into town.

Her feeling of helplessness in the face of someone else's bad acts, that sickening lurch of insecurity, had pushed her in the direction of law school. She'd aced the LSAT, was accepted, and as a single, broke woman returning to school, qualified for unexpected grants and scholarships. Regardless, the process had been expensive. She still owed thousands.

Which brought her back to finding work.

Maybe she'd have to move to another area, another city. Another state? Inessa cringed at the thought of having to take the bar exam again, ten years after she'd left school. She'd never be able to pass. The law had changed in those years, and while she was up to date in her specialty, the test covered contracts, personal injury, in-

ternational law—everything fresh in the mind of the graduating student.

Besides, she couldn't leave her little cottage. Over the last eight years, it had become a part of her. Each year she'd invested in the refit of another room or section of the yard until it was finally exactly what she wanted. How could she live anywhere else?

Time for another Scarlett moment? How many more of those could she afford?

I've got one client. One. A pathetic turn of events.

She went out to get the *Post-Gazette* from its box at the end of her driveway, then waved to Ann, who was just pulling in next door. Ann braked abruptly, got out and hurried over to the low fence between the two drives.

"So, are you going to help Kurt?"

"I can't discuss his case with you, you know that."

Ann grinned. "Then you are. Good. So sad what happened to him. The VA is worthless, sometimes."

That raised an eyebrow.

"VA? Kurt's a veteran?"

"Didn't he tell you?" Ann tilted her head to crack her neck. "Gosh, I'm beat. But, yeah, before he opened his little security agency, Kurt was in the Middle East, doing some secret Army reconnaissance. He got exposed to something toxic or radioactive, and developed brain cancer.

"He had to fight the VA for treatment—no one wanted to admit the unit had been sent in covertly. He wasted months on their half-assed treatments before he came to UPCI to participate in a new research study.

"He's a real trooper. He's lived through some horrendous side effects to get where he is now. I have a lot of respect for Kurt. And he's a cutie."

Since he'd come with such a specific request, Inessa had purposely short-cut her usual intake, the work information and family background that usually gave her a slice-of-life picture of her client. This information put depth into the man.

"He seems very special. He thinks you're something else, too."

"Oh, I'm something else, all right. Mainly exhausted—I've been on for twenty-four. Thanks for helping the kid out. All my prayers are that he won't need these papers, but he's a responsible young man, and he needed to put his mind at ease to concentrate on his recovery." She shook Inessa's hand, her fingers warm and capable. "Bless you. And goodnight."

"Goodnight. Morning. Whatever."

Inessa took her paper back into the house, thinking about Ann's revelations. An ex-military man, an indomitable sense of humor, a Middle East veteran, a cancer survivor—what else might she learn about Kurt Lowdon? Her interest in the headlines faded; she realized she was very curious indeed.

CHAPTER 5

Her phone rang early the next Thursday morning. She'd been up since the usual time, still unable to convince herself to sleep in. She and her cup of coffee had been skimming the Internet for possible job leads when she'd gotten sucked into *Pink Slips are the New Black*, the website of a fellow newly unemployed person. Nothing there inspired her in the least.

She welcomed the phone's distraction.

"Hello?"

"Inessa? This is Kurt Lowdon. Do you have an office yet?"

"I haven't been able to hire on anywhere, Kurt, but I've completed your—"

"Not for me. I've got an old Army buddy—a couple of them, actually—in a bit of a bind. I thought you'd be exactly the person to help. But they need someone, like, yesterday."

Definitely not his usual cheery self.

"I guess I could meet with them here."

"Ahhh, no." Kurt seemed hesitant. "A couple of issues. You're better off meeting somewhere that's more of a green zone."

"Green zone? I'm not eco-friendly? It's a backyard garden, for heaven's sake."

He finally laughed. "I mean it needs to be neutral ground of some sort. We're just going to have to find you an office. I'll have more people to send you than this."

"My own office? Overhead'll kill me."

"Working for yourself is great. No one orders you around. Tell you what, why don't you come take a look at my space? I've got an office that's really too big for me, and I could use some income. Promise not to gouge you. But you've got to meet Rafe as soon as you can." He paused a moment. "How about lunchtime today?"

“Today? Well, I don’t know.” Her gut offered a dozen instant reasons to turn him down. Her standard reaction to initial overtures by a man. After Buck, she’d only dated a couple, and only after they’d been real persistent.

“You owe me some papers anyway. I’ll get some food for the three of us. Look, I’m in a brick three-story just off Penn Avenue in East Liberty.”

“What are you doing out there?” Inessa knew the area, a formerly stagnant neighborhood on the east side. Over the last few years, an influx of trendy businesses and urban renewal grants had put it on the road to recovery.

“When I came home, I had a bonus burning in the bank, and the area was pretty ripe for investing cheap. Couple of small redevelopment grants helped get it repaired to code. It’s not fancy, but it’s going to be a hot address in five more years. Look, I’ve got to run. See you for lunch.”

He gave her a number on the north side of 37th Street and hung up before she could ask what the Army buddies needed, and more important, what was wrong with them that they couldn’t be trusted in her house.



She arrived early, dressed in what she always thought of as her court uniform—navy suit and silk blouse in muted colors, guaranteed not to offend a judge. At the address, she found a narrow brick house of three stories with an immaculate cement stoop. A small hand-lettered sign on the screen door announced *BTDI Security*. She admired a cheery pot of red geraniums as she turned the door handle and stepped inside.

The carpet was new, the color near the midpoint of the blue palette, and the walls semi-gloss white, bare of any décor. A new computer desk was partly constructed in the open front room, parts regurgitated from the carton onto the floor in a random spray.

“Kurt?”

“Back here.” The voice came from halfway down a narrow hall.

The downstairs was still laid out like a private home; this must have previously been the living room, which put Kurt’s location in what might have been a dining room. If there was a kitchen, it had been enclosed.

She followed his voice, coming into a brightly lit space about ten feet square with a large wooden desk and several chairs, two wooden ones in front of the desk and a large black swivel chair behind. Kurt was casually dressed in a red polo shirt and jeans, which made him

appear even younger and his face even more pale. Another man, similarly dressed, was sitting with him, his back to Inessa.

Both rose to their feet as she entered.

“Thanks for coming,” Kurt said. “Lunch will be along shortly. This is Rafe Johnston, one of the army buddies I was telling you about.”

Inessa turned her attention to the second man, tall and sandy-haired, who hesitated then extended his right hand. As she took it, she realized with a start it was artificial. He shook her hand with complete solemnity and withdrew as soon as he could without being rude.

“I’m Inessa Regan. Nice to meet you,” she said, trying not to stare.

His average-Joe face splitting into a crooked smile, Rafe pulled out a chair for her.

“I’m just glad you could come on short notice, ma’am. Life’s pretty FUBAR for me at the moment.”

She didn’t have to be military to recognize that acronym.

“Kurt said it was an emergency.” Inessa took the chair and reached into her leather briefcase for her laptop, which she set on the edge of Kurt’s desk. “What can I do for you?”

Rafe began to speak, but a pernicious stammer dissected his words and he fell silent with a hangdog expression. Kurt sat down again, leaning forward with his elbows on the edge of the desk.

“May I, Ray?”

“Sure, b-buddy. H-h-hard for m-me, y’know?”

“I do.” Kurt regarded Inessa thoughtfully. “Where do you usually start?”

“Let me get some basic information.”

Here we are. Comfort zone central. Just the facts, ma’am...

She took down Rafe’s name and his address in West Mifflin, found that he received a VA disability pension, and that he’d married the former Susan Baker while they had both been stationed in Iraq two years before.

“What did you do in the service, Mr. Johnston?”

“EOD.” At her puzzled look, he explained. “E-e-exp-plosive ordnance d-d-disposal specialist.” A glance at his prosthetic clued her to the cause of his disability.

“Rafe lost his arm in the line of duty and got sent back home about six months into his tour,” Kurt said. “He was a member of the Guard unit under my command on my second tour, before I got returned Stateside.”

“Because of your illness?”

Her question came before she could stop it; her curiosity on this point had been simmering since she’d talked to Ann. The idea shocked her. He’d developed cancer overseas and gone back for sec-

onds? Was he a glutton for punishment? Or maybe a guy with a martyr complex?

“Took them a few years to find out what was actually causing my symptoms.” A rueful expression crossed his face while he fussed with some papers stacked on his desk. “The delayed diagnosis is probably why the sucker’s been so hard to kick. Anyway, I knew Rafe before we shipped out. His big brother Richie was a year behind me in school. Promised Rich I’d look out for him.”

“You d-done good, T-top. You d-did. Ain’t your fault w-w-what’s happened. It’s mine.”

“Shit happens, buddy.” Kurt reached across the desk to fist-bump Rafe’s good hand. “Especially to weekend warriors.”

“D-damn longest w-weekends ever!” Rafe settled his lanky frame back into the chair with a sheepish look at Inessa. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“No need to apologize,” she said, still not sure why Kurt had called her. “Look, if this is some kind of disability claim...”

Rafe spoke up. “No, ma’am, I’ve got that handled. This is about m-m-me and Susie. W-we got m-m-married on some I-and-I w-w-weekend. Hell if I know w-w-w-why, really. Seemed like the thing to d-d-d-do.”

More military jargon? Inessa’s mind swirled in confusion.

“A what?”

He looked sheepish again.

“Intoxication and intercourse. Not that she’s a d-d-desert d-d-dime—she’s real p-p-pretty. But ain’t like there’s m-much to do in the sandbox when you’re not on p-p-patrol.”

“I see.” Marry in haste... At least she wasn’t the only one who ran afoul of poor decision-making. “Susie is the other army buddy you were talking about?” she asked Kurt.

“Yeah. We were all friends. Till everything went bad.”

Rafe’s face flushed. “Till I got my effing hand blown off, you mean. That’s when the shit hit the fan.” He struggled to control himself. “I got my ass sent home and did a hitch at Walter Reed to get this.” He waved his right arm. “But S-s-susie s-stayed. And sh-sh-she...and sh-sh-she...”

He began to tremble. Inessa thought he’d break out in tears.

“Chill, Rafe. It’s okay.” Kurt’s voice was extremely calm, the kind of tone one used to keep a dog from attacking. “Take a deep breath. Think of the beach in Maryland.”

Something almost tangible passed between the men.

Inessa tried to reassure him.

“Mr. Johnston, I understand it’s hard to share the details of your life with a stranger. Just take your time.”

The doorbell rang out front, and Kurt jumped up.

“Let’s take a break,” he said. “That’s lunch. I’ll be right back.” He hurried out, wallet in hand.

A long silence hung between Rafe and Inessa like slowly dissipating smoke. Rafe finally mumbled, “Hope you like green stuff. That’s what he always eats. With spinach and tofu and all.”

“So I’ve gathered.” She seized the opportunity to find out more about Kurt. “Was he an officer, then?”

“No, ma’am. He was top. Top sergeant,” he clarified. “Worked intelligence—where he met Suz. She was HUMINT. Human intelligence. Interrogations, translated documents—that kind of thing. She was good, real good. Knows how to punish people who don’t give her what she wants. Wall-to-wall counseling.” He winced.

“Oh, I see.” She hadn’t heard that term before, but the mental picture of someone bouncing a subject off one wall then the other came to mind. Maybe that was all right in a military crisis situation, but in a relationship...not so much.

She heard Kurt’s cheery dismissal of the delivery person, so she bit back her next question, thinking over what she’d learned. Intelligence? That meant a high-level security clearance, no doubt, and an impeccable record. Interesting.

Kurt returned and set down a large brown bag, reaching in for paper plates and half a dozen Styrofoam containers that he spread across his desk as Rafe cleared space.

“I hope you like Greek. I’ve got...let’s see...a mazzza platter, some stuffed grape leaves, hummus and pita, spinach pie, and feta salads. Still no steak.” He grinned at Inessa. “I’ll wean you off that yet.”

“This looks fine.” She recognized the name of the restaurant. The meal would be delicious.

Rafe grumbled, “Still don’t know what you got against a fine cut of meat, Top. Green stuff is what dinner eats, not what’s for dinner.”

“That stuff’ll kill you.” Kurt settled into his chair with a Greek salad, smacking his lips as he ate the kalamata olives off the top.

Using his left hand, Rafe applied himself to his food with single-minded determination. Inessa felt as if the two men were drawing out as long as possible the moment until they had to get back to the story, but she was in no hurry.

“Do you really want to share this space with another person, Kurt?”

“Oh, sure. Room for a secretary out front, and you could have this office. I can move into the back. Most of what I do is over the phone anyway.” He shrugged, with a confident smile. “We could get a water cooler, or splashy art. Anything you like.”

“I’d like a full stable of clients or a steady paycheck. But we’ll get to that.” She let the subject drop. The ambience was fine, at least

inside. The neighborhood wasn't one she'd have chosen, but Kurt was right that, in a few years, it might become more desirable.

The food was wonderful, and Inessa ate her share. Rafe seemed reluctant at first, but once he'd determined Greek food palatable, he dug in with more enthusiasm. Inessa noted that Kurt ate his small salad very slowly, finishing about the same time they did but having consumed much less.

The conversation moved beyond her expertise when the subject changed to the Pirates' performance, year to date, and the two men launched into the discussion. Pittsburgh was a sports town, always had been. Inessa was not a sports fan, never had been. During football season, she read the headlines enough to carry on a "Wasn't that great!" conversation with other counsel at motions court, but that's as far as it went. Baseball? Right out.

She used the space of not talking to take the last piece of flaky baklava, licking the honey from her fingers when she was done. That was probably enough calories for the rest of her day.

When the food was gone, another uneasy silence stole over them. With a bit of reluctance, she turned to Rafe.

"If you're ready."

"Yes, ma'am." He pushed his plate away.

Kurt quietly picked up the detritus of their meal and packed it into the bag, which he placed in a gray metal wastebasket behind him.

"You were telling me about your wife after you left Iraq," Inessa prompted Rafe.

He was silent so long she wondered if he'd lost track of his story. He stared at the ceiling, at the floor and everywhere but at her.

Finally, he said, "If I hadn't been sent home, it never would have happened."

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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