



BECKY DOUGHTY

WATERS FALL

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Becky Doughty
ww.BeckyDoughty.com

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www.BryanStifle.com

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NORA'S BONES ACHED IN THE FRIGID WATER, AND HER lungs thrummed in desperation for oxygen, but she resisted the urge to push to the surface. She tipped her head back and gazed up at the warped glow above her, the sunlight flaunting its promise of warmth. The water roared as it flung itself over the stacked boulders of the falls and into the pool where she was submerged; the cacophony surrounded her, shutting out all sounds from above. The kids would be calling for her by now, and if she stayed under much longer, Jake would come after her. She'd long ago breathed out the last of her air so she could sink to the rocky bed of the pool. Her long dark hair drifted up around her head, reminding her of mermaid stories, and her arms floated out to her sides of their own volition. If she could just keep from kicking her legs, she might be able to stay there...longer.

It had started out as a game to see who could hold their breath the longest, and Nora knew she'd win, hands down, even against Jake. A choir girl—first school, then church—her lung capacity was in tip-top condition because she worked to keep it that way. On the third round, though, something tripped inside her head, like a live wire sending a

string of sparks skittering across her thoughts, and she was suddenly and acutely aware of the thrill of this watery cocoon, of being out of breath, of the cold, and of the churning chaos just a few feet away from where she waited in a strange state of suspended animation.

They'd stumbled across the huge pool with its waterfall a few years ago while on their annual family camping trip to Kennedy Meadows in the Sierras. It was a bit of a hike up from their actual campsite, and some distance down a tributary of the main river, but they made the trek almost daily during their week-long stay.

They called it Anderson Hollow, and there was never anyone around to challenge their claim to it. The falls made it less than ideal for the hardcore fishing fanatics, and the hike made it less than ideal for waders and sunbathers.

The banks along the west side of the stream were cut away where the water ran swift and deep, but on the east side it was sandy and wide, and they picnicked in the shade or napped in the sun after swimming in the chilled mountain water. The kids collected pretty stones, quartz crystals, and shiny bits of pyrite they were certain was gold.

"The California Gold Rush did happen in California, Mom," Felix reminded her with wide, hopeful eyes. Leslie gathered wildflowers and seedpods to make peace offerings to the local water sprites, and they both learned to weave tall reeds together to form little rafts for boat races.

"This way, if we lose one down the stream, we're not littering." Leslie had participated in an Earth Day Campaign at her school and won a contest for her artwork depicting children putting flowers in the tailpipes of black cloud emitting vehicles. For a while, she'd driven everyone crazy with her activist behavior, but her fervor waned over time to "healthy awareness," much to the relief of her family and friends.

Today was the first time Nora had ever intentionally opened her eyes under the water here without her goggles on.

The torrent from the falls kept the pool stirred up and cloudy, and she'd always been afraid of debris blinding her.

But the swirling specks of silt and sand, glittering and pale, added to the otherworld sensation that held her in its grip. What would happen if she just opened her mouth and drew the fairy dust water into her lungs?

Suddenly the very thought of breathing had her clamoring for the surface, bursting up out of the water with a great gulp that left her coughing and gasping. She looked up to find she'd drifted to the far side of the waterhole where there was no easy place to climb out. Across from her, Leslie scrambled from the top of the large boulder where she'd obviously been perched to try to locate Nora. Felix, tears of panic streaming down his face, stood ankle deep at the edge of the pool, helpless in his youth. Jake, treading water out where she'd first gone under, couldn't seem to make up his mind whether to come to her aid or go back to comfort the kids.

Nora waved him off, and he grimaced at her before making his way to Felix. She read both fear and condemnation in his eyes, but she was too busy trying to catch her breath to respond. She was trembling a little, and her side felt like it wanted to cramp; she wasn't sure if it was from the cold or the depletion of oxygen. She'd have some explaining to do, and she sighed in frustration, knowing nothing she could say would make sense to them. At least not to Jake.

The kids would probably accept that she'd been swept under by the rushing water, even if they didn't like it, because they'd never ventured too close to the falls for fear of just that.

Jake, however, wasn't going to be so easy to appease. He stood with his arm around Felix, his other hand up to shield his eyes from the glint of the sun off the water as he watched her, waiting for her to come back to them.

2

LASHING OUT AT HER HUSBAND NEVER MADE FOR A GOOD start to a family outing. Nora knew that from experience. But the bags were not packed. They were not sitting in the driveway waiting to be loaded into the back of Jake's truck.

The morning was nearly over, and they still had a six hour drive ahead of them to their favorite campsite, Kennedy Meadows, on the South Fork of the Kern River. Fortunately, it would be light until almost eight o'clock tonight, so if they got on the road by noon, they'd still be able to set up camp in daylight. They might even have time to take a dip in the river before the sun set behind the peaks, making it too chilly to enjoy the water.

Jake sauntered into the kitchen from the garage, his arm around Felix, regaling the boy with fishing stories from his own childhood. Nora stood at the kitchen sink, washing the last of the breakfast dishes, trying to force her mounting frustration down the drain with the dirty water. As they passed behind her, Jake reached over and ran a hand along the curve of her waist, his fingers drifting across her low back, and she clenched her jaw to keep from flinching.

She did not want him touching her right now.

She usually loved camping with the family, but it was getting increasingly more difficult to take time away from her business. She had calls to make, orders to place, shipments to process, two new clients to book, and a miscellaneous to-do list a mile long.

And Jake had waited until the last minute to pack him and the kids up.

“It’s only four days, Nor.” So he *had* noticed her less-than-warm response. But then, what did he expect? She’d asked him every day this week how the packing was going, and his noncommittal answers didn’t bode well with her. And she’d been right to ask—he’d done nothing but stock the tackle boxes and junk food supply.

“We can wear the same clothes the whole time. Just toss some clean underwear in a grocery bag, and we’re good to go, right guys?” He and Felix high-fived across the counter behind Nora.

Leslie sat at the table sorting her change, her long brown hair, so like her mother’s, pulled back into a ponytail. There was a quaint little general store near the campground, and the kids collected coins for weeks in anticipation of the homemade goodies at the snack bar. At her father’s words, she stopped counting, and rolled her eyes.

“That’s so gross, Dad.” Looking to Nora, who was now filling the old red and white cooler with perishable food items she’d frozen overnight, she said, “You don’t have to worry about me, Mom. I’m packed. Clothes, toothbrush, deodorant, my hairbrush. And my sketchbook and pencils, of course.”

“Of course. Thank you, Les.” Nora, too, wanted to roll her eyes over Jake’s incompetence, but she refrained. “Would you do me a favor?”

“Sure.” Leslie, still young enough to be excited about camping, was also old enough to be aware that there was more to it than just showing up for the fun.

“Will you make a list of everything you’ve packed and give a copy to each of the boys? Then when they’re finished packing their bags, please do an inspection to make sure they

haven't forgotten anything."

"I don't want her touching my underwear," Felix quipped, a nine-year-old boy with bouts of teenage attitude. "That's just wrong."

"I don't *want* to touch your underwear, freak."

"I'll count your underwear, Felix," Jake laughed, ruffling the boy's hair.

"No, you won't. You'll be too busy counting your own." Nora eyed her capricious husband over the kids' heads, making sure he understood that he'd been categorized with Felix in his ineptitude. Jake had the decency to mouth an apology before reaching over to smack her backside as he left the kitchen.

The three of them headed down the hall toward the bedrooms while Nora finished up alone, a reluctant smile softening the edges of her discontent.



"IT'S TOO MUCH FOR ME TO HANDLE ON MY OWN," SHE murmured, responding to his sideways glances across the silence between them; the unspoken questions in his eyes.

"You could have just asked for a pair of floaties, you know." He grinned and nudged her shoulder with his own. "They probably sell them down at the General Store."

She frowned at his effort to make light of things. She wanted him to listen, to really hear what she was trying to say. The way she'd felt today had scared her, too, and she needed to talk about it without him turning it into a joke so they could brush it under the carpet along with all their other unaddressed issues.

"I need your help, Jake." She dragged in a slow breath, then continued, not looking at him. "I need you to contribute more. It doesn't have to be equal amounts. I don't care about the 'his money, her money' thing, so please don't make this about that, but I'm sinking here." She tried to pick up a piece of curled gray ash that had landed on the cuff of her flannel

shirt. The delicate flake disintegrated between her thumb and finger, leaving behind only smudged traces of itself. “I need your help,” she repeated, her voice barely more than a whisper.

The kids were tucked into their sleeping bags in the tent, and she and Jake sat close to each other on a blanket by the campfire, a second one wrapped around their shoulders. This was usually her favorite part about camping; the two of them alone by the fire at the end of the day. Away from the cares and concerns of reality, they talked late into the night, snuggling closer and closer under a starry sky in the middle of nowhere.

Usually, there was nothing more romantic.

Jake, wide awake even after a long day of hiking, fishing, and swimming, looked over at her. “Sorry if I seem a little confused, or surprised, but I thought we were doing okay, that things were going well.”

“Going well? For whom?”

“For the family. For you and me. I mean, we’re just doing better all around. We both have jobs we love, and the money’s good.” He pulled her close to his side, his arm around her waist. “I know it’s not perfect, but we’re making it work, right?”

She leaned away a little and turned to look at him, taking in his handsome features made rugged by the firelight and the wilderness around them. She wanted to reach over and run a caressing finger down the crooked line of his nose, but his insensitive response to her needs wouldn’t let her. “Really, Jake? Making it work? I’m the one *doing* all the work, *making* all the money, *paying* all the bills. You’re living the life of a...of a kept man. Of course it’s working for you.”

Even in the flickering glow cast by the flames, she could see the tightening of his mouth; the lines between his brows deepen. “A kept man? Wow.” He stared into the fire as though pondering some disturbing revelation. “You know, I was under the impression that I was doing some work, too. Maybe I’m not making tons of cash, but I’m certainly not

sitting around in my smoking jacket and bedroom slippers all day.”

His feelings were hurt, and she squeezed his thigh where her hand rested. “I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry.” Why did the words with the sharpest barbs always slip out at the worst time? “Try to see things from my angle, okay? This isn't the way we planned it. I was going to work some extra hours, take on a few more clients for a while, just until your business was up and running. Remember?”

He didn't say anything, so she continued. “It's been almost two years since you got your license, and I'm still working ‘extra hours.’” She made quotation marks with her fingers to emphasize the words. “But your business hasn't...” She shrugged her shoulders, letting her sentence go unfinished. Her voice dropped. “When, Jake? When are you going to get this thing off the ground? I need to know.”

He continued to stare into the fire, not saying a word. The silence between them filled with the sounds of the wilderness at night; scrabbling little claws in the scrub brush around the perimeter of their site, the rustle in the trees above as life hurried by in the shadows. There was the whup-whup-whup of a set of large wings; perhaps an owl, or even a bat, she didn't know.

Finally she stood up, leaving the warmth of the blanket still draped around his shoulders. “I need a little hope, Jake. I need to know what you're thinking, what you're planning for our future. I don't even need specific answers right now, but I do need to know what the plan is, if it's changed. I can't keep going at this pace.”

When he still didn't speak, she sighed heavily. “I'm tired. We've got a full day tomorrow; I think I'll turn in. You take care of the fire, okay?”

“I thought you liked your job.” He blurted out the words without looking up at her. “You're so good at what you do. And how can you argue being paid so well for doing something you like doing?”

“Like my job? I *love* my job, Jake. And it’s not about the money.” With her booted toe, she nudged one of the blackened logs jutting from the fire’s stone ring, making sparks shoot up into the sky. A balloon cloud of smoke gusted up toward her face, making her eyes burn. “I love my clients. I love helping people get their homes in order.” She wrapped her arms around her chilled body, hunching her shoulders up to her ears.

“But I love being a mom even more,” she said, her words throbbing with longing as she continued. “And I miss it. I love being a wife, and I miss that, too. I love being a friend, but I feel guilty for spending any more time away from home than I already do, so I don’t have many of those left, either. I’m too busy for any of it.” She looked sideways at him, holding her hands out to the fire. Even in May, the nights were cold in the Sierras once the sun went down.

“Don’t say that, Nor. You’re a great mom, and a great wife. We couldn’t ask for any better.” He rose and came to stand behind her, wrapping the blanket around them both. She didn’t pull away from the heat his body offered. “I wouldn’t mind if you spent an evening or two out with your friends. I know I’ll still be the one you come home to at the end of the day.” He bent and planted a kiss in the curve of her neck, nuzzling her ear in a way that made her shiver with pleasure. “Come back to the blanket, baby. I’ll help you warm up.”

They lay on their backs, close together beneath their cover, gazing up at the brilliant stars twinkling in the canopy above their heads. She tried to relax, to simply enjoy their time away from the busyness of life.

She tried. But she couldn’t. He just didn’t get it.

Finally, she sat up again and looked down at him. Her voice was quiet, but firm. “You’ve got to get yourself some work, Jake. Call your brother; he’s always hiring. Drive a forklift. Get an office job. I don’t care. Just do something, so I feel like we’re still a team.”

“Can I ask you something?” He stared off over her left

shoulder, and it bothered her that he didn't look her in the eye.

She nodded.

"How would you feel if the tables were turned? What if you were, as you put it, a *kept* woman, and I was the primary bread winner?"

She'd asked herself this same question many times. It was one of the reasons she'd let things go on so long. But she'd worked their whole marriage. Even after leaving her receptionist job when Leslie was born, she'd turned her stay-at-home status into a work-from-home career, successfully launching SoNora Décor with a baby on her hip. She'd always contributed financially. She couldn't imagine what it would be like not to.

Besides, the question didn't seem fair in these circumstances, and she responded with a flippant rebuttal. "I wouldn't know. Unlike you, I've never had the chance to find out, have I?"

"Ah. Is that what this is about? You want your turn to stay home in your robe and slippers?" He propped his elbows up underneath him. Now he did meet her gaze, and his was slightly hostile.

Even with her thigh still pressed against his, she felt the chasm of unaddressed frustration widening between them. What kind of man asked his wife a question like that? She brought her knees up, wrapping her arms around them, her voice tight. "You've always said the man should be the provider. I'm happy to contribute to our finances, but that's not what I'm doing anymore. I'm providing, Jake. And I'm doing so with very little help from you."

"That's not true," he declared. He was sitting up now, absently snapping a twig into tiny pieces and flicking each one into the fire. "We wouldn't be where we are today if I wasn't providing in one way or another. It may not be financially right now, but I still provide my services. The house is clean, dinner is cooked, dishes are washed, the kids are happy. And

I certainly don't hear any complaints in the bedroom. If I'm a kept man, then I'm doing a pretty good job earning my keep."

Nora sighed. She didn't want to play tit-for-tat. She pushed up to her feet and put distance between them again, standing so she could hold her hands out over the fire and still look at him; making certain he could see her face.

"Actually, Jake, *I* finish the dishes at the end of the night, so you have a clean slate to work with every day. *I* sort the whites, because you stubbornly refuse to pair the right socks together." Her head began to bobble, emphasizing her words like a teenage drama queen, and she tried to control it. "And *I* fold the towels, since no matter how many times I've shown you how to fold them so they fit in the bathroom cupboard, you fold them wrong, and the cupboard door won't close." Now she was jabbing her chest with every *I*. "And speaking of the bathroom, it's clean because *I* clean it. Have you ever, even once in our entire marriage, cleaned the bathtub? Or the toilet, for that matter?" Her cheeks felt hot against the cool caress of the mountain breeze. She had to stop, get her emotions under control, or he would just glaze over.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, took a deep breath, and spoke quietly to soften the blow of her words. "Jake, you need to remember that you're supposed to be working from home, not just staying home. You're at the house because that's where your office is, not so you can be our housekeeper."

"What about the kids? I'm a great dad." He was understandably defensive, and now he was on his feet as well. He didn't come near her, but stood on the other side of the fire from her, their communal blanket abandoned on the ground.

"Yes, you are!" She nodded emphatically. "You're a great dad, Jake."

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans, but remained silent, eyes squinted, shadowed in the flickering firelight. It was as if he could already hear the *but* coming.

"But have you considered what kind of example you're

setting for your children, as a husband and a father? What kind of man do you want your daughter to marry? One who takes care of her and provides for her, or one who allows her to provide for him?" She paused briefly, but he didn't speak. She pushed harder, an edge of desperation in her voice. "Would you prefer that your son grew up learning to keep a house, or learning to provide a house for his family?"

The fire was beginning to die down, but instead of drawing them together as it usually did, it only formed a chilled void between them. Finally, more to himself than to her, he said, "Let me see if I got this straight." His arms hung loosely at his sides, as though he was unsure what to do with them. "I don't make a very good house-wife, and apparently I haven't been a very good husband or father, either. I'm obviously not a very good business man, by your standards. So, I guess I'm not very good at anything, besides being a kept man, am I?"

His gaze swept back up to meet hers, his eyes dark and deep, and Nora shivered, her mind pulling her back to Anderson Hollow and the embrace of the icy water as it swirled around her.

3

Four months later...

“I’M DYING HERE. I CAN’T STAND IT, JO. I JUST CAN’T.” NORA sat in her silver Altima with the windows rolled up, the end-of-summer sun making the temperature inside the vehicle skyrocket. Sweat beaded at her hairline and along her upper lip, but she hardly noticed.

“Nora, you need to pull yourself together. It’s time to draw a real line. No more bargaining, you hear?” Her friend’s voice on the other end of the line was calm, but firm. “Besides, you’re running out of time. School will be out in an hour and your kids—”

“I know. I didn’t forget about them.” Nora’s voice shook. “I just don’t know if I’m ready to play the ultimatum card. Or if he’s ready to hear it.”

“When is anyone ever ready for stuff like this? But the longer you wait, the worse it’s going to get.” Jo paused. “You know that, right?”

Nora’s left hand gripped the steering wheel, and she tried not to stare at the diamond on her wedding ring, mocking her as it glittered in the afternoon sun.

“Nora? Stop with the excuses. I’m tired of hearing them.

It's time. Give him your ultimatum, if you must, but this needs to be his last chance. If it were me, I would have kicked him to the curb a long time ago." She paused, and Nora could hear a phone ring in the background. "Besides, I need to go. I have a client on the other line." Jo didn't wait for her response; the line went silent in Nora's ear. She leaned forward and rested her forehead on her knuckles.

Jo Simpson was one of the few women with whom she still spent any time, mainly because the two of them worked out of offices in the same downtown building, and their friendship had developed out of the convenience of proximity. They shared many lunch hours, and a few after-hours together, and although they had little in common, they'd reached an understanding about each other that didn't require either of them to wear masks.

Jo was divorced. "And it will happen, I'm telling you. Your Jake is exactly like Henry and you'll get to the end of your rope exactly like I did. I was fooled for a while. I thought he was being supportive of me and my dreams. But then I realized he was just lazy and unmotivated and was glad to hand over the reins because it let him off the hook. He didn't *want* to lead. Well, I got tired of dragging his weight around. And believe me, you can't change him. No matter how hard you try, how much you encourage or beg, no matter how many temper tantrums you throw, he won't change. Think about it, honey. Have you ever been able to trust him to take care of things, or does it scare the living daylights out of you to even think about giving him the pants to wear?"

She seemed the only one who understood Nora's frustration. Jo didn't judge her for her marital dissatisfaction. In fact, she assured Nora she was perfectly justified in feeling the way she did.

Nor did she put her up on a pedestal like the women at church did.

During Bible study each Wednesday night, Nora sat in mute misery, listening to Jake advise the other couples on

how to keep the romance alive between them. “Guys, it’s the little things that make her melt. Cut a single rose or flower from the garden—even a dandelion would work in a pinch, right Nor?—and take it to her while she’s in the bathtub. Something that tells her you’re thinking about her even when she’s not right there with you.” Then all the ladies would sigh, look longingly at their husbands, and the questions for the marriage veterans would begin in earnest. It was like that every meeting anymore, the group racing through the scheduled study, right into discussion and prayer, where marital problems and solutions were bandied about like a game of egg-toss. Nora usually found herself giving advice she knew didn’t work, desperately hoping her words, wrapped in their fragile shells, wouldn’t fall to the floor, messy contents splattered for all to see.

Was it possible Jake still believed things were working between them? Either he believed it, or he was trying awfully hard to convince everyone he did, including himself.

“Nora?” She lifted her head to see her husband’s concerned face peering through the closed window at her. He looked crisp and cool in his faded jeans and white t-shirt, in complete contrast to the way she felt, and it irritated her. “Are you okay?”

Why, oh *why*, did he always ask her that? And what would he do if she told him she was *not* okay? If she told him just how *not* okay she really was. No, not if; when she told him.

Instead, she nodded, pointed at her phone, and mimed that she’d been on it. He motioned for her to roll down her window. She opened the door instead, forcing him to step back.

“What on earth are you doing? It’s a thousand degrees in there! How long have you been sitting out here?” He leaned against the outside of the door, ducking his head a little so he could see her. Then he grinned and pointed at her mouth, reminding her of pictures she’d seen of him as a little boy, the same precocious look in his eyes. “You have a sweat mustache.”

She didn't bother responding, but leaned over the console to grab her portfolio off the floor on the passenger side.

"Why didn't you come inside? The air is on, and the house feels great." No wonder he looked so refreshed. Nora thought of last month's terrible electric bill, but didn't say anything. "You'll get heat exhaustion or something."

"I won't get heat exhaustion, Jake. Don't be ridiculous. I just needed to finish my conversation. You know I don't like to be on the phone when I walk in the house."

"I'm not one of the kids, Nor. I would have respected your privacy." He thrust his chin forward. "Unless you don't want me to know who you're talking to." He was gripping the top of the open door, and Nora had a wild urge to slam it on all of his fingers. So much for respecting her privacy.

"I was talking to Jo. Do you want to see for yourself?" He did not approve of their friendship. A bad influence, he called her. Jo only laughed when Nora apologized for his often tactless behavior around her. She said it was just fear talking, that Jake was afraid of her, and afraid of Nora when she was with her.

"Don't be silly." He snorted, making a point to not look at the screen she held up for him to see. "I trust you."

"Mm-hm." Nora slid out of the driver's seat, stepped back, and slammed the car door, a little harder than necessary. He snatched his fingers out of the way, just in time. "Oh, sorry," she said, as she headed toward the front of the house.

She knew he followed closely by the sound of his sloppy footsteps on the cobbled stones behind her. Flip flops. That irritated her too, as her feet complained inside the sharply-angled toes of her three-inch pumps.

Once inside, she decided against kicking off her shoes the way she usually did. Crossing the tile, she let her heels clip purposefully, reminding him which of them was the grown-up in the house. She dropped her things on a chair at the table, then went to the cupboard for a glass. She was parched, the heat outside combining with the frustration burning just

under her skin. Jake beat her to it, taking down a green glass tumbler, and filling it with ice and water from the refrigerator door before handing it to her.

She hated the way she felt as she watched him attempting to appease her. He'd been trying way too hard since their camping trip in May. He just didn't get it. She hadn't asked him to spend more time doting on her. She'd asked him to do his part in contributing to the welfare of the family so that she could spend less time away from them. Come up with a solid plan, at least...but no. She got chocolates and love notes in her packed lunch instead. He washed her car more often, cooked more often, mowed the lawn more often, vacuumed more often.

From somewhere inside, a small voice piped up. Most women she knew would give anything to have husbands who did those things for them. And honestly, she would have loved those things beyond measure if they didn't come with the price tag of her sacrifice. Most women she knew didn't put in the hours she did trying to keep all the loose ends from unraveling...freeing him up to do all those things for her.

"Peace, okay?" He leaned against the counter and studied her as he spoke, the spicy aroma of his aftershave strong. He must have just taken a shower. Her eyes drifted along his jawline to the lobe of his left ear where a dab of shaving cream had been overlooked. He even shaved more often. "Sorry I got a little parental out there. I actually came out to meet you because I have some good news. I'm glad you're home early. I didn't think I'd get to tell you about it until this evening."

She drank her cold water in silence, wondering if it would even occur to him to ask her *why* she was home early. He just smiled expectantly, so she took the bait.

"What's your news, Jake?"

"It's a good possibility that I just landed an exclusive contract with Granlund and Gray Real Estate, that company you hooked me up with several months ago. They refer me to their clients already, so it works out great for both of us."

She kept her antennae up for Jake; he was very diligent when he had work, and she had no qualms about referring him to anyone. “That *is* good news. So what’s in it for you? Give me details. Is it payroll or commission? And will you be eligible for benefits?” Benefits were always the question of the hour, since they were both self-employed.

“They assure me I can get an average of three or four home inspections a month to start out. It’ll increase from there.” He absentmindedly picked up the sponge in the sink and began wiping down the counter beside him. It was already spotless; he seemed full of nervous energy.

Nora frowned. “Isn’t that about what you’re doing with them now? And what if their clients already have someone they want to use? Will that affect your pay?” He seemed awfully confident, but something about the whole setup didn’t sit well with her.

“I’ll still only get paid for the inspections I actually do, but G and G will offer my services as part of their promo package.”

“Wait.” She frowned into her glass, then looked askance at him. “Does that mean you’ll have to offer their clients a promotional discount?”

“I’ll be giving their clients a discount, yes, but it will eventually turn into more work.”

Nora sighed. She seemed to do a lot of that lately. “I’m sorry. I’m not trying to be thick, but I don’t understand. The company already refers you to their clients, and you’re getting paid the full amount for inspections. The only change I see is that you’ll be paid *less* for the same amount of work. Am I missing something?”

Jake’s face fell a little as he tried to defend himself. The sponge went still under his hand. “It sounds bad at first, I know. But there’s potential for a lot more work if this deal goes through.”

It did sound bad. It sounded to her like a raw deal for him. “Jake. Think about what you’re saying. There’s no way they can guarantee you anything, but apparently, they want

you to guarantee them everything. And at a discount rate. I don't see how this can be a good thing for you." She set her glass down and rubbed the back of her neck with her cool, damp hand. "Who designed this contract anyway?"

"I designed it, okay? Geez, Nor." Jake pushed away from the counter and tossed the sponge into the sink. "Don't get too excited for me." Then he turned and left them room, his sandals slapping the tiled floor indignantly.

Nora dropped into a chair at the dining table, her still-damp fingertips making dark circles on the leather portfolio in the seat beside her. Maybe she should go after him and tell him *her* news. Why not? He was already angry with her.

But she just sat there, her words trapped inside.

~ ~ ~

"MOM? YOU'RE HOME!" LESLIE PUSHED OPEN THE DOOR that led from the garage, and Felix came charging past his sister, vying to reach Nora first. She sat at the table, several fabric sampler books opened in front of her, matching paint chips from two different color palettes. Leslie slowed down to let her younger brother win, and snorted derisively when he turned in his mother's embrace to shoot her a triumphant grin.

"You're such a goob, Squealy-Feely."

"Don't call me that, Messy-Lessy."

Nora reached out to touch fingers with her daughter, noticing the delicate line of her cheekbones in the slanting afternoon light that streamed through the kitchen blinds. She was growing up so quickly.

"Don't call you what? Goob or Squealy-Feely?"

"Mom," Felix whined. "Les is calling me names."

"And hello to you, too," Nora cut in, smiling at their sibling banter.

"So I got an A on my Picasso today." Leslie offered nonchalantly, tossing her backpack over the back of the sofa, and dropping into a chair to sit close to Nora at the table. "Mr. Larsen wants me to let him use it as an example for his

other classes.”

“Wow! I'm very proud of you. Congratulations.” Nora turned to her son who had wandered over to the fridge. “Felix, do you have something to say to your sister?”

“Um,” He looked confused; he hadn't really been paying attention. “I'm sorry? But what did I do?” Nora laughed out loud at his assumption that he should apologize for something.

Leslie rolled her eyes again. “It's not what you did, it's what you *are*,” she taunted.

“Congratulate your sister, Felix.”

He still looked confused. “What for?”

“My Picasso, Goob.” Leslie stated. “Don't you hear anything with those flaps on the side of your head?”

“I don't know what a Picasso is, so why should I congratulate you? For all I know, it's a mutant booger you pulled out of your nose, and your teacher named Mr. Larsen wants to keep it in his class for other kids to get grossed out over.” He brought an apple to the table with him, sitting across from the girls. “See? My flaps work fine.”

“Nice save, Felix.” Nora acknowledged him with a high-five. “But just so you know, Picasso is an artist, and Les had to do a Picasso-style painting for her art class.”

“Isn't that plagiarism?” He'd recently discovered the hard way that copying someone else's work, even from a report posted online, and calling it his own, was cheating, but with a fancy name.

“Geez, Felix. Don't get too excited for me.” Leslie's words, though directed at her brother, reverberated inside Nora's mind. She could hear Jake saying the exact same thing to her not more than an hour ago.

Speak of the devil. Jake stood in the doorway, and shot her a smug look behind the children's backs. He'd recalled his words, too. “Come on, kids. Your mother has work to do. And you have homework, too, I'm sure.”

“No, actually, I think I'm done for the day.” Nora stood and began stacking her things into neat piles. “Let's go

celebrate the artist. How about dinner at Pepe's?" Leslie grinned proudly, while Felix ran around in a tight circle, his fist in the air, chanting like a football player. Nora turned to face her husband.

"I'm sorry for being negative today, Jake. Congratulations on your contract. I mean it."

He hesitated just long enough for the children to take notice. Leslie looked from one parent to the other, her face carefully blank, and Felix stopped whooping, but kept spinning in a circle. He didn't fool Nora, though. She could see his flaps were tuned in.

"Well, thank you. It isn't quite in the bag yet, but Robert's pretty confident that the board will sign off on it." He shoved his hands in his pockets, but only came a few steps inside the kitchen. "He's presenting it at their meeting tonight and will call me in the morning."

"Are you going to get a job, Daddy?" Felix stopped spinning and looked over at his father.

"I have a job." Nora tried not to watch the flush creeping up Jake's neck. "I'm just getting more work."

"Oh. Is that a good thing? I'd rather get less work."

"Congratulations, Dad." Leslie cut in, crossing the room to hug her father. Nora's heart sank as she realized just exactly how aware her daughter had become of things. "I hope you get it."

"Me, too," Felix agreed, although he still didn't look convinced. "Can we go eat now?" He grabbed Jake's forearm and started tugging him back toward the garage door.

"Wait a minute, Mister." Jake pulled Felix to a stop, placed both hands on his shoulders, and turned him to face Leslie. "Now that you know what a Picasso is, don't you think you ought to congratulate your sister for real?"

"Sure. Congratulations, Lester the Lion."

Leslie raised both hands like claws and growled deep in her throat, but she grinned at his use of her favorite nickname.



IN HIS OFFICE, JAKE STARED AT THE PHONE SITTING ON THE glass-topped desk in front of him. Why couldn't things go his way just once? It had taken G & G nearly a month to make a decision on his proposal before opting to keep things as they were. A whole month of him assuring his wife that things were going to start happening, he just knew it; that by the holidays, she'd be able to cut back her hours significantly. He knew that was what she really wanted—the love notes, the chocolate, and the extra care he took in bed with her were his way of telling her that he was trying.

He should call Nora, but he didn't think he could bear to hear her voice right now; her disappointment, both for him, and in him.

Nora often seemed sad these days, even though she refused to acknowledge it. A few weeks ago, when he came out to the driveway to see what was keeping her, he was shocked to find her sitting in her car, bent over the steering wheel. He thought she was crying, but he was even more concerned when he realized she was just sitting in the sweltering heat, pink-faced, and sweating, as though enduring some self-inflicted punishment. She assured him she was fine, but inside the closed up car in the middle of an uncharacteristically warm September afternoon? Who does that?

He'd been trying so hard these last few months, and in many ways, things were greatly improved. But Jake couldn't help noticing Nora's smiles rarely lasted once the kids left the room, that everything seemed forced and unnatural when she was alone with him.

"Are you okay?" He asked her that question almost every night, certain she wasn't, but her answer was always the same.

"I'm fine, Jake. Just tired. It's been a long day."

Was her day any longer than his? Any longer than Felix's or Leslie's? When he probed, though, she only grew impatient with him.

Nora's work load was one of the things that hadn't improved. It had gotten worse.

She used to bring a file or two home every once in a while, stuff she had to finish in time for a client meeting the next morning, but now it was her nightly routine; dinner, dishes, and decorating. In fact, more often than not anymore, instead of bringing work home, she headed back to the office after putting the kids to bed, explaining, "It's hard for me to concentrate here, and everything takes twice as long. It's like a mental block. It just works better for me to go back to the office."

Well, it didn't work better for him, especially since it meant he went to bed alone.

"At least sex is still good," he muttered to himself. He lifted his gaze in a halfhearted prayer. "Yeah, I know. Spoken like a true man. But it seems like the only thing I can do right for her. Don't get me wrong," he added quickly, lifting a hand in a halting gesture. "I'm not complaining. Don't know what I'd do if that wasn't happening, either."

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, imagining his wife standing in the doorway, crossing the room to him, brushing her fingertips along his jaw, lifting his face to hers. He loved thinking about her; about her curves, her silky auburn hair, her eyes, her full mouth. His skin tingled when she said his name; the special way she answered her cell phone when she knew it was him. At least, he reminded himself with a grimace, the way she *used* to answer it. Anymore, he got her voice mail more often than not, and when he did catch her, she was always in the middle of something, or in a hurry to get somewhere...besides home to him.

It was days like this that made him seriously consider going back to working for someone else. He didn't miss driving a forklift. He didn't miss the warehouse atmosphere. He didn't miss the early and long hours. But he missed coming home at the end of the day. There was something rewarding about flexing his arms and straining his back to

provide for his family.

And there was something soft and feminine about Nora after she'd spent a few hours puttering around her nest and nurturing her children. He especially missed that.

"No. I can't go back," he asserted aloud. "I can't. I deserve better. I can't quit now." Today was just a little bump in the road he had to get past. So what if it wasn't happening as quickly they'd planned? That didn't mean it wasn't happening at all.

He scrubbed his shadowed jaw with his fingers—he'd need to shave before she got home—then flicked his phone so that it spun across the slick desktop and bumped up against the miniature sand garden Leslie had given him for Christmas last year, complete with rake, shovel, and a red pail. The sound of canned clapping, his text message ring tone, had him raising his fists in triumph, as though all those tiny cheering people in the phone still believed in him. "Who's the man? I'm the man. That's right."

Then he saw the sender's name. Nora.

Need to put in a late night at the office - sorry. Coming home for early supper, then back to work for me. Bringing Antonio's family meal unless you have something else planned. Love you.

END OF SAMPLE

WATERS FALL
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Marriage. What a beautiful, potentially treacherous gift. Thank you, readers, for walking through Jake and Nora's story. I pray you came away with hope.

My dragon slayer, my champion, my husband, thank you for carrying this story when I wanted only to drop it.
You have the most beautiful arms.

Thank you to my wonderful team - each of you are such a huge part of this book and of my heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



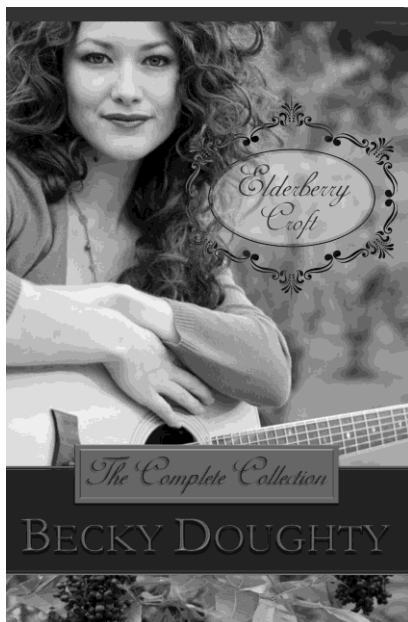
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