16 Lighthouse Road

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Published by MIRA Books

Extract

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One

Cecilia Randall had heard of people who, if granted one wish, would choose to live their lives over again. Not her. She'd be perfectly content to blot just one twelve-month period from her twenty-two years.

The *past* twelve months.

Last January, shortly after New Year's, she'd met Ian Jacob Randall, a Navy man, a submariner. She'd fallen in love with him and done something completely irresponsible–she'd gotten pregnant. Then she'd complicated the whole situation by marrying him.

That was mistake number three and from there, her errors in judgment had escalated. She hadn't been stupid so much as naïve and in love and–worst of all–romantic. The Navy, and life, had cured her of that fast enough.

Their baby girl had been born premature while Ian was at sea, and it became immediately apparent that she had a defective heart. By the time Ian returned home, Allison Marie had already been laid to rest. It

was Cecilia who'd stood alone in the unrelenting rain of the Pacific Northwest while her baby's tiny casket was lowered into the cold, muddy earth. She'd been forced to make life-and-death decisions without the counsel of family or the comfort of her husband.

Her mother lived on the East Coast and, because of a snowstorm, had been unable to fly into Washington State. Her father was as supportive as he knew how to be–which was damn little. His idea of "being there for her" consisted of giving Cecilia a sympathy card and writing a few lines about how sorry he was for her loss. Cecilia had spent countless days and nights by their daughter's empty crib, alternately weeping and in shock. Other Navy wives had tried to console her, but Cecilia wasn't comfortable with strangers. She'd rejected their help and their friendship. And because she'd been in Cedar Cove for such a short time, she hadn't made any close friends in the community, either. As a result, she'd borne her grief alone.

When Ian did return, he'd blamed Navy procedures for his delay. He'd tried to explain, but by then Cecilia was tired of it all. Only one reality had any meaning: her daughter was dead. Her husband didn't know and couldn't possibly understand what she'd endured in his absence. Since he was on a nuclear submarine, all transmissions during his tour of duty were limited to fifty-word "family grams." Nothing could have been done, anyway; the submarine was below the polar ice cap at the time. She did write to tell him about Allison's birth and then her death. She'd written out her grief in these brief messages, not caring that they'd be closely scrutinized by Navy personnel. But Ian's commanding officer had seen fit to postpone

relaying the information until the completion of the ten-week tour. *I didn't know,* Ian had repeatedly insisted. Surely she couldn't hold him responsible. But she did. Unfair though it might be, Cecilia couldn't forgive him.

Now all she wanted was out. Out of her marriage, out of this emotional morass of guilt and regret, just *out*. The simplest form of escape was to divorce Ian.

Sitting in the hallway near the courtroom, she felt more determined than ever to terminate her marriage. With one swift strike of a judge's gavel, she could put an end to the nightmare of the past year. Eventually she would forget she'd ever met Ian Randall.

Allan Harris, Cecilia's attorney, entered the foyer outside the Kitsap County courtroom. She watched as he glanced around until he saw her. He raised his hand in a brief greeting, then walked over to where she sat on the hard wooden bench and claimed the empty space beside her.

"Tell me again what's going to happen," she said, needing the assurance that her life would return to at least an approximation of what it had been a year ago.

Allan set his briefcase on his lap. "We wait until the docket is announced. The judge will ask if we're ready, I'll announce that we are, and we'll be given a number."

Cecilia nodded, feeling numb.

"We can be assigned any number between one and fifty," her attorney continued. "Then we wait our turn."

Cecilia nodded again, hoping she wouldn't be stuck in the courthouse all day. Bad enough that she had to be here; even worse that Ian's presence was also re-

quired. She hadn't seen him yet. Maybe he was meeting somewhere with his own attorney, discussing strategies—not that she expected him to contest the divorce.

"There won't be a problem, will there?" Her palms were damp and cold sweat had broken out across her forehead. She wanted this to be over so she could get on with her life. She believed that couldn't happen until the divorce was filed. Only then would the pain start to go away.

"I can't see that there'll be any hang-ups, especially since you've agreed to divide all the debts." He frowned slightly. "Despite that prenuptial agreement you signed."

A flu-like feeling attacked Cecilia's stomach, and she clutched her purse tightly against her. *Soon,* she reminded herself, soon she could walk out these doors into a new life.

"It's a rather…unusual agreement," Allan murmured.

In retrospect, the prenuptial agreement had been another in the list of mistakes she'd made in the past year, but according to her attorney one that could easily be rectified. Back when she'd signed it, their agreement had made perfect sense. In an effort to prove their sincerity, they'd come up with the idea that the spouse who wanted the divorce should pay not only the legal costs but all debts incurred during the marriage. It could be seen as either punitive or deterrent; in either case, it hadn't worked. And now it was just one more nuisance to be dealt with.

Cecilia blamed herself for insisting on something in writing. She'd wanted to be absolutely sure that Ian wasn't marrying her out of any sense of obligation.

Yes, the pregnancy was unplanned, but she would've been perfectly content to raise her child by herself. She preferred that to being trapped in an unhappy marriage–or trapping Ian in a relationship he didn't want. Ian, however, had been adamant. He'd sworn that he loved her, loved their unborn child and wanted to marry her.

As a ten-year-old, Cecilia's entire world had been torn apart when her parents divorced. She refused to do that to her own child. In her mind, marriage was forever, so she'd wanted them to be certain before making a lifetime commitment. How naïve, she thought now. How sentimental. How *romantic.*

Ian had said he wanted their marriage to be forever, too, but like so much else this past year, that had been an illusion. Cecilia had *needed* to believe him, believe in the power of love, believe it would protect her from this kind of heartache.

In the end, blinded by the prospect of a husband who seemed totally committed to her and by the hope of a happy-ever-after kind of life, Cecilia had acquiesced to the marriage–with one stipulation. The agreement.

Their marriage was supposed to last as long as they both lived, so they'd devised an agreement that would help them stay true to their vows. Or so they'd thought…. Before the ceremony, they'd written the prenuptial contract themselves and had it notarized. She'd forgotten all about it until she'd made an appointment with Allan Harris and he'd asked if she'd signed any agreement prior to the wedding. It certainly wasn't the standard sort of document; nevertheless Allan felt they needed to have the court rescind it.

Her marriage shouldn't have ended like this, but after their baby died, everything had gone wrong. Whatever love had existed between them had been eroded by their loss. Babies weren't supposed to die—even babies born premature. Any sense of rightness, of justice, had disappeared from Cecilia's world. The marriage that was meant to sustain her had become yet another source of guilt and grief. Experience had taught her she was *alone,* and her legal status might as well reflect that.

She couldn't think about it anymore and purposely turned her thoughts elsewhere.

Attorneys milled about the crowded area, conferring with their clients, and she looked around, expecting to find Ian, bracing herself for the inevitable confrontation. She hadn't seen or talked to him in more than four months, although their attorneys were in regular contact. She wondered if all these other people were here for equally sad reasons. They must be. Why else did anyone go to court? Broken vows, fractured agreements…

"We have Judge Lockhart," Allan said, breaking into her observations.

"Is that good?"

"She's fair."

That was all Cecilia asked. "This is just a formality, right?"

"Right." Allan gave her a comforting smile.

She checked at her watch. The docket was scheduled to be announced at nine and it was five minutes before. Ian still wasn't here.

"What if Ian doesn't show up?" she asked.

"Then we'll ask for a continuance."

"Oh." Not another delay, she silently pleaded.

"He'll be here," Allan said reassuringly. "Brad told me Ian's just as keen to get this over with as you are."

The knot in her stomach tightened. This was the easy part, she told herself, dismissing her nervousness. She'd already been through the hard part–the pain and grief, the disappointment of a marriage that hadn't worked. The hearing was merely a formality; Allan had said so. Once the prenuptial agreement was rescinded, the no-contest divorce was as good as done and this nightmare would be behind her.

Then Ian appeared.

Cecilia felt his presence before she actually saw him. Felt his gaze as he came up the stairwell and into the foyer. She turned and their eyes briefly met before they each, hurriedly, looked away.

Almost simultaneous with his arrival, the courtroom doors opened. Everyone stood and began to file inside with an eagerness that defied explanation. Allan walked beside Cecilia through the mahogany doors. Ian and his attorney entered after them and sat on the opposite side of the courtroom.

The bailiff immediately started reading off names as though taking attendance. With each name or set of names, a response was made and a number assigned. It happened so quickly that Cecilia almost missed hearing her own.

"Randall."

Both Allan Harris and Brad Dumas called out.

Cecilia didn't hear the number they were given. When Allan sat down beside her, he wrote thirty on a yellow legal pad.

"Thirty?" she whispered, astonished to realize that twenty-nine other cases would have to be heard before hers.

He nodded. "Don't worry, it'll go fast. We'll probably be out of here before eleven. Depends on what else is being decided."

"Do I have to stay here?"

"Not in the courtroom. You can wait outside if you prefer."

She did. The room felt claustrophobic, unbearably so. She stood and hurried into the nearly empty hall, practically stumbling out of the courtroom in her rush to escape.

Two steps into the foyer, she stopped–barely avoiding a collision with Ian.

They both froze, staring at each other. Cecilia didn't know what to say; Ian apparently had the same problem. He looked good dressed in his Navy blues, reminding her of the first time they'd met. He was tall and fit and possessed the most mesmerizing blue eyes she'd ever seen. Cecilia thought that if Allison Marie had lived, she would have had her daddy's eyes.

"It's almost over," Ian said, his voice low and devoid of emotion.

"Yes," she returned. After a moment's silence, she added, "I didn't follow you out here." She wanted him to know that.

"I figured as much."

"It felt like the walls were closing in on me."

He didn't comment and sank onto one of the wooden benches that lined the hallway outside the courtrooms. He slouched forward, elbows braced against his knees. She sat at the other end of the bench,

perched uncomfortably on the very edge. Other people left the crowded courtroom and either disappeared or found a secluded corner to confer with their lawyers. Their whispered voices echoed off the granite walls.

"I know you don't believe me, but I'm sorry it's come to this," Ian said.

"I am, too." Then, in case he assumed she might be seeking a reconciliation, she told him, "But it's necessary."

"I couldn't agree with you more." He sat upright, his back ramrod-straight as he folded his arms across his chest. He didn't look at her again.

This was awkward–both of them sitting here like this. But if he could pretend she wasn't there, she could do the same thing. Surreptitiously, she slid farther back on the bench. This was going to be a long wait.

"Well, hello there," Charlotte Jefferson said as she peeked inside the small private room at Cedar Cove Convalescent Center. "I understand you're a new arrival."

The elderly, white-haired gentleman slouched forward in his wheelchair, staring at her with clouded brown eyes. Despite the ravages of illness and age–he was in his nineties, she'd learned–she could see he'd once been a handsome man. The classic bone structure was unmistakable.

"You don't need to worry about answering," she told him. "I know you're a stroke patient. I just wanted to introduce myself. I'm Charlotte Jefferson. I stopped by to see if there's anything I can do for you."

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Published in Great Britain 2009
MIRA Books, Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN 978 0 7783 0290 2

58-0309

Printed in Great Britain
by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc