311 Pelican Court

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Extract

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One

From the moment Rosie Cox entered Cedar Cove's divorce court, she'd felt a renewed sense of failure—not to mention betrayal. Who *wouldn't* feel that way? After seventeen years of what she'd believed to be a reasonably good marriage, Zach's infidelity was the last thing she'd expected.

He'd never openly admitted to the affair. She hadn't found her husband in a compromising situation, hadn't found any concrete evidence—no matchbooks from expensive restaurants, no jewelry receipts or motel bills—but in her heart she knew. A wife always does.

Rosie owned up to the truth—she was angry and she'd expressed that anger by making this divorce as complicated and difficult as she possibly could. Why should she go easy on Zach or walk away from their marriage without one hell of a fight? And fight she had, with both fists raised.

As she turned away from the judge, the final decree in her hand, she realized she'd made another mistake.

Rosie had *assumed* that once the divorce was granted, the anger and bitterness of these dreadful months would be lifted. Wrong again. An even heavier burden had been

added. When the joint custody agreement she and Zach had so carefully worked out, point by point, was presented to Judge Olivia Lockhart, the judge had rejected it.

Instead, Judge Lockhart had stated that it was emotionally detrimental to kids to shuffle them between residences every few days. Allison and Eddie needed stable lives, according to Judge Lockhart, and *they* hadn't asked for the divorce. Some people considered the judge innovative, Rosie thought, disgruntled. How about interfering? Or out of her mind? Because—of all the crazy settlements—she'd awarded the children their house. That meant Rosie and Zach would be the ones moving in and out.

Talk about ridiculous! Talk about impossible.

Now that the divorce was final, Rosie and Zach would have to figure out some kind of living arrangements. The ramifications of what they'd agreed to were starting to hit Rosie and she hadn't even left the courtroom.

"Rosie," Sharon Castor, her attorney, said as soon as they were in the silent hallway outside the courtroom. "We have to meet with your ex-husband."

One look told Rosie that Sharon was as flustered as she was herself.

Otto Benson, Zach's lawyer, joined them. Although he remained outwardly calm, his face was tense. She dared not glance in Zach's direction. In fact, she'd avoided looking at her ex-husband from the moment she'd walked into the courtroom.

"Let's get a conference room and discuss the details," Zach's attorney said.

Rosie peered at Zach, standing behind his lawyer. He didn't seem any happier than she was with this decision, but she'd keel over in a dead faint before she let him know how she felt.

"Rosie and I should be able to work this out ourselves," Zach said with an edge of irritation.

Given the way everything had gone so far, that suggestion wasn't promising. "If you remember, it took us weeks of haggling to come up with this joint custody agreement," she pointed out. She enjoyed reminding him what a jerk he'd been. Rosie supposed Zach was hoping to avoid more attorneys' fees. Too bad. If he ended up with less money to spend on his girlfriend, that wasn't her concern.

Fists clenched, Zach snarled something under his breath. Probably just as well she couldn't hear it, Rosie decided, proud of her own display of self-control.

"What makes you think we're capable of agreeing to anything without a mediator?" she asked sarcastically.

"Fine," Zach muttered, with a pout reminiscent of their nine-year-old son. Staring at him now, Rosie had trouble believing she'd ever loved Zachary Cox. Not only was he smug and argumentative and self-righteous, he had no idea what it meant to be a husband and father. Granted, Zach was a handsome man; not only that, his appearance proclaimed his success as a businessman, a professional. Although, in her opinion, anyone with half a brain would instantly peg him for an accountant. He had that narrowed look about his dark eyes, as if he spent too many hours a day squinting at columns of tiny numbers. Despite that, he was appealing to the eye with his broad shoulders—which nicely set off his expensive suit—and thick, dark hair. At one time he'd been an athlete, and even now he routinely jogged and kept in shape.

Rosie had loved the firmness of his muscles as she stroked his back during lovemaking. Of course, it'd been months since they'd slept in the same bed, and much longer since they'd actually made love.

Rosie didn't even remember the last time. Had she known, she might have appreciated it more, lingered a moment longer at her husband's side, savored the feel of his arms around her. One thing was certain: Zach hadn't been interested in her from the day he'd hired Janice Lamond as his personal assistant.

The thought of him entwined with Janice nearly suffocated Rosie and she forcefully shoved the image from her mind. Anger and revulsion at her husband's—no, ex-husband's—unfaithfulness rose like bile in the back of her throat.

Zach's raised voice caught her attention; apparently he'd agreed to have their attorneys negotiate this added complication to their divorce decree. Otto was checking with the clerk for an empty conference room.

Once a private room in the law library was secured, Zach and his attorney sat at one side of the table, across from Rosie and hers.

Even the attorneys seemed perplexed by the situation. "I can't say I've ever heard of such a decree before," Sharon said, starting the conversation.

"Me, neither." Otto frowned. "This is one for the books."

"Fine," Zach said in a curt voice, "it's unusual, but we're both adults. We can figure this out. I know *I* was sincere about putting the children first." He glared at Rosie, as if to suggest she hadn't been.

"If you were sincere, you would've had second thoughts about sleeping with that slut." Rosie hadn't intended to be argumentative, but if her ex-husband was so concerned about their children's welfare, he would never have broken his wedding vows.

"I refuse to dignify that remark by responding to it," Zach said through gritted teeth. "Besides, if you were home more

instead of volunteering for every cause known to mankind, every cause *except* your children, you'd–"

"Well, I refuse to allow you to blame me for what *you've* done." Her volunteer efforts were Zach's big complaint. He had his wish; she'd had to resign from every position she held and seek paid employment. She hoped he was happy. For the first time since their children were born, Rosie wasn't a stay-at-home mom.

"I thought we were here to discuss this divorce decree?" Zach asked with a bored look, an expression that was obviously for her benefit. "If we're going to trade insults I'd rather not pay our attorneys to listen."

That's right, Rosie mused, deriving a small sense of satisfaction out of knowing that Zach was responsible for both sets of attorneys' fees. He was the one with the high-paying job. She was currently taking summer classes to update her teaching certificate. Classes Zach was paying for. That was another notch in her belt–another concession granted in their divorce settlement.

Her application was in with the South Kitsap School District and, considering all her connections, she shouldn't have any difficulty getting hired as a substitute teacher in September.

"Let's make a list of what we can agree on," Sharon said briskly, ignoring the antagonism between Rosie and Zach. "Despite the breakdown of your marriage, you both claim you want to keep the needs of your children first and foremost."

Rosie nodded and so did Zach.

Sharon smiled. She was a no-nonsense woman who wasn't swayed by emotion. "Okay, that gives us a place to start."

"I want to compliment you both on your attitudes," Otto said, removing a legal pad from his briefcase as if to prove

he was earning his pay. Zach had chosen the best and, for that matter, so had Rosie. Both attorneys came with high price tags.

"Yeah," Zach said sarcastically. "If we got along any better, we might've stayed married."

"You know who to blame for that," Rosie snapped.

"Yes, I do," he snapped right back. "How many nights were you actually home? How many dinners did you cook? If you don't remember, I do. Damn few."

Sharon sighed audibly. "Okay, the kids come first, and at this point, they have the house, which means Rosie will need to find somewhere else to live for the three days a week when Zach's staying with them."

Somewhere else to live? Rosie's head jerked up as the shock ran up and down her spine. The reality—the repercussions of the judge's edict—had just started to sink in.

"*And* pay half the mortgage on the house," Zach added, smiling at her benignly.

"But I can't—" Rosie hadn't realized, hadn't thought that far in advance. "I don't have a job yet—how am I supposed to afford an apartment on top of everything else?" This was grossly unfair. Surely Zach could see that such a demand was unreasonable. She had a life, too, and no way of building it if every penny she earned went into paying for two separate residences.

Rosie stared at Zach. He returned her look, unblinking.

"I have a suggestion," Sharon said.

"Let's hear it." Zach's lawyer sounded eager, if not desperate, for ideas.

"If Zach spends three days a week at the house with the children, then his apartment will sit empty, is that right?" She turned to Zach for verification.

Rosie studied him, too. In essence, Sharon was asking if

Zach intended to move Janice into the apartment, Janice and her son, who was the same age as Eddie.

"The apartment will be empty," Zach said emphatically.

"What if–" Sharon glanced from one to the other "–Rosie moves into the apartment during the time you're at the house? You did say it was a two-bedroom apartment, didn't you?"

Objections shot up like weeds in Rosie's fertile mind. She didn't want anything to do with Zach. She certainly didn't want to be put in a situation where she had to deal with being around him or his things–or what had been *their* things. Nor did she want to be privy to any information regarding his relationship with his girlfriend.

"No way am I letting Rosie in my apartment." Apparently Zach shared her qualms. "We're divorced. It took months to get that way. Rosie wanted out and she got her wish."

"You were the one who moved out," she reminded him scornfully.

"Correction. You kicked me out."

"If you'll recall, *you* insisted I see an attorney." She couldn't believe how convenient his memory was.

Zach snorted and looked at Sharon. "More fool me."

Rosie's attorney raised both hands in a pleading gesture. "Listen, it's just a suggestion–a way of saving money for you both." She turned to Rosie. "You'll be fortunate to find a place, even a studio apartment, for less than five, six hundred dollars a month."

"Zach will have to pay–"

"The hell I will!"

"The divorce is final," Otto Benson stated. "Zach isn't responsible for anything more than what's already been agreed to."

Rosie's gaze flew to her attorney, and Sharon reluctantly

nodded. All at once, this was more than Rosie could bear. Not only had she lost her husband, but now she was being forced out of her home, too. Moisture welled in her eyes, and she managed to blink it away. Hell would freeze over before she let Zach know what he was doing to her.

A long moment passed before Zach finally spoke. "Okay, I'll agree to let Rosie stay in the apartment on the days I'm at the house, as long as she's willing to split the rent."

Rosie was well aware that she had no choice, but she did have her pride and she was determined to hold on to that. "On one condition," she insisted, lifting her head.

"Now what?" Zach asked with a long-suffering sigh.

"I don't want you bringing that woman into the family home. I want our house to be a safe place for the children. In other words, I don't want Allison and Eddie exposed to your women."

"What?" Zach glared at her as though she'd spoken a foreign language.

"You heard me," she said vehemently, meeting his angry eyes. "This divorce has been hard enough on the kids without you parading Janice or any other woman you decide to date through my home. I want the house off-limits to your…your floozies."

"Floozies?" Zach smirked. "Fine, no *floozies*. And the same goes for you. I don't want you bringing any men to the house, either. No studs, no hotties, no boy toys, no–"

"Oh, that's rich," Rosie broke in, putting an end to his ridicule. In seventeen years she'd never so much as looked at another man. Not since the day she'd met Zach.

"Do you or don't you agree?" her ex-husband challenged.

"Of course I agree!"

"Good."

"Perfect."

With their attorneys present, they made decisions about a number of other issues, and Sharon quickly wrote up an agreement. Zach's attorney reviewed it, and then both Zach and Rosie signed it.

By the time she left the courthouse, Rosie felt as if she'd been pummeled by wave after wave in a stormy sea. Strange as it seemed, her heart actually ached. For weeks she'd dreaded this day and at the same time longed for it, just so the divorce would finally be over. Now she wasn't sure *what* she felt, other than this deep pain that threatened to overpower her.

Nine-year-old Eddie was shooting baskets when Rosie pulled into the driveway at 311 Pelican Court. In a little more than a month, school would start again. Perhaps then their lives would return to some semblance of routine.

Eddie caught the basketball and held it against his side as he waited for her to park the car in the garage. His sad dark eyes watched Rosie as he stepped aside so she could drive past.

Fifteen-year-old Allison was in the kitchen, microwaving a hot dog for lunch. She turned and stared at Rosie, eyes glittering defiantly. She resembled Zach so much just then.

"How'd it go?" Eddie asked, following Rosie into the kitchen. He continued to hold the basketball.

"All right, I guess."

The microwave beeped and Allison removed the steaming wiener, devoid of a bun. As if it had suddenly lost its appeal, she set the plate on the countertop and studied Rosie.

"There's been a…minor complication," Rosie announced. She didn't believe in hiding the truth from her children, especially when it involved something that would affect them.

"What kind of complication?" Eddie asked, pulling out

a kitchen chair. He balanced the basketball on the table, one hand supporting it. Allison crossed her arms and leaned against the counter, pretending to be bored; still, she didn't leave the room as she so often did.

With effort Rosie managed to show a bit of enthusiasm for Judge Lockhart's decree. "Well…you guys won't be moving in and out of the house every few days, after all."

Allison and Eddie shared a look of surprise. Trying to sound positive, Rosie explained Judge Lockhart's decision and briefly outlined how the switch would work.

"You mean Dad's going to live *here?*" Eddie asked as if he didn't quite understand. Rosie didn't blame him for being confused. She was, too. Confused and irritated by this turn of events. Add miserable to the mix, and it pretty much described the way she felt about life in general.

"Your father will be at the house part-time," Rosie said, so there wouldn't be any misunderstanding. She'd agreed to turn what had been her sewing room into a spare bedroom for his use. The sewing machine could go in the master bedroom without a problem.

"Oh," Eddie said. He seemed disappointed, but then his eyes lit up as he realized he'd have his father back, if only half the time. "I think it's cool!"

"I don't," Allison shouted. "As far as I'm concerned, this entire divorce is bogus." With that she stormed out of the kitchen.

Rosie watched her daughter go, wishing she knew how to reach her. She wanted to put her arms around Allison and hug her and assure her that everything would be all right, but the girl wouldn't accept any kind of closeness. At least not from her…

"Don't worry about Allison," her nine-year-old said.

"She's really glad about Dad coming home, even if it's only for a few days at a time, but she wouldn't let you know that for anything."

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