

WHEN DREAMS TREMBLE

by

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Author's Note

Wolfe is quoted as saying, “You can’t go home again.” I don’t disagree with that fundamental truth, because “home” is more than a place or even the people. It is a particular series of moments, defined by the unique interactions of individuals at a particular point in their lives. Life is ever changing and we can’t go back, because the very act of living, day to day, changes us. I am not who I was at eighteen when I left.

But having recently moved “home,” or within miles of where I grew up, I can say that the sense of recognition, and dare I say, belonging, is more than fond recollection made rosy with the passage of time. I know these roads—I learned to drive on them. I know the mountains and the lakes—I camped there with my parents. I took my partner to the very same roadside hot dog stand I frequented forty years ago with my best friends in high school. But despite the familiarity, the best part of being here now is that I am finally who I am in the place I had to leave to find myself. I am a lesbian, and I have the life I always dreamed of.

This story is set “just up the road” from the place I spent my last summer before leaving home for college. I did not know then exactly why I didn’t fit, or what it was I sought. Fortunately, I discovered the answers not long after with a girl as innocent as I. We didn’t know the words, but we recognized love.

My thanks go to my first readers, Connie, Diane, Eva, Jane, Paula, and RB, as well as my editors, Ruth Sternglantz and Stacia Seaman, and the generous proofreaders at Bold Strokes Books for making this a better book.

Lee and I spent a weekend at “the Lake” taking photos for the cover. Thanks to Sheri for capturing so eloquently the beauty I tried so inadequately to describe.

To Lee, who has never questioned the dream—*Amo te*.

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CHAPTER ONE

All set to add another notch to your belt, LJ?” Leslie Harris glanced up from the deposition transcript, hiding her annoyance at the interruption and the uninvited familiarity. She’d made the mistake of leaving her office door partly open when she’d arrived at 4:30 a.m., and now she discovered with a quick glance at her Piaget it was close to seven, and the troops were arriving. It wasn’t like her to lose track of the time.

Absently tucking a strand of her shoulder-length, ash blond hair behind her ear, she smiled automatically at the junior associate who leaned into her office. Mentally, she ran his stats. Tom Smith. Eager, just like every other ambitious young attorney, and smart enough to recognize the important players in the firm. Points for that. Just the slightest bit obvious with his flirtatious attention. Minor demerit. She crossed her silk-stockings-clad legs beneath the skirt of her custom-tailored Armani suit and shrugged. “Just another day at the office, Tom.”

“Oh yeah. Like it’s every day we take on the Feds with a couple of million at stake.”

“Uh-huh.” Actually, for her it *was* a near-daily occurrence, because defending corporations in big-ticket, high-profile lawsuits was her specialty. And she liked to win. Every time. Her ferocious drive had shaped her career from the start, as had her unfailing ability to read a jury and emphasize just the right aspects of the case to garner their sympathy. She’d fast-tracked to partner seven years out of law school, and her pace, if anything, had picked up in the last year since she’d moved into a corner office.

But she had neither the time nor the inclination to point all this out to Tom. She'd barely squeezed in her daily workout at the gym before coming to the office to prepare for a big morning in court. She was also juggling six other cases that were every bit as important as the one she was due to defend in two hours before the United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York. She reached for her fourth cup of coffee of the morning and went back to reading.

"Get you something from the coffee shop, LJ? Bagel?"

"What?" Leslie glanced up again, surprised to see Tom still standing there. Didn't he have any work to do? "No. Thanks. I'm fine."

Breakfast wasn't on her schedule. She'd be lucky if she remembered to grab a yogurt at lunch, because the midday recess was a critical time to recap the case with her client and revamp strategy. *Working lunch* was just a euphemism for *more work*, and rarely included food. Fortunately, as far as tough battles went, today's case was middle-of-the-road.

United States v. Harlan Vehicles, LLC, et al. She knew the facts verbatim of course, but her defense wouldn't center on the facts. It was true that her client, Harlan Vehicles, had imported 11,000 pieces of gasoline- and diesel-powered equipment over the past nine months that didn't meet the federal Clean Air Act emission requirements. Arguing that point would be folly, because the measured levels of smog-forming volatile organic compounds and nitrous oxides in the exhaust was irrefutable. She never based a case on discrediting the science, because Americans were programmed to believe facts and figures. No, her ammunition had to be more personal, something that Joe Juror could relate to. And when the federal government assessed the company millions of dollars in penalties and fines after the special agents from the Justice Department and U.S. Customs seized the equipment, she had just the weapon she needed.

She couldn't make the charges go away, but she didn't need to. After all, what average citizen couldn't be made to appreciate that levying crippling costs on Harlan meant a higher price tag for *them* the next time they went to buy a snowmobile for their kids for Christmas? In this kind of case, reducing the monetary damages to tens of thousands rather than millions of dollars—what amounted to a slap on the wrist for a corporation the size of Harlan—was a major win.

Still mentally reviewing the order of her witness list, Leslie drained her coffee cup and rose to get a refill. As a sudden wave of

dizziness rolled through her, she dropped her coffee cup onto the thick Persian rug. Reflexively, she braced both arms on the desk, lowered her head, and took several long, slow breaths. It was frighteningly difficult to catch her breath, and her heart felt as if it might dance its way up her throat and right out of her body. She blinked and forced herself to focus on the pens and papers covering her desk until the room stopped spinning and the black curtain obscuring her vision lifted. Then, when she was sure she wasn't going to faint, she carefully lowered herself into her chair. Worried that someone might have witnessed her *spell* or whatever the hell it was, she checked the door to be sure no one was nearby.

Thankfully, the hall was empty. The last thing she needed was for her colleagues to get the impression that she wasn't up to form. Her adversaries in the courtroom weren't the only ones who killed the weak. She got along well with her partners, but she wouldn't exactly call them her friends. Nevertheless, the thin veneer covering aggressive competitiveness didn't bother her. This was the battlefield she had chosen, or perhaps the one that had chosen her, and she intended to triumph.

"Ready to head over, LJ?" Stephanie Ackerman called from the doorway.

Leslie's paralegal, a voluptuous redhead four inches shorter than Leslie's five foot six, pulled a rolling cart with two enormous briefcases strapped to it. In the other hand, she carried a venti cappuccino.

"Just about." Leslie smiled brightly and hoped she didn't look as pale as she felt. Even though her breathing was more comfortable, she still felt an odd fluttering sensation in her chest. Maybe no breakfast after three hours' sleep wasn't such a good idea after all. "Do me a favor and grab a Danish along with another coffee for me, will you?"

"Sure. I'll meet you by the elevators."

Leslie waited until Stephanie disappeared to fill her own briefcase with the notes and files she'd need. By the time she joined Stephanie, she felt fine. While the elevator descended, she nibbled on the Danish and scanned the messages on her BlackBerry. When the doors slid open, she dropped the remaining half of the pastry into a nearby wastebasket. She didn't need food; the upcoming mental combat was all the fuel she needed to energize her.



By three in the afternoon the next day, Leslie knew she'd have another win in her column. The trial was still a long way from over, but she'd sensed the subtle change of mood in the members of the jury, from wary and perplexed—as they'd listened to the assistant U.S. attorney recite dry statistics and a litany of rules and regulations—to sympathetic, when she'd pointed out the massive expense and time required for her client to comply with those same rules and regulations. Her subtle point, time and time again, had been that Harlan Vehicles wished to be in compliance with the law despite the heavy financial burden placed upon them by government regulation, and that levying huge penalties would only make it more difficult for them. Oh yes, any taxpayer would understand that.

As she listened to the testimony of another of the government's scientific experts, she ran numbers in her head, calculating how much she might be able to rein in the penalties. A very great deal, she wagered.

"Your witness, Counselor," the judge said.

"Thank you, Your Honor." Leslie rose quickly and strode briskly from behind the defense table. She had only a second to register the violent racing of her heart before she fainted.

LJ!

My God, Leslie! Someone get some water!

"I'm fine. Fine," Leslie said weakly. Vaguely aware of the fact that she was lying on the floor in the middle of the courtroom, she struggled to sit up. Someone held her down with the slightest touch to her shoulder, and she didn't have the strength to protest. Her vision wavered and she felt as if she were trying to breathe underwater. "No, please. Really. I...just need...a little air."

She heard the judge hastily adjourning for the day and flushed with embarrassment. She was used to being the center of attention, but not like this. Stephanie's face swam into view, and Leslie fixed on the bright blue eyes a shade lighter than her own. When her head cleared enough that she thought she could stand without falling, she said, "Help me up, Steph. I'm okay."

Stephanie and Bill Mallory, Leslie's second chair, guided her to her feet. Stephanie kept her arm around Leslie's waist. "You're white as a sheet, LJ."

"I feel like..." Leslie couldn't get enough air to finish the sentence and the room went dim. "I think I need...hospital."



Almost 275 miles due north of the courthouse, Dr. Devon Weber waded into Lake George up to her waist. Her waterproof boots and waders kept her dry, but not warm, and the familiar ache in her right hip appeared before she'd gone ten feet. It might be almost mid-June, but the lake was still frigid, its temperature lagging far behind that of the air, which was only in the high sixties despite the bright sunshine. Still, she was used to being wet and cold and sore; it came with the job.

"Can't you do that from the boat?" Park Ranger Sergeant Natalie Evans called from shore.

"I can feel the bottom better when I walk on it!" Dev yelled back, thinking a little enviously that the petite brunette shuffling her boots on the packed brown earth at the water's edge looked warm and comfortable in her khaki uniform and spring-weight flak jacket.

"Mud's mud," Natalie said.

Dev smiled to herself. She was used to people finding her work and her interests strange, even professionals like Natalie who had a better understanding than most of what she was doing. Dev kept going until the water was an inch below the top of her waders and she felt the accumulation of soil, plant detritus, and decomposing organic matter change consistency beneath her feet.

"I can bring the launch out and at least hand you sample bottles," Natalie offered.

"Thanks, but you'll rile the waters with the boat. I'll just be a minute." Dev opened her canvas shoulder bag and slid out a plastic collection bottle the size of a maraschino cherry jar. With her other hand, she slowly inserted a long metal rod with a suction chamber on the far end straight down through the water and several inches into the lake bottom next to her foot. By depressing a button with her thumb, she was able to extract a small sample. She secured the specimen in the collection jar and dropped it into her bag. "That's number one."

On the shore, Natalie noted the date, time, ambient temperature, water temperature, and exact location on a lined sheet of paper affixed to a clipboard.

"I appreciate you playing secretary," Dev said as she waded back to shore. "I'm sure you've got better things to do than follow me around."

“Not a problem.” Actually, Natalie did have *other* things to do, but none that she would have found quite as pleasant. She was a park ranger stationed on the western shore of Lake George in Bolton Landing, New York. She patrolled a portion of the three hundred square miles of parkland that surrounded the lake, which was thirty-two miles long and three miles wide at some points. Despite the fact that the enormous body of water, nestled in the heart of the Adirondack Mountains, was one of the most popular tourist attractions on the East Coast, much of the surrounding mountains was still as wild and untamed as it had been for centuries. It was her job to keep both nature and those who came to enjoy it safe.

“I’m supposed to have a summer intern starting next week.” Dev’s leg had progressed from sore to stiff, and she climbed awkwardly up the slippery slope in her heavy gear. When Natalie extended a hand to steady her, she grabbed it. Natalie’s fingers closed on hers, warm and strong. “Thanks.”

“Hey, it’s kind of interesting.” Natalie tried to keep her expression from revealing the precise nature of her interest as she observed the woman who had arrived the previous afternoon at the regional park headquarters. Everything about Devon Weber—from her collar-length, almost-but-not-quite-messy light chestnut hair to her tight athletic build and the casual self-confidence in her hazel eyes—said she was a lesbian, but Natalie never relied on impressions to make that call. Since they were going to be working together in close proximity for the next few months, she didn’t want to create any kind of awkwardness between them. She was interested, but she could be patient. “Besides, I’ve got the radio, and if something comes up, I’ll just leave you to fend for yourself.”

“That’s nice of you.” Dev grinned. “I think.”

Natalie smiled back. “Just how many samples do you plan on taking?”

“Well,” Dev said, flicking the hair back off her forehead as they headed up the narrow path that had been cut through the thick pines on either side by animals making their way to the water, “between soil, water, vegetation, and fish specimens? Couple thousand.”

“You’re kidding.”

When Natalie stopped abruptly, Dev bumped into her and Natalie’s shoulder brushed across Dev’s breasts. Natalie’s long, dark hair was caught back with a soft tie at the base of her neck and the wind blew

a silky strand smelling of mountain laurel into Dev's face. Dev's lips tingled and she stepped back.

"Nope. I'm serious. It's been eight months since the last multitiered biologic survey was done on the lake. With the increase in commercial and recreational boat traffic and the prevalence of industry in the adjoining areas, we need to revamp all our statistics."

"I always thought people at your level just sat in the lab while grunts slogged around out here collecting samples," Natalie teased as they reached the green and white truck with the emblem of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation on the side.

"I'm old-fashioned, I guess," Dev said as she stripped off her outer gear and stowed it in the back of Natalie's SUV. Beneath it she wore jeans, a short-sleeved denim shirt, and a light zip-up navy vest. She climbed into the truck and shifted to find a good position for her sore hip as Natalie slid behind the wheel. "Sometimes the only way to know there's a problem is to see for yourself. If I just send out someone who isn't an expert on the water life to randomly collect specimens, we could miss the early signs of pollutant effects on the fish population."

"That's your thing, right? You're a fish guy?" Natalie backed out of the parking lot and headed north on Route 9, which wended its way along the shore and through the small villages that dotted the lakeside.

"Yeah, close enough." Dev unfolded her regional survey map to check the next sample site. "I'm a freshwater biologist. I started out studying fish populations and got interested in the effects of environmental alterations on breeding and population dynamics."

"So that's how you ended up with the DEC."

"Technically, I'm an independent consultant, but I'm heading up a joint survey this summer with the Derrin Freshwater Institute and the state."

"Fish, huh?" Natalie shook her head and laughed. "If you don't mind my asking, how the hell did you ever get interested in *fish*?"

Dev wondered if it would make any sense if she told her the truth. If she explained that she'd grown up a stone's throw from where they had collected the first sample. That the lake had been her first and, in the end, her best friend. That for as long as she could remember, she'd never fit in anywhere. Not at home, not at school. She'd spent hours on the water, in the water, from the time she'd been old enough to walk. She'd found peace in those quiet alone times as she'd lain on the dock in the hot summer sun watching the small schools of fish circle in the

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shallows. She had wondered then what it would be like to be part of a group like that, moving so easily together, effortlessly attuned. To be accepted, to belong. She didn't know then. She still didn't, but she didn't wonder any longer.

She didn't know Natalie well enough to share those secrets, and even if she had, she wouldn't have answered any differently. Those times were long past. "I spent so much time in the water when I was a kid, I guess I thought I was part fish."

"Well," Natalie said, deciding to fire the first shot as she gave Devon a slow, appreciative once-over, "you look to be all woman now."

Dev took a quick read and added up the findings. The answer was pretty clear. Natalie was very attractive, she wasn't wearing a wedding ring, and it was forecast to be a long, hot summer. Dev leaned back with a smile. "Nice to know you noticed."