

An Imperfect Stranger

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AN IMPERFECT STRANGER

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Chapter 1

Come back!

Rain slicked the highway. Wiper blades slap-slapped, smearing the road spray. Headlights glared, too bright in the dark. Blinding. The baritone blare of a semi's horn. Metal crumpling into metal. Flames roaring from an exploding gas tank. Hands beating on unyielding glass.

And the screams. Oh, god, the screams.

Morgan!

*

Nick sat upright in bed, heart pounding like a jack-hammer. Morgan's screams still echoed in his ears even as the dream slowly faded. He groaned, covering his face with his hands.

No. Not again. Would the nightmares never stop?

What time was it? The damned alarm clock read 3:04 a.m. Nick rubbed tired eyes and ran a hand through sweaty, tangled hair. Only about three hours' sleep. *God.* He lurched out of drenched, clammy sheets and stumbled down the hall to the bathroom. He'd get no more rest tonight. He never did.

Shaking all over, he wetted his scarred hands in the sink as if they still burned, rubbing icy water over his face. The shock from the water, colder on his face than his hands, helped to drown the shrieking in his head the same way the electric lights did. Nick turned them all on.

Would they finally chase away the monsters?

Years ago, he'd taught himself to wake up when the nightmare began. Sometimes it worked, but not always. Not this time.

He tried not to think about that horrible night—but demons prowled the hours after midnight to torment even insomniacs with clear consciences.

Unlike him.

Sighing, Nick dressed in his rough work clothes and headed out to the barn to wake up the cows. Hard work was the only way to brave the

demons. Keep himself too busy to think.

Until tonight, when the battle over his soul began again.

Chapter 2

“You what?”

Darcey sucked in her breath as if Claudia had just punched her, gaping at the director of her department at ConsAmer Pharmaceuticals, unable to believe what Claudia had just said. When her boss asked Darcey into her office, she’d expected to receive a promotion. She never expected this.

Claudia tossed dark auburn curls and returned Darcey’s gaze with direct gray eyes. “We hired someone else from the outside instead.”

“Wait a minute—” Darcey cut herself short. She took a deep inhale, trying to calm herself. *Nice girls don’t make unpleasant scenes. Especially with the entire department eavesdropping outside the door, straining to hear.* “I don’t understand,” she said more temperately, bracing her hands against the edge of her boss’s desk. “You all but promised the promotion to me.” She’d earned it too, after putting in 80 hour weeks for the last three months. Weekends, too. Even worked through Thanksgiving. Wasn’t that enough “dedication”? “You said I was a strong candidate.”

Darcey gave herself a mental kick. *Claudia only strung you along so you’d put in all that unpaid overtime, dummy—and you fell for it. Again. When will you ever learn?*

Claudia leaned back in her chair, toying with a pen with both hands. “We decided to go in a different direction. Anyhow, that’s the way it is. You can go now. You’ll get me the report I need for the meeting tomorrow on the new biosimilar medicine by the end of the day?”

Darcey’s fingers curled, the nails digging painfully deep into her palms. *Typical.* Claudia always dropped one just-can’t-wait project on her at the last minute—usually five minutes before Darcey planned to go home.

Not taking the bait, she kept her voice cool with herculean effort.

“Different how?” Hell, she wasn’t leaving until Claudia gave her a real explanation.

Claudia put the pen down. “Well, Tim Green has several years of project management experience. You don’t.”

I do, too. For the last four years her entire job had revolved around managing projects—only Claudia refused to call it that. The last one had been a huge success for the company. Darcey had taken the PM training. She just didn’t have the official credential in project management, that’s all. Claudia kept her too busy to finish it.

“I know you were counting on the promotion. You must be very disappointed,” Claudia purred with phony sympathy. “I want you to know that we really do appreciate all your hard work and effort. I’m sure if you just try harder, you’ll get your chance one day.”

Harder? What a load of bull-oney. Darcey gritted her teeth, eyes rolling. *Enough already!* What more could she do? Claudia had dangled the promise of promotion before her one too many times only to snatch it away with one lame excuse or another. Darcey would never get anywhere at ConsAmer.

“Save it.” The snarl burst from her. “You and I both know that for the lie it is. You’re just afraid I’ll be after your job one day. That’s why you always put me down.”

Her hand covered her mouth. *Oh god, had she just said that?* Darcey forced the hand down. It wouldn’t help.

“That’s enough.” Claudia hadn’t raised her voice. She never needed to. The quiet danger in her tone always let her direct reports know when they’d gone too far. It had never been turned on Darcey before. She subsided in her chair, swallowing the rest of her spleen. After all, she needed her job.

Her mouth pinching, Claudia gathered the papers on her desktop together, stuffed them into a manila envelope and slid them into a file drawer. “Your immature outburst just proves that you’re not ready to be promoted, Darcey. Tim starts on Monday. You’ll report to him from now on.”

What the h— “I didn’t get the promotion and now you’re going to make me report to the guy who did?” *Claudia had rubbing salt in the wound down to an art.* Darcey jumped to her feet. She’d thought she and

Claudia had a good working relationship. What a boat-load of crap. She blinked back furious tears. “The next thing you’ll be saying is that I’ll have to train him, too.”

Claudia avoided her gaze. “My assistant is setting it up right now.”

“How can you do this to me?” Darcey protested. Despite her efforts to control it, her eyes flooded. “It isn’t fair!”

“Darcey, sit down,” said Claudia, stern. “You’re acting childish.”

Darcey ignored the dangerous tone this time. Her career was damned anyway. “You can’t ask me to train him, Claudia.” She sniffled hard. “I won’t do it.”

“I said, sit.”

Taking a deep breath, Darcey obeyed, bitter acid searing the back of her throat.

Claudia looked down at her, giving her a perfunctory pat on the shoulder. Darcey’s shoulder twitched away. The other woman’s mouth tightened. “I understand that you’re upset about this. Look, you have three weeks of vacation coming to you. Take it. Go home and calm down. Three weeks from now I expect you to come back with your emotions under control. Understand?”

Damned if she’d give Claudia the satisfaction of hearing her say it. Darcey rose to her feet, keeping her lips glued together. Anything she said now she’d definitely regret later. She nodded once, sharp.

“Take the rest of the day off.” Claudia opened the office door. Loitering just outside, two of Darcey’s co-workers, Nathan and Ernie, bolted away fast. “You’re no good to me like this.”

Gladly.

Wiping wet eyes with the heel of her hand before anyone saw them, Darcey stalked back to her spartan, anonymous cube. She’d screwed up but good. The company would never promote her now that she’d lost it—actually cried—in front of Claudia. Wrenching her purse out of an empty file drawer, she kicked the drawer closed and yanked her fake-fur coat off its hanger so hard the cheap wire flailed about for several seconds before falling to the floor.

Her laptop stared at her. Her newest assignment wasn’t finished, would be several weeks late now. “So I can’t manage projects, huh?” Darcey closed the document without saving her changes. “Okay. Fine.

Manage this!”

She spun on her heel and marched away. With luck the computer would be stolen by the time she came back.

If she came back.

Chapter 3

"It's just not worth it." At Darcey's distraught call, Lorri abandoned her kids and husband to decorate the Christmas tree by themselves and raced through snow flurries to Darcey's suburban Chicago condo/townhouse. *Only a true friend....*

Brown-haired and plump, Lorri settled on Darcey's second-hand couch, tucking her stockinged feet beneath her, just like back in the old days when they'd been college roommates. "The rat race I mean. You can't let it get to you."

Darcey hugged a colorful needlepointed pillow—her grandmother's work—to her chest and moaned. "Too late. It's already got to me."

"So what does it matter if you're not a VP by 35 anyway?" asked Lorri with a shrug. "Who is?"

Darcey turned a glum face on her. "You don't know my family. It's torture, trying to compete."

"You never talked about your family before." Lorri leaned forward, her face alert. "Lord knows I asked often enough."

Making a face, Darcey said, "If you knew them, you'd know why I don't."

Lorri relaxed against the upholstery. "Then tell me now."

With a groan, Darcey leaned back and put the pillow over her face. Lorri snatched it away. "Come on, tell me. You know I won't give up until you do."

Darcey made a grab for the pillow, but Lorri held it out of reach. Darcey held up her hands in surrender. "Okay, okay." She took a deep breath. "My father's a cardiac surgeon. A famous one."

"Dr. Courtenay?" Lorri tried it out on her tongue. "I remember, there was a Dr. Courtenay in the news last week. Something about a heart transplant? A new kind of surgery."

"That's my Dad. His team developed a way to grow the patient a new

heart from her own DNA without using stem cells. No transplant rejection. No moral ambiguities.” Darcey rubbed tired eyes. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m very proud of him, but it’s a hell of a standard to live up to.”

Lorri flipped her hand in a disdainful gesture. “If that’s all—”

“Believe me, it’s not.” Darcey began to massage her temples to ease the sudden headache. She forced herself on. “My mother created the company that sells that diet food you like.”

Lorri’s mouth fell open. “Wow. That’s *your* Mom in those ads? She looks stunning.”

Darcey shook her head. “Nah, that’s an actress, but my Mom developed the food in our kitchen and turned it into a successful business. She gives all the profits to a foundation trying to end world hunger. Lord knows we don’t need the money.”

Lorri made an exasperated noise. “Geez-Lou-freakin’-weez. Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

Darcey bit her lower lip to keep it from trembling. “That I’m the family loser?” Her shoulders slumped. “I’m not proud of it.” She heaved a doleful sigh. “*And* it gets worse.”

“How can it get worse?”

Grimacing, Darcey said, “My sisters. Elinor’s a brilliant archeologist. Discovered some new prehistoric species of whale. One with legs. Even named it after herself, *Cetacea elinoriceti*, or something like that. She did a series of documentaries for PBS last year.”

Lorri’s hand smacked the couch arm. “No! I *saw* those. They were *good*.”

Darcey’s headache started to throb. “Jackie’s a pediatric surgeon. Specializes in kids with serious heart deformities. Every year she spends three months working for Doctors without Borders.”

“Hell, no. No family is that hyper-perfect. Nobody could be. You gotta be exaggerating.”

“I only wish I were.” Darcey pulled up her knees and leaned her head on them. “But you see, compared to them, I’m a total disappointment. I’m not brilliant, I’m not philanthropic. I can’t even get a damned promotion.”

Lorri gave her a soothing pat on the back. “You’re not a

disappointment. You're just ... different."

"Same thing," Darcey insisted, chin out-thrust.

"You got As in school," Lorri pointed out.

"I had to study like a maniac for every one of them." Darcey pouted. "I pulled so many all-nighters I began to feel like a vampire."

"You haven't the teeth for it." Lorri play-punched Darcey on the shoulder. "Hey, stop feeling sorry for yourself. Heck, they're just a bunch of over-achievers. By any normal standard, you're just ... normal. Thank God *my* father only drove a truck for a living."

"No expectations. Lucky you." Darcey meant it.

"So you've got three whole weeks off work, hmmm?"

Darcey studied her fingernails with displeasure. "Three weeks to deny reality."

Lorri shrugged. "Whatever. Where are you going to go?"

Darcey glanced around her condo. "I thought I'd just stay here. I never see the place anyway, just sleep." At least, she hadn't for the last few months. "I could read a few books maybe. Look for a new job." *If anyone would ever hire her again, that is.*

Lorri gave her an annoyed push. "You are *not* going to sit in this room and be depressed for three weeks thinking about work. You gotta go somewhere and get your mind off it. Remember six years ago when I worked for Lenny, the boss from Hell? Paris did wonders for me. There's something incredibly peaceful about standing on the *deuxième étage* of the Eiffel Tower, looking down at the city and realizing just how small your problems are."

"I don't speak French," Darcey grumped, "and Paris isn't half-far enough away."

Lorri waved away her objections. "Then go further. What about Australia? They speak English there."

"Australia? Are you trying to get me killed? Aren't there like a thousand ways to die there? Heat, sun-stroke, crocodiles?"

Lorri shrugged, unfazed. "New Zealand, then. I've always wanted to go there. It's not as hot and no crocs, except at the zoo."

Darcey shot her a pained look. "Are you kidding? It's incredibly expensive. Not to mention I can't imagine anything worse than spending fifteen, twenty hours crammed in a tiny airplane seat. No, I'll just stay

home.”

Lorri gave her a strong nudge with one of her feet. “No way. You are *not* staying home feeling depressed. Come on, Darce, live a little. You’ve never been anywhere.”

“I have too,” Darcey insisted, jerking her chin. “I went to Rome last year.”

“Business trip.” Lorri said with another dismissive wave. “How much of Rome did you actually see? Besides the hotel?”

“The taxi passed the Coliseum.” Darcey tried to bring up a mental picture and failed. “I think.”

“You think? You don’t even know? Darce, you are going to New Zealand, even if I have to buy the ticket with your credit card and forge your name. The scenery is beautiful. They filmed *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* there, you know.”

“I never saw either one.” Between her college studies and all of Claudia’s special projects, she’d been too busy to take time for a movie. Claudia had taken credit for much of Darcey’s hard work, too.

Maybe Lorri was right. Darcey had focused so much of her energy on trying to prove herself, she’d given up having a life.

She held up her hands when Lorri drew breath for yet another tack. “Relax. You’ve convinced me. I’ll go to New Zealand.” Darcey sighed. “At least it’s as far away from here as I can possibly get and still be on Planet Earth.”

“You’ll have a great time, I know,” bubbled Lorri. “Maybe you can find your own personal Aragorn.”

Darcey gave her a blank look. “What’s an aragorn?”

Chapter 4

“You’re going *where*?”

Darcey briefly closed her eyes in pain. “New Zealand, Dad.” *Not planning to walk off the edge of the earth.*

“All alone?”

“Yes, Dad. All alone.”

Listening on the speaker, Mom said, “Is that a good idea, sweetie? I thought you were working on an important project. What does your boss think?”

Count on Mom to pile on the guilt, but Claudia deserved it. Darcey took a deep, hunted breath before she answered. “She thinks it’s a great idea.” Well, that wasn’t quite a lie. “I’ve been working too hard and need a break.”

“I don’t like it,” said her father, “when you’re up for that promotion. Going away now sends your boss the wrong message.”

Darcey wished she’d never confided her hopes to her parents. She gnawed on her lip, glad they couldn’t see her. How could she tell them their loser of a daughter was passed over again?

“I don’t like the idea of your going to the far side of the world alone, baby,” her mother said, distressed, before Darcey could force out her confession. “You should go with a friend.”

Darcey had lost track of most of her friends since taking that job at ConsAmer Pharm. five years ago. Only Lorri managed to keep in touch, more through her efforts than Darcey’s, but Lorri had a family now and couldn’t run out on them.

“—or take a tour.”

“You know I hate tours, Mom,” Darcey griped, sticking out her tongue. Lucky Mom couldn’t see. “You spend hours trapped on a bus with some guide yammering in your ears about the same boring historical tidbit that you already knew before you started. Besides, it’s

too late to book anything. I'm leaving the day after tomorrow." At least her passport was still valid and the expedited visa came in record time. She'd found a cheap, last-minute airfare online, too, even got to use some of her frequent-flyer miles.

"So soon?" her mother fretted. "What about Christmas? It's only three weeks away."

"I'll be back in plenty of time, Mom. Don't worry." Darcey had bought gifts for everyone last night and spent most of the night wrapping them. One less thing to deal with when she came home.

"How are you going to get around?" Dad demanded. "On foot? They don't have mass transit there."

"Yes, they do."

"Honey, you should get Darcey a car. Surely there are some nice rentals to be had."

"That's a great idea, Anne. I'll buy Darcey a nice little car to drive while she's there. Then our baby won't have to worry about rental fees and accident surcharges."

I'm not a helpless infant. "Daddy—" Darcey stopped herself and began again, trying to sound less whiny. "Dad, it's okay, really. I can rent a car." She had her own credit card. Besides, it would be easier to fly between cities than to drive. Lorri had been a fount of useful information.

"God knows what kind of rattletrap they'll stick you with. No, I'm buying you a car and that's final." Darcey sighed. When her father got "final," she knew better than to argue. She'd learned decades ago he would have his way, no matter what. "You're flying into Auckland? I'll have it delivered to your hotel. You won't have to worry about a thing."

"Thanks, Dad." Darcey surrendered, feeling twelve years old, maybe less. She could have managed on her own.

"Where are you staying?"

She'd been looking at hotels on a travel app when the phone rang. "I, um... I haven't decided yet. I'll find someplace nice, Dad. Don't worry."

"You haven't even reserved a hotel room?"

I was just about to. Darcey swallowed her protest. It would do no good.

"They're probably all fully booked. God knows where you'd end up. Annie, we have to find her a hotel. We can't have our baby sleeping on

the street.”

“How long are you going to be there?” Mom asked.

A bad feeling crept up Darcey’s back. “Eighteen days. I fly into Auckland on the sixth and back on the 23rd.”

“I’m not happy that you’re running around all on your own, without even a tour guide to look after you,” said Mom, still fussing.

“I’ll be okay, Mom, I promise. I’m taking some great travel books.” Courtesy of Lorri, of course.

“Pah, books! They’re useless. I know. I’ll prepare you an itinerary to follow. It’ll be the next best thing to a tour.”

Oh, god. The last thing she wanted was some whirlwind extravaganza. Twenty cities in eighteen days. “But Mom, you don’t have—”

“Darcey, honey, I’d feel much better about your going so far away alone if we knew where to find you. What if something horrible happened to you out there?”

I’m sure the police would call and tell you.

“You could never manage all by yourself,” Mom continued.

Yes, I could.

“We’d be worried sick the whole time.”

Mom’s guilt trips were as effective as Dad’s “finality.” Demoted to age three, Darcey closed her eyes and forced herself to say what her mother wanted to hear. “That’d be great, Mom. Thanks.”

“I’ll e-mail you the itinerary first thing in the morning.”

She ground her teeth. *Wonderful.*

Her parents peppered her for more details about her trip until Darcey developed a headache from all the lies and begged off. Why did she have to justify herself anyway? Heck, she didn’t even really want to go.

“Call us when you get there,” said Mom. “We won’t sleep a wink until we know you’re safe.”

“Okay, Mom. ’Bye. ’Bye, Dad.”

God. Darcey hung up the call and leaned back against her chair, closing her eyes and rubbing her throbbing temples. Smother love. Why hadn’t she just kept her mouth shut?

The phone began to ring again. She checked the caller ID. Elinor. *Damn.* Mom had called her already. Elinor knew people everywhere. No

doubt she had friends in New Zealand and was calling to insist Darcey stay with them.

Darcey let it go to voice mail, doing her best to ignore the guilt. Thank goodness she didn't have an old-style answering machine or Elinor would be demanding she pick up the phone—and Darcey would dutifully pick up.

Why did her family always have to treat her like a helpless but lovable little Cindy-Lou-Who? It wasn't her fault she had stopped growing at just over five feet tall, looking like a china doll, all flaxen curls and wide, blue eyes. If she didn't have Mom's hair and Nana's mouth, she'd think she was switched at birth.

So what if she didn't get a perfect score on her SATs like Elinor or Jackie. Darcey was an adult. She was capable. She could manage just fine on her own.

She would prove it to them. To them all.

Suddenly she couldn't wait to get away.

Chapter 5

Hell. She should have stayed in Chicago.

Darcey's flight to Auckland was every bit as cramped and crowded as she'd feared. She couldn't sleep on the plane. Her so-called "window" seat turned out to be next to a bulkhead. By the time she'd watched Tom Cruise's latest hit movie for the third time in a row, a claustrophobic Darcey was ready to slit her wrists. If only she'd remembered to bring something to stream.

Finally she crashed at her hotel in Auckland, grabbing a three hour nap on the bed before walking outside in the bright sunshine to evaporate the rest of the jet lag. She would have a good time in New Zealand—or *else*.

The beautiful city made up for the discomfort. It was in bloom and larger than life. Flowering shrubs that reached a modest two feet high at home, here towered over her head. A fat sycamore near the hotel looked hundreds of years old and boasted leaves the size of dinner plates.

Darcey gazed around in every direction, a dozen years of cares falling from her shoulders. No work, no one to pester her. Just summer sun, fresh air and green trees peppered with Christmas-red blossoms. *Free!* She spun around on the sidewalk with her arms flung wide, giggling like a child. A passing taxi driver beep-beeped at her and grinned. A young woman pushing a stroller in the other direction gave her a friendly wink. Even the baby chuckled and waved aimless hands.

Feet still dancing, she took a long walk in nearby Albert Park, drinking in the steep but glorious scenery. If only Lorri were here to share it. Darcey snapped a lot of photos with her camera. Taking a few extra with her cell phone, she emailed them to her friend.

Lorri's email when it came, oddly dated yesterday, said,

I'm so jealous. Next time take some pics that aren't blurry.

Darn. She should have taken time to learn how to use the camera on

her new phone. She mailed Lorri several picture postcards.

Darcey strolled down to the waterfront for some shopping, trying to memorize every moment she didn't capture on her camera and, on impulse, booked a short cruise of the harbor. Leaning against the starboard rail, she absorbed the warmth of the sun on her hair and the novelty of the salty sea breeze against her face. *We don't have this in Chicago in December.* Darcey laughed for sheer joy. *I should have done this years ago.*

Before she left town, she even bungee-jumped off the Sky Tower. She had the photos to prove it, too. (*That in your face, Elinor.*) Her blood raced as she plummeted a suicidal 300 meters toward the earth, stopping short at the last moment and landed safely. *Hear me roar.*

Darcey hated to leave Auckland, but Mom's itinerary gave her only three days in the city.

The pre-owned Toyota Dad had insisted on buying her had the steering wheel on the right hand side of the car. Everything was backwards. It took some getting used to. Driving took every bit of her concentration.

So weird to drive on the other side of the road. The car kept drifting to the left shoulder every now and then. Once she almost drove into a ditch, but she managed to stay on the road somehow, picking up Highway 1 without once getting lost or causing an accident, though every time she tried to signal a turn, she turned on the windshield wipers.

"Shit," Darcey swore, shutting them off for the dozenth time before she headed south out of town toward Lake Taupo and beyond.

Stopping for ten minutes in Taupo, Darcey grabbed a fast-food burger and bio-break before heading south again. Not even enough time to get her feet wet. According to that fiendish itinerary, it should take her about five hours to reach Elinor's friends in Wellington with plenty of time for dinner. Six hours of hairpin turns and ear-popping mountains later, Darcey seemed no closer.

Her stomach growled. She should have saved some of the fries to snack on. Was there anyplace she could pick up a quick sandwich? She was going to need to stop for gas soon, too. She had less than a quarter-tank left.

"Mom didn't think about the terrain," she grumbled to the car. "For

every mile I go horizontally, it must be three vertically. And I have no time to stop and actually *see* anything.” Not that she could see anything but the road. South of Taupo, a steady rain set in, obscuring all the spectacular scenery she’d spent several thousand dollars to look at.

Without warning the road curved sharply to the left, leading into a traffic roundabout. Darcey dropped an F-bomb, glad Mom didn’t hear it. She whipped her head around. Where was she supposed to get out?

Following the car in front of her, she hoped the driver knew where he was headed. A half hour later Darcey watched the vehicle turn onto a gravel road next to a lush field dotted with clusters of fluffy sheep and drive up the side of a mountain.

Damn. She’d taken the wrong turn-off at the roundabout. Growling under her breath, Darcey drove on for several miles looking for a place to turn around but didn’t find one. She’d have to do a Y-turn in the road, that’s all. It should be okay. The rain had let up to a fine drizzle. Not another car for miles.

The maneuver, so simple on suburban streets back home, turned out awkward in this car. She reached for the gear shift without thinking and banged her right hand on the door. Again. “Shit.” Ignoring the throbbing knuckles, she used her left to shift the car into reverse and back up across the road.

The Toyota kept rolling backward into the ditch at the opposite side. Darcey tried to ease the car forward, but the right-side wheel spun without traction, sinking deeper. *Oh, hell.* “What made me think I could go to New Zealand alone? Mom’s right, I shouldn’t be allowed out without a babysitter.” Darcey shut off the ignition and rubbed the pain between her eyes. “Thank God Elinor can’t see me now. She’d never let me hear the end of it.”

At least the car didn’t block the road. She pushed the heavy door open with some difficulty and went to investigate, sinking up to mid-calf in the mud. “Drat.” Darcey dragged her foot free, but her shoe stayed embedded deep. “A brand new pair of flats, too.” Cold muddy water squished between her toes, a pleasant sensation to be enjoyed at age four, maybe, but not so much right now.

She reached down and tried to pry the shoe from the mud. Her slippery fingers couldn’t get a good grip and the suction held it fast.

Darcey flung her hands in the air. “Forget it. I don’t want it back that badly. Besides, it’s probably wrecked now anyway.”

She took a moment to look around, a cool breeze fanning her face. Much better than being stuck in the stuffy car, despite the faint hint of cow manure. There wasn’t much to look at, though, just acres and acres of untouched land. “If only the sun would just come out.” In bright sunlight, no doubt these hills and valleys would glisten, becoming exceptionally lovely. *I could find peace here.*

A pity the sky was so overcast and gray. She rubbed her chin. “What time is it?” She checked her watch. Well past dinner-time. “I am *so* late.” Her stomach seemed so empty her navel and backbone would touch any moment. She should call her sister’s friends in Wellington. Now, before they panicked and called Elinor.

Darcey plopped down onto the seat, hurling the other shoe into the back seat of the car, and dug the new cell-phone out of her purse. Elinor had insisted on providing a list of emergency numbers in case she ran into trouble, thank God. Darcey hated the inference, but obviously Elinor knew her doofus little sister.

She turned on the phone—no signal. Not even half a bar? “Oh, come on!” Darcey thudded a fist against the dashboard. Must be the mountains. A colder wind gust swirled around her. What was she going to do? It would be getting dark soon.

A crack of thunder boomed. Darcey flinched. “Oh, no.” It needed only this. The rain intensified, pounding on the roof like machine gun bullets. Darcey closed the car door and settled in to wait for somebody to find her. “I’ll stay here. Someone *has* to pass by sooner or later.”

No one did.

Darcey drummed her nails on the dashboard. “Is it a holiday or something? Where is everybody?” She checked her watch. Over an hour had passed since she’d gotten stuck. “At least the rain let up a little.” Darcey’s stomach growled louder, reminding her she hadn’t eaten in hours.

If only she’d thought to pack some snacks. She hadn’t—or extra drinking water, either. She shouldn’t have needed any. She tried to leave an empty water bottle in the rain, but only managed to collect half a swallow through the narrow neck. An unpleasant sting reminded her she

needed to use a bathroom soon.

The murky sky was getting darker. "I can't wait any longer for help to find me," she told herself. "I have to go find it." Darcey got out of the car.

She rubbed goose-bumps on her arms, the air already noticeably chillier. Darcey collected her purse and tote bag from the car, digging her spare pair of shoes out of one of the suitcases in the trunk and putting them on. Three inch heels—she liked the extra height they gave her—but they were new and the pointy toes pinched. Fine for the office or even a dance floor, but not meant for hiking. "These will be hell to walk on."

She cast a glance at the deep foot-print next to the car, filled with inches of dirty water. That shoe was a lost cause. She grimaced. Heels or barefoot? Another whiff of manure settled the question. No contest. Heels. She shuddered. "I don't want to step barefoot into cow-poop, not even by accident."

The suitcase? "Should I take it?" She tried to lift it out. No. Too heavy and bulky. It would just slow her down. "I guess it'll be safe enough here." She had all her essentials in the tote bag. She closed and locked the car trunk.

Darcey grabbed the cell phone and tried again, plodding several yards in both directions of the road through the light rain in search of a signal. Nothing.

"If I'd had any sense, I'd have packed an umbrella," she grumbled, "or a raincoat." Cold rain soaked her hair and dripped off the end of her nose.

Darcey trudged several yards further along the pavement to a short rise and looked around her, one hand above her brow to keep the water out of her eyes.

"Which way is south?" With the sun suffocated by dense, graphite-gray clouds, she couldn't be positive. Weren't there *any* landmarks? Road signs?

In the deepening gloom, she made out a weathered old barn in a gently sloping valley and a picturesque farmhouse beyond. The damp wind carried on it the distinct scent of wet cows. Darcey wrinkled her nose, trying to breathe as little as possible. How far was it? A mile? Two?

She looked back the way she had come. Nothing but miles of road through empty country, most of it uphill. She shuddered. "In these heels? No way." Geez, her toes already hurt.

The farm, then. With luck, the farmer would be able to pull her car out of the ditch. "He might even have a wife willing to put me up for the night. The very least they could do is call me a tow truck."

There was no direct road to the farm from here as far as she could tell. The turn-off might be miles up ahead or behind her somewhere,. Maybe the way there might not meet up with this road at all. No choice but cross-country. Hefting her tote bag to her shoulder, she took a deep breath and set off across the wet fields. "I just hope I don't lose these shoes, too."

The soggy ground sucked at her feet with every step, quickly soaking through the shoe-leather. The narrow heels sank into the soft earth. Mud clung to the soles, making them heavier with every step. She clenched her toes to try to keep them on.

Stopping after a hundred feet or so, she tried the phone again. Still nothing. "Damn, the battery's getting low." Turning it off, she shoved it into her tote bag to try to keep it dry.

A horde of tiny flies began to buzz around her. She tried to wave them off. Two or three stung her face, several others found hands and arms. "Ow!" Instant sharp pain like small razor blades cut into her skin. The bites itched almost immediately, worse than poison ivy. She kept waving away the little nuisances, swatting the most determined ones. Darcey stumbled through an ankle-deep stream and kept on walking, trying not to scratch.

Within minutes, the light rain turned into a downpour, soaking her straight through to the skin. On the bright side, the heavy rain drove away those biting flies.

Darcey grumbled every swear word she knew as she squished through the mud. Mud and other things. Stinky things. She stopped to try to scrape the gunk off her shoes with a stick, trying not to get any on her hands but it didn't help much. The shoes just accumulated more mud.

Shoulder aching, she switched her bag to the other side. Why had she packed so much? It dragged at her arm as if she'd stuffed it with bricks. With one hand she massaged the sore muscles. Didn't help a lot.

How much further to the farm-house? Her feet were killing her. She must be getting closer, surely? The reek of manure grew stronger despite the rain. From the road it had looked like only a mile or so. Must be more. The lights of the house taunted her, still impossibly far. "It can't be *that* much further," she whimpered. "I've walked for ages already." Switching her bag back to the other shoulder, she scraped more mud off her shoes and trudged onward.

Her toe caught on an unseen rock. Darcey fell, sliding downhill several yards on her chest. She spat out a mouthful of moldy-tasting mud and wiped her chin clean as best she could with the back of her hand. "Crap." Pulling out the cell phone, she tried again for a signal. Shit, the damned thing wouldn't even power on. She hurled it back into her bag.

"I should've stayed with the car. I might have been found already. I should go back." Shivering, Darcey turned around. Where the hell was it? The curtain of gray rain obscured everything beyond a few yards. No going back, then.

"Great. Just great. Perfect! All I need now is another thunderstorm." As if to oblige her, a bolt of lightning lit up the sky. Darcey flinched and ducked. Thunder rumbled a second or two later, loud enough to drown out her stomach. "Do you hate me?" she screamed to the sky, icy water streaming down her face.

"Get a grip, Darce," she told herself, jaw quivering. "Don't lose it now. Panic and do something stupid, you'll die out here." She clenched her fists for several long moments until she regained control. Shifting her bag again, she set off toward the lights in the distance. Darcey scratched at the cruelly stinging bug-bites. She'd have to buy some calamine lotion in the morning. If she had any skin left by then.

The rain stopped at last. The clouds broke up, making a few holes for stars to twinkle through. Night birds began to call to each other. Strange musical notes. Different from the birdsong back home. The house lights went out but the stronger smell of soggy cows nearby reassured her. She must be getting closer.

Some night creature fluttered close to her face. An owl? A bat? Darcey shrieked. She didn't know what it was, didn't care, just swung her purse and tote bag at it to scare it off. Both slipped out of numb, wet fingers, vanishing into the dark. Off-balance, heart pounding, she landed

hard on her bottom.

Shit. Shit. Shit. She smacked the mud at her sides with her fists. At least her scream scared the nasty thing away, whatever it was. She got to her knees and felt around with her hands for her purse and bag. Where were they? No trace of either in the dark. Eyes smarting, Darcey gave up. Without lightning or a full moon, she'd have to wait till morning to hunt for them. If she lived that long.

Why had she thought she could manage alone? Darcey burst into tears. Her family was right about her. She *was* a helpless Cindy-Lou. She could just hear Elinor snark.

Well, of course you're going to fail with that attitude.

No. Hell, no. Darcey tossed her head, defiant. Not on your life. She wiped the tears away with a muddy hand. She'd show Elinor. She'd show them all. New Zealand was *not* going to break her.

She struggled to her feet and rubbed her bruised, aching backside. She must have landed on a half-buried rock. Now where the hell was that house? There, that darker spot in the blackness. "Come on, Darce, you can do it and you're going to." She forced herself on by sheer will. "Only half a mile," she insisted, praying to God it wasn't more. She should be there by now. Every mistreated muscle in her body ached. Still she dragged one foot in front of the other, barely keeping her feet inside her filthy shoes.

A thick fog settled on the ground. She lost sight of the house. The owners must have gone to sleep. "Did I miss it?" She might have walked right past in the dark and never known.

"I can't give up now. I *won't* give up." That would only prove Elinor was right. "Push. Just a little bit further. Come on." She started moving again. "Think about what's waiting for you there: a warm bath, hot food, a soft bed. You've conquered worse than this." *Yeah, when?* She ignored the pessimistic voice. "Come on. You can do it."

Darcey stumbled again, this time a gravel drive crunched beneath her high-heeled shoes. *Finally!* She sped up, teetering over the loose, uneven surface. Her foot twisted painfully in a rut. She fell on all fours, one shoe-heel breaking off. Her once-pristine linen slacks ripped. A burning sting tore across her left knee and both palms.

Face-down on the ground, Darcey bawled like a baby. "I *hate* New

Zealand! The first chance I get, I'm heading for the nearest airport and flying home!"

Except—then she really *would* be a helpless Cindy-Lou.

Something cold and wet prodded her ear. "Gah!" Darcey's head shot up. "What the—" A warm, silky tongue lapped at her cheek. Cringing, she tentatively reached out and touched wet fur. Oh, god, did New Zealand have wolves? Dingoes?

A soft whimper responded. A head nosed beneath her hand. She dragged herself to her feet and petted the big animal. "Nice doggie." *I hope*. In the darkness, she just made out wide jaws splitting in a canine smile, a huge tongue lolling out. "Is your master home?" She took a limping step toward the house, gritting her teeth as fresh agony shot up her leg. *Sonofa—*

The dog ran up to the house, barking loud enough to wake the dead. *Gotta be a dog. Can't be a wolf. Wolves howl*. Twenty more feet to go. *Push*. "Come on. You can make it that far."

Hobbling to the door, she forced herself up the porch step, teeth tightly clenched. *I made it. Thank God*. She leaned against the wall, breathing deep, gathering strength to ring the bell.

Light flooded the porch. The door to the house flung open.

"Who the hell is out there?"

THE TUDOR TRILOGY BY

Daphne Walter

King Henry's Last Daughter

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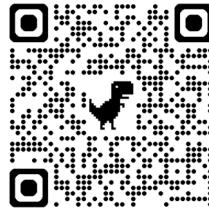
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Daphne Walter

writing as

Colette Maëlys

The Edge of the Midnight Woods

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Daphne Walter always loved books, ever since teaching herself to read at age three. She has been writing ever since her college roommate turned her on to romance novels. She could never get enough stories.

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Her previous published Tudor fiction novels (written as Daphne Walter) are King Henry's Last Daughter (2017), Fallen Angel (2024) and Spymaster's Web (2018). She also published a paranormal fiction novel (written as Colette Maëlys), The Edge of the Midnight Woods (2021).



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