



A
Heart
to
Trust

A.L. BROOKS



Chapter 1

“MORNING, BOSS!” JENNY CALLED IN the vicinity of Adrienne’s office as she threw her bag onto her own chair Thursday morning.

Adrienne smiled at her when she placed the still-steaming coffee in front of her, along with a bag containing a croissant and a fruit cup. “Good morning. I’m going to miss this level of service after I move to California.” She sipped the coffee, then tapped her chin. “I wonder if I can train Morgan to do this for me every day?”

Jenny snorted. “Hah, good luck with that!” She pursed her lips. “On second thought, she’s so gooey over you, she probably would.”

Adrienne blushed. “Probably.” She sat straighter in her chair. “Anyway, enough of that. You, young lady, are a genius.”

“I am?”

“Yes! That idea you had to change the opening sequence in the WNBA film worked brilliantly.”

“You ran with it?” Jenny’s heart thumped.

“I did.” Adrienne beamed at her. “I saw the first cut last night, and I *loved* it.”

“Wow.”

“Indeed.” Adrienne leaned onto her elbows. “You have a great mind and great ideas. I wish you’d have a little more faith in yourself.” Her tone was gentle, but her gaze locked on Jenny’s.

Jenny’s face heated and she shuffled her feet. “Thanks. I know you’ve said it a couple times, but...”

“What?”

Jenny shrugged. “I can admit I lack some self-confidence. And...” She blew out a breath. Given Adrienne had opened the subject, maybe it was okay to say it. “And I guess I wasn’t sure of my standing after the mistakes I made with the whole Morgan thing.”

Adrienne sat back once more. “Okay, I can understand that. But, honestly, that was all a blip. Since then, you’ve proved yourself to me time and time again. You can forget that chapter, okay? You should think about what your next steps will be.” A small frown creased her brow. “You know, longer term. You can’t stay a PA forever.” She cleared her throat. “Well, I need to get on with some things.”

The dismissal was a tad abrupt, but Jenny was happy to leave the awkward conversation. She was always a little freaked out by people, especially Adrienne, who told her to push for more. Pushing meant change, and Jenny didn’t like change. In her experience change usually came with big problems and heartache, and she had no desire to add those to her generally happy life. She shuddered as unwanted memories from a decade ago threatened to surface.

No, change was bad, and her happy status quo was good. She was content working for Adrienne and pretty sure she’d be content working for whoever was brought in to replace Adrienne at the end of the month.

She took a step back. “Okay. Any changes to today’s schedule I need to know about?”

Adrienne didn’t meet her eye. “One. Check your inbox—a mandatory company meeting at four this afternoon. Please move whatever you need to so you can attend.” Adrienne’s voice carried a serious tone Jenny didn’t think she’d ever heard from her before.

Jenny’s heart beat faster. She opened her mouth to speak, but Adrienne held up a hand.

“Whatever you’re going to ask, I can’t tell you.” She looked at Jenny, then away again, licked her lips, and ran a hand through her short auburn hair. “Please just make sure you attend, okay?”

Jenny’s gut twisted, but she bit back her words and nodded before exiting Adrienne’s office. When she got to her desk, she took a moment to breathe deeply and tried to calm her racing pulse. *Whatever it is, I’ll find out later.* There was no sense in worrying over nothing. She hoped.

She booted up her laptop and eased into her chair. While her computer did its thing, she sipped her coffee and nibbled her croissant.

As soon as her email program loaded, the meeting request pinged onto the screen:

*All-staff meeting
Conference Room A
4–5 p.m.
Mandatory*

Jenny swiveled in her chair and peered through the large glass window separating her workstation from Adrienne’s office. Her boss had turned her chair so she faced away from Jenny toward the external window that looked out onto the Manhattan skyline; her hands gripped the arms of the chair.

What the hell was going on?



They said YES!!!! Meet me and the girls at Limelight tomorrow night for a LOT of alcohol xxx

Carl’s text buzzed in as Jenny scooped up her phone to tuck it in her purse. The all-staff meeting was in two minutes and she shouldn’t be late, so although she was thrilled for her roommate and his big news, an appropriately gushing response would have to wait. It wasn’t every day one of her closest friends managed to get a contract to sell his jewelry at Bloomingdale’s, but she’d need more time than she had available now to congratulate him properly.

She looked around for Adrienne. She’d barely seen her since that awkward conversation in Adrienne’s office earlier in the day, which she didn’t understand because Adrienne’s calendar showed her free all afternoon. Where had she disappeared to?

Well, I’m not her keeper. She knows the meeting is now, so she’ll have to get to it.

Jenny swung back to her desk to lock down her laptop—for once having remembered to do so—and found Maxwell waiting for her.

His body filled her cubicle; he wasn't overweight, just tall and broad and a little imposing on first meeting. Once you got to know him, you realized what a marshmallow he truly was.

"Hey, Max, my man!" Jenny held out her fist for a bump and chuckled when Maxwell stared down at it. "Still not up for fist-bumping, huh?"

He shook his head.

Jenny laughed.

Maxwell was kind of a geek and passionate about sports statistics. Truth be told, he loved all sorts of statistics. He was quiet, intense, and never socialized with the team, but he and Jenny got on fine.

"Okay, let's go." She shoved her purse into her desk drawer.

When they reached the main conference room, it was, of course, standing room only. She and Maxwell squeezed past the guy from legal who always smelled of oranges and sidled between a small group of chattering women from finance until they leaned back against a small patch of wall near the big credenza that dominated one end of the room. Opposite them at the other end were the five main board members, the head of HR, and the head of legal.

Adrienne had a seat halfway down the long table on the right side, but try as Jenny might, she couldn't catch her eye.

Maxwell leaned in. "It won't be good news."

"What?" Jenny's heart rate picked up again.

He shrugged. "I looked back on all the previous all-staff meetings and analyzed what they revealed. In eighty-seven percent of cases, it was to announce things that led to major changes in the business. In eleven percent of cases, it was even worse, leading to job reductions. Therefore, there is only a two percent chance this will be good news. Statistically speaking, those are small odds."

Before Jenny could thank him for making her feel *so* much better, the CEO brought the meeting to order by loudly tapping his pen on the table.

The room fell silent.

The CEO stood and glanced at his watch. He turned to the heads of HR and legal, and when they nodded, he looked over at a woman Jenny didn't recognize who stood in the doorway. When that woman, with a cell phone to her ear, gave him a thumbs-up, the CEO faced the room.

“Everybody, thank you for clearing your calendars to be present right now. Today is an exceptional day in the history of TC Productions. A moment ago, it was announced to the markets that C&V Inc—who you have all heard of, I’m sure—will be acquiring TC Productions, as of today.”

Gasps and mutters spread around the room.

It took a moment for his words to sink in, but then it dawned. Jenny turned to Maxwell, whose eyes were serious.

“Two percent was very small odds.” He puffed out a long breath.

“Shit.” Jenny blinked rapidly as she turned back to listen to the CEO once more.

“I know this is probably a shock, but we truly believe this is the best way forward for the future of the company.” He tried a smile, but in the stony silence that greeted his words, it didn’t last long.

“For the company or for your bank balances?” The bitterness in the speaker’s tone was crystal clear.

Rita Lapham, the HR director, stepped forward, palms raised in a placating gesture. “I know this is not how you expected your day to end, but let’s try to keep it civil, shall we?”

“Easy for you to say!” The shout was from a woman standing in the corner opposite Jenny. “I bet your job isn’t on the line.”

Murmurs of agreement spread round the room like a wave.

Oh crap. Jenny pressed herself back into the wall, afraid her knees would give way. *My job! What’s going to happen to my job?*

“Are you okay?” Maxwell gazed at her with concern.

“I have no idea.” She swallowed with her fists clenched so tight, she feared she’d crack a bone.

“So, how many of us will be out of work?” the same woman called, this time stepping out from behind a group of people to face the room.

“I’m not at liberty to say right at this time,” Lapham replied. “But each of you will be invited to a meeting with a representative from my team to discuss what the next steps will be.”

“But there *will* be job losses?” the woman pressed.

Jenny vaguely recognized her now as someone from marketing.

Lapham glanced at the CEO, who gave her a short nod. “Yes,” she said, “there will.”

A mix of gasps, cries, and loud curse words rumbled around the room.

Once more, Lapham raised her hands. “Please, stay calm. Wait until you hear from your HR representative. We hope to meet with everyone today, so I would ask you all to stay at your desks until you’ve been called. Please don’t leave the building; hear what we have to say.”

The CEO stepped up and said something in Lapham’s ear, and she took that as her cue to step aside. “As Rita has said, it would be best if you all returned to your desks,” he said. “We’ll be sending out more details once all of those meetings have taken place. So, please, could you now leave the room?”



Jenny slammed the stall door closed behind her and sat on the toilet. By the faint sounds coming from the other two stalls, she wasn’t the only one who sought solace in the one place you were unlikely to be interrupted. From the stall immediately to her left came faint sniffing sounds, and her heart ached for whoever emitted them. And from the stall farthest along the row came the sound of someone furiously tapping on a cell phone.

Not ready to cry and certainly not ready to share the news with anyone else, Jenny simply sat and stared at the back of the stall door.

TC Productions had been sold, and neither she nor any of her peers had any idea at the moment what that meant for them. Would she have a job to come to in the morning or not? And if she didn’t, what the hell would she do? It was like hanging onto a cliff edge, the stone crumbling beneath her fingers.

Jenny’s anger at the hopelessness of her situation surged, and she swallowed down the bile in her throat. *I might be okay. It might be other teams that lose people.* At least Adrienne would be all right, leaving at the end of the month for her big move to California.

Jenny’s heart skipped a beat. She remembered how weird Adrienne had been about telling her the all-staff meeting was scheduled and that she had to attend. Had Adrienne known something? And if so, why hadn’t she warned Jenny? She would have thought, after all these years together, she deserved better treatment than that. Her skin flashed hot and cold with anger. Though a small part of her mind registered she was directing her fury for the situation at the wrong person, there was only one place she wanted to be.

After exiting the restroom, she stomped along the hallway back toward her cubicle and veered left at the last moment to rap loudly on Adrienne's door. At the tired, "Come in," she pushed the door open and stopped herself from slamming it behind her.

Adrienne was in her chair but pushed back from her desk with a single piece of paper in her left hand. Her head was propped in her right hand and her arm leaned on the chair arm. "Jenny, I—"

"Don't!" Jenny held up one hand as she marched into the center of the office.

Adrienne sighed and threw the piece of paper onto her desk. "Have a seat."

"I don't want to sit!"

Adrienne's eyes narrowed. "Then at least have the courtesy to lower your voice."

The coldness in her tone brought Jenny up short, and she sucked in a breath, finally realizing how close her behavior was to insubordination. "I'm sorry." Her shoulders slumped, and she pushed a hand through her hair in frustration.

"Please. Sit down." This time, Adrienne's tone was warm and understanding.

Jenny fought back tears. She sat on the comfy chair on the visitor's side of Adrienne's desk and exhaled, willing the tears to stay locked behind her eyelids.

There was a short silence between them, and then Adrienne said, "I found out late last night. All the senior managers like myself who hadn't been part of the negotiations were summoned to a meeting with the CEO and informed." She sighed. "They've been working on the deal for weeks. I'd been aware of late-night meetings but just assumed it was all project related, and I never heard a whisper from anyone in the industry that this was on the cards. I honestly didn't know, and even once I did, I couldn't say anything because they made us all sign nondisclosure agreements."

Jenny leaned back in her chair and breathed slowly. No point staying angry with Adrienne given what she'd just heard. "I understand."

Adrienne's expression shifted to one of concern. "You'll hear it from HR soon, but yours is one of the jobs under threat. I'm very sorry. I'm not even supposed to tell you, but I don't care right now."

Jenny's heart pounded, and her stomach flipped. "Shit."

"Indeed."

"What..." Her mouth went dry. She swallowed and tried again. "What will happen to me?"

"I'm not sure exactly, just that all production assistant jobs are up for review, as well as all admin-level posts and a handful of managers at my level." She shrugged. "They'll want to streamline and get economies of scale where they can. Buying TC is great for them—they've wanted to get more involved in sports, and this is an easy way for them to do that. But that doesn't mean everyone from TC will be happy."

"I bet you're glad you're already leaving." Jenny couldn't help the hint of bitterness that crept into her tone. It was bad enough knowing she was losing Adrienne as a mentor and manager. She'd never have imagined her own job would soon be at risk too.

"I can't lie—yes, I am. I wouldn't want to get into a fight for a position, not now. In fact, I know I've made it easy for them in that respect. One less headcount to worry about." She hesitated for a couple moments. "Are you okay?"

Jenny, who had been trying to get her erratic breathing under control, snorted. "No, not really. To be honest, I'm panicking." Her stomach did cartwheels. She wondered where the nearest drugstore was; she was in desperate need of some antacids.

"Hey." Adrienne stood and walked around her desk to place a comforting hand on Jenny's shoulder. "Please don't panic."

Jenny exhaled three times, Adrienne's warm hand still pressed into her shoulder. "I'm sorry for coming in all angry and, you know, shouting."

"It's forgotten. It was understandable. And I'm sure you aren't the only one in their boss's office right now."

Jenny nodded, her breathing calmer. "Probably not." She thought of the mystery woman crying in the stall next to her in the restroom. "God, people are going to lose their *jobs*. This is awful."

Adrienne backed away and sat against the edge of her desk. "It is. I've been through something like this once before, maybe twenty-five years ago. It's not pleasant."

Before Jenny could respond, Adrienne's phone rang. She glanced at the display and sighed. "Right, that's Harper from HR. I imagine she's looking for you. Did you get a chance to see when your appointment was for?"

Jenny nibbled her bottom lip, her embarrassment at maximum. "No, just marched in here with my ass on fire."

Adrienne threw her a knowing look, then schooled her features as she picked up the phone. "Hi, Harper. Yes, she's with me. My bad, I wanted to talk to her after the staff meeting and lost track of time." Adrienne shot Jenny a wink.

Jenny clapped a hand over her mouth to stop her laugh escaping.

"Yes, I'll send her up now." Adrienne put the phone down.

"You didn't have to lie like—"

Adrienne held up a hand. "No harm in doing so. Now, at the risk of sounding like I'm telling you what to do, here's what you're going to do."

Jenny rolled her eyes.

Adrienne smiled. "Stay calm. Listen to what she says without any arguing, even if you don't like what you're hearing. You're always better off with a job, even if it's not the perfect one. So, don't do or say anything to jeopardize any chance you have of staying on, at least in the short-term." She stopped, her cheeks red. "Good God, I sound like your mother."

Jenny's throat closed, and she had to swallow a couple of times before responding. "No, you don't. You sound like someone who cares, and I appreciate it."

Adrienne's eyes went wide. "Oh God, I'm so sorry. It was a figure of speech and—"

"It's okay, don't worry." Jenny stood and straightened her shoulders. "Okay, I'm going to see what Harper has to say." She paused. "Thank you. For everything. And I don't just mean today."

Adrienne pushed away from the desk and motioned Jenny toward the door. "You've got this. I have every faith in you."

"Thanks."

"I'll be gone by the time you come back down, so I'll catch up with you in the morning, okay? But call me later if there's anything you want to talk through."

"I'll be fine, don't worry." Jenny left Adrienne's office trying to believe her own words.

Chapter 2

“HOW ARE YOU?” ADRIENNE ASKED as Jenny walked into her office Friday morning, Adrienne’s usual coffee and her breakfast bag of a croissant and a fruit cup clutched in her hands. “You look tired.”

Jenny knew Adrienne was being polite. She looked like shit. “Yeah, I didn’t sleep so well last night.”

“What did Harper say?” Adrienne motioned Jenny to take a seat.

Thankful to rest her weary body, Jenny slumped into the visitor’s chair. She placed the coffee and breakfast bag on Adrienne’s desk. “The meeting was all right. I mean, she basically told me what you’d already said. My job’s been put on the ‘at risk’ list and this morning I meet my new boss and find out more about what’s going to happen.” She willed her stomach to stop acting like a gymnastic event at the Olympics, but it was hard. Her nerves were literally eating her up about what would happen. “I mean, it’s great they’ve organized that meeting so quickly, but I feel like a zombie. I’m so not ready to go play nice with the new people.” She huffed out a long breath. “This all just totally sucks.”

“It does indeed.” Adrienne tilted her head. “Have you eaten anything?”

“No, I’m too nervous.”

They stared at each other for a moment.

“I should get going, the meeting’s in a few minutes.” Jenny stood. Her head pounded from her lack of sleep, and painkillers were a necessity to survive what the morning had to offer.

“Come see me afterwards?”

“I will.” She huffed out a long breath and headed back to her cubicle. After locating the bottle of painkillers in her desk drawer, she downed two.

“Jenny, are you ready?”

Maxwell’s voice made her jump in her seat and clutch her head at the unwelcome movement. “Please, for the love of everything good in this world, stop creeping up on me, Maxwell!”

“Are you sick?” he asked.

“Kind of.”

“I’m sorry.”

She sighed. “I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to shout.”

He shrugged. “You didn’t. Are you ready?”

“No, but we need to do it anyway.”

He turned away and walked toward the stairs to the next floor where the meeting rooms were situated. She trotted to catch up with him, and that didn’t help matters with her thumping head.

Maxwell entered the meeting room ahead of her. Once he’d moved out of the way, Jenny checked out who waited for them. The guy at the head of the table had to be what’s-his-name, the new production team manager she’d now report to. It would be *so* good if she could remember his name some time very soon. Harper had told her, but in the shock of all that she’d heard, Jenny had completely forgotten it.

On the opposite side of the table sat two immaculately presented women. They both looked a little older than Jenny. One was all blonde hair, dazzling smile, and way too much makeup, wearing a bright-red blouse. The other woman, dressed in a dark-brown blazer over a creamy silk top, was serious, her posture rigid. Her neatly cut brown hair curved around her neck, and her hazel eyes stared intently at Jenny and Maxwell.

“Derek Flanigan,” the new manager said as he stood, unwittingly saving Jenny from the embarrassment of having to ask him his name. His handshake was firm, and his face revealed nothing. He was pretty short with a belly trying to tell him his shirts were a size too small. He clearly wasn’t listening.

Averting her eyes from the mass of flesh threatening to escape the straining buttons, Jenny returned his handshake with equal firmness. “Jenny Quinn.” She inwardly winced at the slight wobble in her voice.

Maxwell briefly shook Derek’s hand and introduced himself.

Derek motioned for them to take a seat. “First, introductions.” He gestured to the two women.

“Hi, I’m Christine Gillard, but you can call me Chrissy!” The blonde spoke loudly, far too loudly for Jenny’s poor head.

She wasn’t sure she’d covered her wince successfully, if the frown on the other, more serious woman’s face was anything to go by.

Then the serious one spoke. “Olivia Sinclair.” Much to Jenny’s surprise, the woman’s accent was British.

“Do you go by Liv?” Jenny attempted a friendly smile. No point antagonizing the rivals on day one.

“Certainly not.” Olivia gave Jenny a withering look, then turned her attention to Derek.

Oh, good. Great start. Jenny slid an inch or so down in her seat.

“So.” Derek leaned forward and clasped his hands together. “I know you’ve all been briefed by HR, but I wanted to give you some more detail and clarity on how this whole thing’s going to go.”

Jenny schooled her features and focused on his face. Harper had told her not to panic, and to hear him out, and she knew that was all she could do, though her nerves were taut as bow strings.

“As you know, we’re looking to have three production assistants in place under the new structure. Some managers might take a look at this situation and take one of the easy options.” He faced Jenny and Maxwell. “Option one is to keep our own C&V staff and let go one of you based on seniority. Or performance.”

Jenny shifted in her chair and risked a quick glance at Maxwell; his mouth hung open.

Derek turned to Chrissy and Olivia. “Option two is to immediately let one of you go, because you’re on short-term contracts.”

Jenny blinked. Interesting.

“But I don’t work that way.” Derek held up his hands. “I firmly believe in people being given a job because they’re the best one for it. Contract status, age, and length of service are all irrelevant.” His weak smile offered Jenny little comfort. “So here’s what we’re gonna do. You’ll all continue working on your current projects. But I’ve also got a great new project lined up, and I want all four of you working on it together. I’ll assess how you work both individually and as a team, and at the end of this project I’ll make my decision on which one of you has to, unfortunately, leave us. The

remaining three will then be given full time, permanent roles with C&V Inc.”

Silence met his announcement.

Jenny swallowed a couple of times as her tired brain worked to keep up. Four of them being assessed for three jobs. Three *permanent* jobs, which was something. But how the hell would this assessment process work? And what was this new project they had to work on together?

Maxwell looked equally confused, which helped.

“Any questions?” Derek asked.

“When can we start on this new project?” Chrissy’s voice was full of excitement. “I’m so looking forward to this challenge!”

Jenny avoided rolling her eyes, but only just. To her surprise, a brief scowl crossed Olivia’s face before she shut it down and returned to her impassive mask.

“I’ll send you all a meeting request for a project kick-off session and you’ll hear all about it then.” Derek turned to Jenny and Maxwell. “I think it would be best if you two moved over to our offices on Monday. I’ll get two workspaces freed up for you this afternoon. Please clear out your desks and get your stuff transferred over, okay?”

Jenny’s stomach rolled. More change. More upheaval. She wanted nothing more than for some genie to appear, snap their fingers, and roll back time to a point where C&V did not want to buy TC Productions. Why couldn’t things stay as they were? After the changes enforced on her by her parents ten years ago, she’d built herself a new life, a calm and predictable one. She liked it that way; the emotional turmoil of anything else wasn’t something she wanted to repeat.

And yet, here she was again, having big change imposed on her. She didn’t know if she wanted to cry or scream.



“Do you think you could handle some food now?” Adrienne said the minute Jenny walked back into her office. She leaned back in her chair and gazed at Jenny, her expression warm and understanding.

Jenny had expected to sit right down and talk everything through with Adrienne, so the question about food threw her a little. She was still numb

from what Derek had said. She was also still trying to process both his words and her impression of him.

He'd come across as sincere, but she'd misread people before with her trusting nature, and maybe this was another one of those occasions.

She'd tried to talk to Maxwell after they'd left the meeting, but he'd muttered something about needing time to think and promptly left the office. *I need to find him later, make sure he's okay.* Focusing back on Adrienne's question, Jenny checked in with her body. Okay, head not beating like a drum anymore, stomach giving a hint of hunger. "Yeah, sure. Tell me what you'd like and I'll go get it and—"

"How about you let me take you out? The day's normal work has gone out the window, wouldn't you say? And I think it would be good to talk about everything you've learned today. So I think we deserve a slightly longer break. Therefore, pizza from Gino's might be in order."

Jenny's mood lifted considerably. "Seriously?"

"Absolutely. Come on. Get your purse and let's get out of here."

After the waiter showed them to their small table halfway down the diner, he passed them menus, took their drink orders, and left. Service at Gino's was always performed with speed; their sodas were in front of them a minute later.

"So, what's the deal?" Adrienne's voice was quiet.

Jenny sighed, then sat forward in her seat and related to Adrienne all that had transpired in the meeting.

"Hm," was all Adrienne said when she'd finished.

"Yeah." Jenny fiddled with her soda glass. "You know what's weird? The only thing I can focus on is that part about moving offices. More than anything, it brings home that today is the last day I work for you." She looked at Adrienne, her mentor and friend, and swallowed the lump in her throat. "I mean, I've only ever worked for you. You've been incredibly supportive to me, and pushed me to learn and better myself. And literally in a couple hours that'll all be gone and I'll work for someone else."

Adrienne's eyes glistened. "I know. It's all so sudden. But I am only a phone call or email away, okay? I will always have time for you. Remember that."

"Thank you." Jenny's voice was small.

“You can do this, you know. I obviously don’t know how good the two C&V women are, but I know *you* are good at your job. Just do for Derek what you’ve done for me and I think you’ll be fine.” Adrienne squeezed Jenny’s hand.

Jenny sucked in a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. “Yeah. I will.”

“And I know, from what you’ve told me about your past, that changes like this one are the thing you hate the most.”

Jenny managed a wry smile. “Yeah, they are.”

“But you are so much wiser now. You learned so much from what your asshole parents did.”

Jenny snorted; Adrienne had never referred to Jenny’s parents in such strong terms before.

“Sorry.” Adrienne chewed her bottom lip. “That just slipped out.”

“Hey, it’s fine. They were assholes.”

“Absolutely.” The vehemence in Adrienne’s tone made the hairs on the back of Jenny’s neck stand up. “I will never, ever understand so-called Christians who willingly and so abruptly kick their own child out of their house just because they find out she’s gay.” Her skin flushed a dark pink. “Honestly, if I ever met them, I’m not sure what I would do or say. But I expect there would be some ass kicking involved.”

Jenny laughed out loud at the thought.

“Remember, you survived that. More than survived—you thrived. Look what you’ve done with your life since then. This won’t stop you. You know that.” Adrienne pinned Jenny with an intense look. “You have had some brilliant ideas in the last year or so. Whatever this new project is you’re a part of, make sure you keep that creative part of your brain switched on. I don’t know about the others, but I do know Maxwell isn’t anywhere near as imaginative as you. This is something where you could definitely have the edge, and you should play it to the maximum. You’re also very good at getting to know the most important people on a project or team and nurturing your relationship with them. People like you, and they share things with you. Again, play to your strengths. Use that. And don’t let your fears dull all those great advantages you have.”

Jenny let the words sink in and inhaled deeply. “You’re right. Sorry, I just needed to wallow for a while and—”

Adrienne sat back. “Perfectly understandable. I’m sure I would have done the same in your position.”

Jenny snorted. “Honestly, I can’t imagine you wallowing. Ever.”

Adrienne’s mouth twisted. “Trust me, when my ex, Paula, left, I did plenty of wallowing. But I got past that, and look where I am now.” Adrienne raised her glass and Jenny clinked hers against it. “To being strong.”

Chapter 3

“COME ON, BARNABY. YOU CAN do it. Look, it’s just one more block.” Olivia gazed down at the dog beside her and chuckled at his expression.

It said, “Can’t you just carry me?”

Barnaby, a big, old, golden Labrador, belonged to Mr. Cousins, one of Olivia’s neighbors. Now well into his eighties and using a walker to get about his apartment and their neighborhood, Mr. Cousins wasn’t physically able to give Barnaby the kind of walk he needed. Although, Olivia thought, most days Barnaby himself, who was probably over seventy in dog years, didn’t seem capable of that kind of walk either.

This Friday evening was a case in point, but they had at least made it to the small local park, where the grizzled dog had taken care of business. Olivia was thankful because, as ever, her time with Barnaby had grounded her and let her cut loose the stress of the day.

And God, what a day. It had been bad enough reading the company email late Thursday when they’d announced their takeover of TC Productions. One key phrase had sent shivers down her spine: “There will, inevitably, be some restructuring and potential loss of some positions, but that will be communicated as soon as is possible.”

As someone on a short-term, month-by-month contract, she’d feared the worst, and sleep last night had been hard to come by. Of course, now that the deal had been announced, so much of the last couple of months made sense. Derek must have known the deal was imminent when he hired her and Chrissy, and therefore only offering them short-term contracts fitted nicely into C&V’s plans. Why take on more permanent staff when you might be getting rid of them only weeks later?

Her frustration grew once more, despite Barnaby's calming presence. She'd worked her backside off trying to impress Derek these past three months, and now it might all have been in vain. Her contract with C&V was her third temporary assignment since arriving in New York, and she was sick of them. She just wanted a permanent job. Ideally something with good prospects, but she'd take just the permanent status right now. In six months, she'd be branching out on her own, and being able to convince a landlord she could make rent each month was vital.

Today's meeting hadn't exactly allayed all her fears. Although her first impressions of the two TC Productions staff had given her a glimmer of hope. Maxwell hadn't strung two words together, and Jenny had looked as far from professional as Olivia thought possible. *She had green hair, for God's sake.* Who did she think she was, a pop star? And either she was ill or hungover, because she'd looked dreadful. She'd slouched in her chair, her eyes puffy, with a perpetual frown on her face. It wouldn't pay to be overconfident, or smug, but Olivia had to admit, leaving that room, she'd had the impression a permanent job was within reach.

She and Barnaby reached the front entrance of the apartment building.

Marcus, the night doorman, held open the door for them. "Hey, Barnaby!" He knelt and patted the dog's head.

Barnaby immediately sat, then leaned into the touch, his long tongue lolling from the side of his mouth.

"Big walk today, man?" Marcus scratched behind Barnaby's ears.

"Just to the park and back," Olivia said. "He's not up to much more these days, the poor thing."

Marcus stood. "Ah, that's a shame. But hey, least he's still here."

"Exactly. I know how much it means to Mr. Cousins to have him around."

"How's the old guy doin'?"

Olivia wagged her free hand back and forth.

Marcus nodded. "I hear ya. Well, you have a good evenin', Mrs. Sinclair."

"I will. Thank you, Marcus."

"G'night, Barnaby," Marcus called after them as they made their way to the elevators.

After dropping Barnaby off at Mr. Cousins's apartment on the eighth floor, Olivia took the elevator up to the top floor and let herself into the

apartment she shared with Broderick. She went to her room and grabbed a summer sweater from the closet, then made her way to the kitchen. She'd just poured herself a glass of white wine when the front door opened.

"Hey, wife!" Broderick called. "I'm home."

She leaned against the kitchen doorway. "Aren't you bored of calling me that?"

Broderick threw her one of his impish smiles, his brown eyes sparkling. "Not yet."

"It's been well over a year."

He walked over and dropped a small kiss on the top of her head. "Does it genuinely bother you?"

She sighed. "No, I suppose not." She took a sip of her wine, then pointed to the glass. "Want one of your own?"

"Yes, please."

"You seem awfully chirpy," she called over her shoulder as she made her way to the refrigerator. "I take it the meeting with Dewbury's went well?"

"It did!" Broderick strode into the kitchen behind her and leaned against the breakfast bar while she poured his drink. "They love me. And you. That photo spread in *Motor Racing World* knocked their socks off."

Olivia snorted as she handed Broderick his glass. "I'm sure." She shook her head. "I still can't believe they've fallen for it all."

Broderick shrugged. "Why wouldn't they? We've presented a very convincing front to them from the get-go. None of them would suspect our sordid secret: the big lesbian and the ace/aro man in a fake marriage that would shock the nation if the truth ever came out." He feigned a swoon, and she had to laugh.

"All right, all right. Yes, I know, we've sold it well. As long as it doesn't backfire on us."

Broderick's expression turned serious. "It won't. And even if it does, it's my head on the block, not yours." He rubbed at the back of his head, messing up his thick brown hair.

"Which doesn't actually make me feel any better." Olivia leaned across to smooth his wild locks. "We did all of this so you could get a big, fat sponsorship deal and finally get your motor-racing career off the ground. You lose all that if they ever find out."

“But we only have another six months or so to go. That’s all.” He took her hand. “The first seventeen months have flown by, haven’t they? Pushing on for six more is totally achievable. Dewbury’s even talked today about extending the deal already. Peters seems to think they’ll be ready to sign in three months or less. Then I’ll be safe, and we can start the divorce and go back to being what we always were.”

She willed herself to relax. He was right. They’d faked it so well for this long, six more months should be easy. She was focused on finding her ideal job and a whole new start in the country of her birth, and that task would easily fill the time. Especially after the events of the last twenty-four hours. “You’re right.” She exhaled slowly and took another mouthful of her wine.

“Okay, enough of all that. How was your day?” He startled. “Wait, crap, how could I forget—you had the big meeting today!”

The scowl twisted her mouth before she could stop it. “Ugh, yes.” She filled him in on what Derek had said and the people from TC she’d met.

“You all have to compete against each other? How ridiculous.”

“I know. But what choice do I have? If I argue too strongly, Derek might decide it’s easier to terminate my contract right now.”

“I guess. How did Chrissy take it?”

Olivia snorted. “Like the good Girl Scout she is. Practically fell over her own tongue extolling the virtues of Derek’s plan.”

“Ugh.” Broderick drank some of his wine. “Are things any better between you two?”

“Not much.” She cringed when Broderick gave her that look, the one that said, “Are you even trying?”

Chrissy had also been employed a few months ago—two weeks before Olivia, in fact. She was friendly, outgoing, and good at her job. Her personality grated on Olivia’s nerves, but she didn’t come to work to make friends. She’d made that mistake in the past and wouldn’t repeat it, not given how it turned out last time; Sally’s betrayal still cut deep. No, as long as her fellow workers could get the job done and leave her alone to do hers, that was good enough for Olivia. “Don’t give me that look.” She glared at him. “She’s so...*much*.”

He laughed, his shoulders shaking. “Play nice! I know it’s hard for you, and I know why. But I’ve known you a long time, and I know there used to be a version of you that liked people and got on with them. I think she’s

still in there somewhere,” he said, wagging a finger in her direction, “and it might help you in the next few months if you resurrected her. That’s all I’m saying.”

“We’ll see.”

He shook his head. “All right. Let’s change the subject.” He grimaced. “Don’t shout, but we’ve been summoned this weekend. Lunch tomorrow at Mom’s.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Sorry, but I am.”

Olivia ground her teeth. “Well, I suppose we’ve managed to get away with it for a few weeks.”

“Exactly.”

“Just us?”

“No, thank God. Philip and Mallory will be there too.”

That helped. Mallory and Olivia tolerated each other, and neither particularly wanted to spend time with their husbands’ mother. Katherine Sinclair was always easier to face with an ally at your side.

“Well, that’s something.” Olivia took another sip of her wine.

“Sorry.” Broderick met her gaze. “I know this is the hardest part and—”

Olivia held up a hand. “It is, but this is all part of the deal, and I’m okay with that.” *Mostly*. It pained her, every time she saw Katherine, that they were living a lie that brought Katherine such happiness. Olivia remembered the joy on Katherine’s face when Broderick had announced to his mom that he and his longtime friend from university had realized they were in love and were to be married. Katherine had always treated Olivia as an extension of the family, and calling her “daughter-in-law” was the icing on the cake.

He took her hand once more. “Then I’ll just say thank you again instead of sorry.”

Olivia squeezed his hand. “And how many times have I told you that’s not necessary? We both gain from this. Now, when’s the next race?”

His face lit up, making him appear much younger than his thirty-one years. “The end of the month. But the team and I head out to Virginia two weeks prior to that.”

“That’s right. I knew there was a reason I would have some time to myself this month.”

Broderick chuckled. “No partying and trashing the place while I’m gone.”

Olivia tutted. “Hardly my style.”

“True.” He frowned. “You would say if you wanted to, you know, spread your wings a little?”

“Spread my wings?” Olivia tilted her head. “Whatever do you mean?”

Broderick blushed.

Olivia’s eyes widened in realization. “No! There’s no need for any of that in the next few months. Trust me, what we have is perfect for both of us. I don’t intend to make it any more complicated.” She shuddered at the thought.

He grinned ruefully. “And at least we’d only have to worry about you on that score.”

She gave him an affectionate smile. “Yes, that’s true.” Their earlier conversation jumped back into her mind. “Oh God, we’re going to have to battle your mother again about children, aren’t we?”

Broderick groaned and rolled his head back, puffing out as he did so.

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A HEART TO TRUST

BY A.L. BROOKS

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