

WHERE
TREES
TOUCH THE
SKY

National Park Novels

When Stone Wings Fly
Where Trees Touch the Sky

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A Redwood
National
Park Novel

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Where Trees Touch the Sky: A Redwood National Park Novel

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The quote on page 316 is from John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley: In Search of America*.

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To my daughter, Bethany.
Watching you press your hands against the
bark of each redwood tree is a memory
I will long treasure.
I pray you always maintain that sense
of wonder.

*I didn't need to understand the hypostatic unity
of the Trinity; I just needed to turn my life over to
whoever came up with redwood trees.*

—ANNE LAMOTT, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*

*God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought,
disease, avalanches, and a thousand . . . tempests and floods;
but he cannot save them from fools—
only Uncle Sam can do that.*

—JOHN MUIR, “The American Forests”

Redwood National Park
Crescent City, California
May 8, 1972

SITTING IN THE superintendent's office at Redwood National Park was the answer to a thousand desperate prayers. The only trouble was, they hadn't been hers.

June shifted on the hard wooden chair and tapped the toe of her wafflestomper hiking boot, the red laces done up so tight the stiff leather nearly cut off the circulation at her ankles. Most women would put on a dress for the first time meeting a new boss. But since she already had the hiring papers in hand, it seemed appropriate to look the part. Better yet, these wide-legged corduroys completely covered her brace. This job was a huge opportunity—a chance to live out her brother's dream—and the last thing she wanted was unnecessary distractions.

A gray-haired man appeared in the doorway, his shoulders drawn stiffly back beneath his uniform. "Miss Turner?"

She grabbed the edge of the desk for balance as she started to get to her feet. "Yes, sir—"

"Don't get up." He pulled out the swivel chair behind the desk. "I'm Superintendent Carlson. Sorry to keep you waiting." His eyes locked on her, his mouth dropping open. He dropped onto the seat with a thud. "My goodness, you are the spitting image of your aunt. I imagine you hear that a lot."

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“Yes, sir.” She managed to keep her voice steady despite her nerves. She’d long given up reminding folks that Marion was her great-aunt by marriage only.

He leaned back, making the chair squeak. “She’s a dynamo, your aunt Marion, with beauty and brains to match. I was truly sorry to hear about Walt’s death. It’s quite a blow to the family, I’m sure.”

June pressed her fingers into her thigh and glanced at the big trees just outside the window. *No tears*. “Yes, it was.” Her family had endured more than its share of sorrow in recent years. Losing her great-uncle had been the final blow. Little else could have convinced her to throw away two years of college and catch the Greyhound to California. She wasn’t some flower child chasing self-fulfillment; she just wanted a piece of her heart back, and this seemed the one place she could make that happen—at least in a small way.

“When Marion demanded I hire you as a seasonal ranger, it didn’t take much convincing. Walt taught me everything I know about the outdoors—took this green kid and turned him into a true ranger. I guess it’s my chance to return the favor.”

June shifted her gaze to the superintendent, suddenly aware of the fact that she’d said little more than “yes, sir” in the past few minutes. She couldn’t be making much of an impression. “I appreciate the opportunity. I know Uncle Walt held you in high regard.”

“When I first started, the Park Service was a different beast, you know. Strong fellows who could cut trail, bust fire lines, sit in the saddle all day long while patrolling the boundaries. But things are changing, or so Washington keeps telling me.” He pressed his palms against the table. “Hug the trees, save the planet, teach the world to sing? Is that why you’re here, young lady?”

Why *was* she here? Jonathan should be the one sitting in front of him. Her stomach knotted. She was a poor substitute. But then, she’d been a lousy sister as well. “My uncle inspired me with stories of his trips to Yosemite and his time working for the Prairie Creek and Jedediah

Smith state parks. I remember him saying that some of the first women rangers had been hired when the parks were facing a shortage of male candidates during World War I. Since these ladies were capable of doing the job more than fifty years ago, I figured I could do it too. And I was raised to care about the environment. I'm not following some fad. My aunt has fought for coastal redwood preservation her entire life. She was protesting their destruction long before it was the cool thing to do." She gripped her knee, willing the muscles to stop quivering below her brace.

A smile eased across his lined face. "I'm glad to see you inherited some of Marion's gumption. That's good. You'll need it. The local community still isn't fond of the National Park Service moving in here. They were fine with the state parks, but they see this as a land grab." He shuffled a stack of papers. "In truth, I'm not opposed to ladies in the Park Service. I think there's a place for a gentler touch. I hired three other girls for the summer. As soon as my secretary gets your measurements, your uniforms will be on their way. Washington came up with new designs for lady rangers two years ago, but we haven't had need of them before now."

The tension in her back eased. They'd finally gotten rid of the ridiculous airline stewardess skirts and pillbox hats? *Thank you, Lord.* "Will we be wearing the same uniform as the men, then?"

"You're already taking a man's job. You want his trousers too?"

Heat rushed to her cheeks. "No, sir."

"We haven't built any seasonal housing yet, but since a few of you are going to be stationed down in the Orick area, we've dropped a couple of trailers near the new information center. It's not much. We're still working on the park's master plan, so most everything is temporary for now." He stood, his chair squeaking as it released his weight.

"I'm sure it'll be fine." June reached for her elbow crutch, slipping the cuff over her forearm before pushing herself to a standing position and latching her brace.

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Superintendent Carlson froze mid-step, the color draining from his face. “You . . . you’re crippled?”

The word dropped like a hatchet, and her throat clenched. “I . . . Yes.” *He hadn’t known?*

He blew out a long breath and averted his eyes. “Your aunt really should have mentioned that.”

“I agree.” She balanced on her single aluminum crutch, withering under the superintendent’s examination. She should have anticipated this. Aunt Marion and Uncle Walt were pretty much the only two people in June’s life who saw what she *could* do rather than what she couldn’t. “I came down with polio when I was five. This”—she tapped her leg—“is my reminder.” June straightened to her full height—what little there was of it. She might not be ideally suited to the job, but her determination had gotten her through worse.

“I wish Marion had said something.”

“I get around just fine, sir. I can do the job.”

“Can you?” The sideburns failed to disguise the twitch in his jaw. He blew out a long sigh. “You’re here now, I suppose.” A groove formed between his brows. “You do know this position involves leading nature walks? We’re not hiring an office girl.”

She forced a smile to her face. “I love hiking. I’m a little slower than some, but I always make it to the end of the trail. Always.” A half truth, but she’d hold herself to it in the future.

He scooped up the stack of papers and headed for the door. “I guess we’ll have to see how you do. Follow me.”

June swung her weak leg forward, thankful the carpeting dampened the sound of her crutch. If her boss was doubtful, what would the tourists think of her? Maybe this was a mistake.

“*Come on, Junie. Remember the little engine storybook?*” Uncle Walt’s voice echoed from her childhood as he held out his hands and encouraged her to walk. “*If you think you can, you will.*” It was his faith that

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had gotten her on her feet after polio. And his faith again that made June take a first, stumbling step into Jonathan's rightful place. Disease wasn't the only thing to steal and destroy. War did a fine job of dealing cruel blows as well.

Orick, California

June 1, 1923

IF THE COLOR green had a scent, it would smell like a redwood grove. Marion cradled the bouquet of roses in one arm and breathed deep of the fresh air. This was the one place she sensed God's voice, as sure as she heard the wind whispering in the branches and the chatter of the trickling stream. Whenever her soul splintered, the forest had a way of piecing her back together. The treetops disappeared into the misty canopy several hundred feet above her head, but it wasn't their size that gave her solace. It was their age. Living to be over a thousand years old, these ancient trees would likely consider her twenty-two as a mere blink of an eye.

Entering her favorite grove, Marion pulled off her cloche hat and gazed up at the large tree to her left. Sweet memories flooded her mind. Years ago, she'd begun naming a few of the giants after people she had lost, transforming this section of woods into a personal memorial garden. A sacred space. She could pour out her sorrows here, the redwoods absorbing her grief even while they breathed hope back into her heart. And since her loved ones were in heaven—not the cemetery—what difference did it make where she went to remember them?

A second trunk leaned upon the first, branches tangled together. She'd named these two after her parents. It seemed fitting with the way they supported one another. "Hi, Mother and Dad. I miss you."

She tucked the flowers under her arm. “These aren’t for you. Not this time anyway.” With a sigh, she turned and studied the rest of the grove.

It might be an odd tradition, but it had brought her much comfort over the years. And today, she needed to select another tree.

A stately redwood stood near the stream, its bark practically glowing in the warm rays of the morning sun. *That’s her.*

Marion took her time and walked around its girth, studying the behemoth from all sides. A fire scar had hollowed out a section of the trunk, but it remained strong and sturdy, as if radiating joy. Just as she’d always remember Gladys. Caring for her through those final, horrible days had been an honor and a privilege, but one that came with a cost. It was difficult enough to lose a patient, but a friend? It took a piece of your soul, even if the person was more than ready to go.

Gladys deserved a place in Marion’s grove. Standing tall beside the stream, digging her roots down deep into the California soil, and stretching her arms up into the heavens.

Marion laid a hand on the trunk. “I know you were here for hundreds of years before my friend was born.” She ran her fingers down a deep crack in the reddish bark. “But you don’t mind if I call you by her name, do you?”

The gentle breeze ruffled the edges of Marion’s bobbed hair. She laid the small bouquet at the foot of Gladys’s tree and blinked away tears. She could almost hear the older woman’s chiding, “*Don’t cry for me, sweet girl. I’m basking in heaven’s glory.*”

Now that Marion had her little roadster, she could come whenever she liked, and that realization gave her a dose of peace. Her brother, Archie, hadn’t been pleased when she’d used her nursing wages to purchase the small Model T, but he’d been stingy with his own automobile. She had to look after herself. That’s what their mother had taught her.

She glanced back at Mother’s tree in the heart of the grove. Would she finally be proud of Marion’s accomplishments? Emptying bedpans

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and changing wound dressings seemed like drudgery at times, but Marion could feel God working through her hands. God was present in a person's final moments the same as He was at a baby's birth—and every one in between.

The sound of twigs snapping in the distance made her breath catch. She dabbed at her eyes, determined not to be found crying. In fact, she didn't really want to speak to anyone in this private refuge at all. Turning, she scanned the area. It could be a bear, for all she knew.

As usual, her first instinct had been correct. A man walked along the edge of the grove.

She'd have preferred the wild animal. The last thing she desired was to make small talk or explain why she was out in the woods by herself. Society frowned on a respectable young woman going anywhere unescorted, especially a place as isolated as this. *Ridiculous. As if God didn't want His children—including His daughters—out appreciating creation?* After ducking behind the tree, she squeezed into the cavern in Gladys's trunk, thankful she'd worn breeches and boots instead of her usual dress and T-strap pumps. Once he went on his way, she'd return to her car. As much as she wanted to stay, she really needed to get back to the clinic. Marion crouched and peeked out of the opening.

The man stood nearby, scribbling in a notebook, a canvas satchel draped across one shoulder. Tipping his head to gaze skyward, he slid a fedora from atop his dark hair and braced it against his chest. The fellow's eyes almost seemed to reflect the richness around him, spilling over with intensity as he inspected Gladys from her base up toward her crown. A smile crept across his face, softening the strong line of his jaw.

Marion leaned out a little farther. Oh, to have a man look at her that way. He must be marveling at Gladys's height and strength. Perhaps he admired the spread of her upper limbs, reaching over the river to gather the extra sunshine spilling through. Marion couldn't help but smile too. Spying on the fellow from this hidden spot made her feel

like one of Robin Hood's outlaws from the Douglas Fairbanks movie she'd watched last year.

The man splayed fingers across his brow for a long moment before pausing and writing a few more things in his journal. Tucking it back into his pocket, he moved away from Marion's line of sight.

He must be a tree lover like her—perhaps a botanist or an arborist. The way he was going at that notebook, maybe he was an artist, making preliminary sketches before setting up to paint a great masterpiece. Clearly, he was someone who appreciated natural beauty. A kindred spirit. The idea sent her heart racing.

A scraping sound nearby drew her attention. Marion ducked to the side, trying to catch another glimpse, when a deafening thwack shattered the silence of her little grotto. She shrieked before she could stop herself, landing a hand over her mouth. A second sharp crack jolted her into action. Marion's shoulder collided with the edge of the opening as she scrambled out of the cavern.

The man balanced on one of the buttressed roots, about four feet off the ground, on the creek side of the tree. He slammed a hatchet into the trunk, deepening a gash in the redwood's bark.

Stumbling toward the intruder, Marion waved both arms. "No—What are you doing? Stop it!"

He jerked around, eyes wide. The sudden movement destabilized him, and he lurched to one side, an arm flung outward. He seesawed for a moment before tumbling backward and out of sight.

Marion sucked in a quick breath. She hadn't meant to make the fellow fall, just to stop the destruction. The commotion on the creek bank, followed by a splash, suggested he'd met with an uncomfortable landing. She hurried over to survey the damage.

The man dragged himself from the water and sprawled on his back at the creek's edge as his hat bobbed downstream. After drawing in a gulp of air, he coughed and rolled over, pushing up to his knees. With a pained hiss, he fell onto his side, hooking both hands under one leg.

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Cold swept over Marion as if she'd been the one to land in the icy water. "Wait—let me help you." She began picking her way down the slope.

"No, don't." He grimaced. "Don't trouble yourself. I just need a minute to get my wits about me."

"I'm a nurse." Marion pressed onward, grabbing a branch to help guide her descent. The last thing she needed was to fall headlong after him. She wouldn't be much good to the man if she hurt herself in the process. "I really should assess your injuries."

He choked—or was that a laugh? "I think you've done enough." Once he sat up, he scrubbed a dirty fist across his face, smearing the blood that dripped from his nose. "Ugh."

She clambered over a fallen log and then slid down the last few steps to reach his side. "How bad is it? Is anything broken?"

He dug a handkerchief out of his pocket—only slightly less wet and mud stained than the rest of him—and pressed it to his nose. "I'm still searching for the pieces of my pride. Have you seen those anywhere?"

"I'm more concerned about your body." She crouched and pressed hands to his cheeks, then tipped his face toward her. "Let me see that nose. I think it might be fractured."

"Wouldn't be the first time." He grunted, pulling away from her touch.

"And your knee?" She reached for it.

He blocked her arm. "No, don't. Please."

Marion sat back on her heels and took a deep breath, forcing herself to slow down. One must earn a patient's trust before attempting treatment. Had she forgotten all her training? Mrs. Wallace had corrected her many times for jumping in before using her head. "I'm sorry. My name is Marion Baker. I'm a nurse."

"Frank Duncan." His breathing slowed as he stared at her for a long moment, still pressing the bloodstained handkerchief to his nose.

“Where are you from? Orick is little more than a wide spot in the road. It doesn’t have a doctor, does it?”

“I work for Dr. Russo in Arcata.” She visually assessed the man since he wouldn’t let her physically examine him yet. The possibility of a head injury concerned her most, but his speech seemed ordered, and his eyes looked fine. Very fine. “Do you live nearby?”

“No.” He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “Yes. Well, it’s complicated.”

So much for ordered thoughts. “I see.” She paused, the sound of the river rushing past filling the quiet between them. Mrs. Wallace had taught her to wait and let the patient speak whenever possible. That’s when one learned things.

“I grew up nearby.” A pained expression crossed his face as he shifted his weight, rustling the nearby brush. “I’ve been gone for years, but I recently returned.”

“What a welcome I gave you, jumping out like that. But you were chopping away at Gladys.”

His brows drew down. “Gladys?”

“The tree.” She glanced around for the hatchet he’d been using. Thank goodness he hadn’t fallen on it. She found it a few steps away and scooped it up.

“I could hardly chop down a redwood with that. I was just blazing it.” Mr. Duncan made another attempt to rise, but his right leg buckled and dropped him on his backside. He moaned.

“Steady.” She moved closer and kneeled, setting the tool on the ground. “Please let me check your leg. You don’t want to aggravate the injury.”

“The knee’s no good, I’m afraid.” He didn’t fight her off this time. “I hope it’s not broken. I don’t know how I’ll get back up the hill.”

Taking care not to jostle him, she rolled up his pants leg. The high-quality fabric seemed softened from wear, frayed along the hem. Running her hand along the man’s lower leg, she inspected the knee joint,

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the warmth of the inflammation already obvious to her fingertips. Thankfully, the patella remained in place, and the bones on both the upper and lower leg appeared intact and not misaligned. She gently bent and flexed the joint.

He winced, face growing pale. “What’s your diagnosis, Nurse?”

She sat back. “I don’t believe anything is broken, but you may have strained or even torn the ligaments. The doctor will know more. But I don’t think you’ll be able to bear weight on it.” How quickly this day had gone awry.

“I can get upright if you give me a hand.”

Marion stood. “We’ll need to immobilize the joint, but maybe between the two of us, we can get back to my automobile. It’s not far.”

With the help of the man’s hatchet, it didn’t take her long to break up enough fallen limbs to fashion a splint. The pair of them bent their heads over the project, and within twenty minutes, she had Mr. Duncan up, balanced on his good foot, and clutching an improvised walking stick.

Marion picked up the satchel—only slightly damp from its dip in the creek. After a moment’s hesitation, she wrapped an arm around Mr. Duncan’s waist to help him walk.

“This is not how I pictured my afternoon.” His skin took on a waxy pallor as they took their first few steps up the slope.

She did her best to ignore the sweat-dampened fabric pressed against her side. “I’d hoped for a quiet day of reflection with some of my favorite trees. It’s been a difficult week.”

He grunted. “What did you call that one? Gertrude?”

“Gladys.”

“I’ve never heard of anyone naming trees. At least not anyone over the age of six.” He gave her a sidelong glance, as if assessing her age. The fellow didn’t seem much older than she, though it was difficult to tell from this angle.

“I started when I was a child.” She tried to shrug, but her shoulder

was too encumbered. “I don’t see any reason to stop. Growing up is aggravating. We spend so many of our waking hours being respectable adults. It doesn’t hurt to have one place where your heart can remain young and free. Don’t you agree?”

“I suppose.” The sound of his ragged breathing matched that of her own. “I played in these forests often enough as a boy, before my life changed.”

“What happened?”

“My father.” The curt tone in his voice invited no further questions.

Since they inched along—hardly faster than one of those giant yellow slugs so common in these parts—it took well over an hour to reach her roadster. Her Tin Lizzie only had a single door, so she climbed in first and slid across to the driver’s seat. Hopefully, Mr. Duncan wasn’t one of those men who took a high tone with women drivers.

Settling in beside her, Mr. Duncan had to shift sideways to manage his splinted leg. Her brother would protest seeing her so cozy with someone she’d just met. Then again, she and Mr. Duncan had been glued to each other’s side on the walk, so he could hardly be called a stranger.

No, he was more of an axe-wielding maniac ready to chop holes in her favorite trees. She tucked his canvas satchel under his foot to elevate it. “I forgot your hatchet back at the creek, I’m afraid. But I can go back and retrieve it tomorrow. Why were you marking Gladys, anyway?”

Mr. Duncan rubbed his upper leg. “I have some friends who might be interested in her—it. The grove, actually. I wanted to be able to find it again.”

“Do they love trees too?”

He glanced away from her. “Yes. Yes, they do.”



Frank shifted on the roadster’s seat, trying to ignore how Miss Baker’s pale-blue eyes locked on him every time he so much as breathed funny.

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His head throbbed only slightly less than his knee. He'd hung on to the woman's shoulder for the better part of a mile as they'd limped along like the world's slowest three-legged race team, and now he would be at the mercy of her driving all the way back to town. What a mess of a day.

She shifted the auto into gear. "It will take some time to reach Arcata, I'm afraid." She gestured at the tree limb he'd been using as a walking stick. "I should have tossed that back into the woods for you."

He pulled it close. "I think I'll keep it. I do some woodworking in my spare time. And this branch has been pretty useful so far." Plus, he'd have to get into the doctor's office somehow. "My truck is parked on the side of a dirt road a few miles back. I suppose I'll retrieve it later." *Somehow.*

He'd never expected to return to this part of the state, but after the disaster of the past six years, he'd crawled home like the prodigal he was. Now, after less than a month of work, he'd been dragged out of the woods by a dainty young woman. If the crew found out, he'd never live it down. Then again, what did it matter? It's not like he had any dignity left.

"It'll be nice for you to give that old branch a new life." Miss Baker flashed him a smile. "I'm sure the tree found it of great use."

"A naturalist, are you?"

She revved the engine and guided the small automobile out onto the deserted highway. "That's what I thought you were until you started hacking away at Gladys."

The disappointment in her voice irked him. "*Another brainless do-gooder,*" his father would say. The thought gave him pause. The last thing he wanted to be was his father. Frank hooked one elbow up on the seat's back. "I was doing a bit of surveying."

Her brow furrowed as she met his eyes for a moment. "Not another road, I hope. They've built enough of those crisscrossing through these woods. It exposes the trees to additional dangers, making them

more accessible to logging and destruction. Why can't we just leave them be?"

Frank fell silent for a moment, studying her face. Pretty. How had he not noticed that until this moment? "It's an impressive stand of trees. I'm not sure I've seen one better."

"It's my favorite grove. And yes, I know I must sound a bit dotty, giving them names."

Was he staring? He averted his gaze. "I've heard ladies can be quite sentimental about such things."

"I'm not sentimental." Her voice grew firm. "I'm appreciative. Those trees have stood for centuries, long before American settlers walked the hills of California. Before we landed the *Mayflower*. I believe that's worthy of our respect, don't you?"

"I do indeed. Impervious to fire, to rot, to insects? They're a lesson in survival, those redwoods." He gripped the walking stick, imagining the beautiful designs he could carve into the fallen limb. "They have advantages over any other species of tree, and we're just beginning to fully understand how many." Frank tugged at the splint restraining his knee. "I could use a bit of that strength now."

"Dr. Russo will help you, but I think it might be some time before you're tramping through the woods again."

His father would be livid. So much for crawling back home, hat in hand. Now he didn't even have a hat. He ran a hand over his hair. It was probably floating down the creek somewhere.

An hour later, he was hobbling through the door of the medical clinic, Miss Baker clutching his side in an attempt to be helpful. She'd wrapped her arm tight around his back, her fingers resting against his ribs. He may have dreamed of a woman's touch, but this was not at all what he'd envisioned.

As if aware of his thoughts, she suddenly released him and scooted a couple of feet away.

He grabbed the door for support. "What is it?"

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“My brother.”

A well-heeled man strode toward them, jerking down the cuffs of his fine suit. Above the starched collar, a flush mottled his cheeks.

Frank instinctively tightened his grip on the stick. If he'd learned anything during his time away, it was to be wary of men with murder in their eyes, especially when a beautiful woman was involved.

“Marion, where have you been? I came to escort you to lunch, and Nurse Logan informed me you weren't working today. At breakfast, you said—”

“Doc Russo insisted I take the day off.” Her voice held a practiced sharpness. “I just got in the car and started—”

“You could have telephoned. I was concerned.” He folded both arms across his chest. “And what on earth are you wearing?”

Funny how he seemed more upset with his sister than the mud-stained man who had been clinging to her shoulder a moment before. Frank cleared his throat. “I'm afraid Miss Baker was a bit distracted rescuing clumsy men who don't have better sense than to trip and fall headfirst into a creek.”

Miss Baker placed a hand on his arm. “Mr. Duncan, I do apologize. I should introduce you.” She eyed her brother. “Archie, this is my dear friend Mr. Frank Duncan.” Her fingers squeezed his wrist like a vise. “Mr. Duncan—my brother, Archibald Baker, attorney-at-law.”

He must have hit his head harder than he thought. *Dear friend?*

She released her grip. “Mr. Duncan took a rather unfortunate step, and I insisted he come in and have Doc take a look at his knee.”

“A friend?” Mr. Baker's dubious tone matched his narrowed eyes.

“I do have a few. You and I don't share the same social circles, as you're quite aware.”

“It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Duncan.” Brows lifted, the attorney thrust out a hand, somewhat oblivious to the fact that Frank was wobbling on one foot. “Let me guess. You're part of the Coastal Redwood

Appreciation Society? Or the Save the Redwoods League? So this was a society outing?”

As her brother’s attention was diverted, Miss Baker nodded frantically at Frank.

“Um, yes. The ‘appreciation society.’ You could say that. It’s a pleasure to meet you as well.” Frank deftly switched the walking stick to his opposite side and placed his right hand in her brother’s grip.

The fellow snapped a quick nod. “My sister intends to save the redwoods even if she has to do it single-handed. Be careful. She’ll have you writing letters to congressmen next.”

“As I’ve told you before, Archie, there are many people who feel as I do.” She jutted her chin. “It’s ridiculous that our leaders aren’t watching out for the future of Humboldt County. These trees are national treasures, but Goodwin Timber is turning them into stacks of shingles faster than you can blink an eye.” She snapped her fingers.

“It does take a bit longer to cut one down than that.” Frank shifted, the splint biting into his upper leg. “Several days. Weeks, sometimes.”

“But it takes them centuries to grow. It’s a crime of human arrogance.”

Her brother lifted his hands in surrender. “I appreciate forests as much as the next man, but people need houses, and redwood lumber is unparalleled. There are plenty of trees for everyone.”

“There are not.” Her eyes flashed. This hallway wasn’t the place for the debate, but apparently, the siblings couldn’t resist. “If Goodwin Timber and other companies like it continue cutting at this pace, the massive redwoods will be gone in less than fifty years.” She stopped for a breath and glanced over at Frank. “I need to help Mr. Duncan to the examination room. Archie, I’ll see you at home.”

Her brother nodded, finally moving toward the door. “Maybe Mr. Duncan would like to join us for supper this evening.” He turned back to Frank. “My wife is an excellent cook, and she always makes more

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than enough.” He drew his brows together. “What was it you said you did for a living?”

The truth would come out eventually—might as well get it over with. “I’m a timber cruiser.” He cleared his throat. “For Goodwin Timber, in fact. And thank you, Mr. Baker. I’d be pleased to accept your invitation. That’s very kind.” He hobbled forward with the help of the walking stick, bracing his other hand against the wall. Frank wasn’t sure he’d make it all the way to the doctor’s office like this, but he wanted to be far out of reach by the time Miss Baker realized what he’d said.



Marion shut the door behind them with a little more force than necessary. “You’d be pleased to accept? You do realize my brother now believes we’re fast friends. How am I going to explain this? He was laughing all the way down the hall.”

Mr. Duncan sighed, settling onto the chair. “It rather seemed that’s what you intended for him to think.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you worked for a lumber operation? Instead, you let me blather on about redwood protection for the whole drive here. You should have said something.” A wave of heat climbed her neck. “My brother is the biggest fussbudget around. He’s convinced I can’t think for myself, and I didn’t want to spend an hour explaining why I was dragging an injured stranger into the clinic. Or why I was out in the forest unaccompanied, for that matter.”

“And I wouldn’t have been injured if you hadn’t jumped out at me.”

“I explained that.” Her thoughts scattered. “This is a disaster. Now we’ll have to keep on pretending just to prevent him from ferreting out the truth.”

“How is this my fault? Didn’t your parents teach you not to lie? It’s like quicksand; the more you struggle, the deeper you sink.” He scowled

and loosened his tie. “I always assumed attorneys would be able to spot such deception at a considerable distance. You should count yourself fortunate that I’m so good at it.”

“Good at it?” She took a quick step back, a fresh wave of misgivings coming over her. “You aren’t some sort of confidence man, are you?”

“Nothing so glamorous.” Mr. Duncan straightened out the injured leg in front of him. “But I hit a rough patch a few years back—a falling out with my father—and spent some time living a life I’m not proud of. Family relationships aren’t always easy.”

“Then we have something in common.”

He quirked a brow. “Beyond the mutual admiration of redwoods?”

His flippant attitude sent a prickle across her skin even as Doc Russo entered the room. She made a quick excuse about washing her hands and slipped out to the hall to gather herself. She’d been off-kilter ever since this man walked into her grove.

She’d rarely been one to swoon over a handsome man. There never seemed much point. Her mother had long despaired over what she called Marion’s “plain looks.” Though Opal insisted it wasn’t true, Mother’s words had sunk too deep to be easily uprooted. And it didn’t really matter. After all, Marion preferred to keep her passions focused on her work and causes. It figured that the one time she dropped her guard and noticed a good-looking fellow, he’d turn out to be a logger. God had an irksome sense of humor sometimes.

Wait. Her breath caught in her chest. He was cruising timber—in *her* grove?

She burst through the door, and both men jerked up their heads.

Doc had his hands braced on either side of the man’s kneecap. “Is there a problem, Nurse Baker?”

She glared at Mr. Duncan. “You work for a timber company.”

“I believe we ascertained that earlier.”

Doc continued his examination. “Many of our patients are loggers, Marion.”

WHERE TREES TOUCH THE SKY

She swallowed hard as a flush of heat rushed to her cheeks. “You can’t cut my trees.”

“They’re not your trees. And it’s not my decision.” Mr. Duncan winced as Doc pressed on a spot to the side of his knee. “Can we discuss this—”

“You were marking one of them. Doc, I’m sorry for interrupting, but this fellow has been lying to me since we first met.”

Doc pushed his stool back. “Perhaps I should give you a minute?”

Mr. Duncan huffed. “We don’t need a minute. I haven’t lied once. You *assumed* I was there to admire the trees, and you weren’t wrong about that. They command respect. But I also have a living to make and my—my boss to please.” A shadow crossed his face at that. “You never asked if I worked for a timber company. And being in a rather compromised position—thanks to you, I might add—I decided not to divulge that information. Perhaps I should have.”

“Yes, you absolutely should have,” she snapped. “And you can’t log that grove.”

Doc Russo sighed. “Nurse, I think it’s time for you to step out. Our primary concern is Mr. Duncan’s health, not his occupation.”

What would she tell Archie and Opal when Mr. Duncan didn’t show up for supper? Or worse, what if he did? Marion bit her lip. “Of course, Doctor. I’m sorry.” She backed out the door, her mind whirling.

How did she get herself into these messes? Archie would be quick to point out that she was too trusting. After pacing down the hall to the staff office, she sank onto the cushioned window seat overlooking the back garden.

This is why she preferred the company of trees. They never had reasons to lie.