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# THE LAKE EFFECT

Leigh Michaels





# “They chose their bait well.”

Alex stared at Kane. She hadn't the foggiest idea what he meant, but from the chill in his voice, it wasn't a compliment. “What...”

“Don't play dumb, Alex. Why do you think they sent you anyway? Why not someone from my own team or one of the senior partners?”

She shook her head. “They sent me because I had a legitimate reason to be here.”

“They sent you because our esteemed leader suspected that every time I looked at you I wasn't just thinking about law.” His voice was almost brutal. “Be sure to tell him for me that the bait was very attractive. But unfortunately for him, I didn't bite quite hard enough to get hooked.”

**Leigh Michaels** held several different jobs before settling down to writing romance novels. She feels being a writer is the most perfect career for her, however, because she can be whatever her heroines are—from antique dealer to wedding consultant to architect. She can study whatever field intrigues her and not have to take any tests. And as soon as the book is done, she can change to something else altogether. “Besides,” she says, “I get to fall in love with a new man every few months, too—and my husband thinks it’s great!”

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## **THE LAKE EFFECT**

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## CHAPTER ONE

THE RESTAURANT WAS one of the Twin Cities' newest and most upscale, and so it was always crowded at lunchtime. Today, the maître d' was turning away group after group of would-be patrons. When he saw Alexandra, however, his stern face mellowed ever so slightly into a smile. "Miss Jacobi, I'll try to find you a table right away. Will you be meeting a client?"

"No, George. I'm joining Mrs. Adler's party. The baby shower."

He nodded. "Straight through to the party room. Please give my regards to your father, won't you?"

Alex nodded. "I will—the next time I see him." She made her way slowly across the crowded restaurant, nodding to acquaintances here and there, and stopped at the door of the private dining room for half a minute, bemused by the mess and hilarity within.

She was late, of course. It wasn't her secretary's fault, for Sharon had buzzed her, as ordered, fifteen minutes before the time set for Joanna's party. But there'd been just a bit of work left to do on the case file on her desk, and that telephone call had been truly important....

The dozen young women in the party room hadn't waited for Alex, however. She hadn't expected that they would. The luncheon buffet was still set up, but the used plates had been pushed aside in favor of the main enter-

tainment—the gaily wrapped bundles stacked in the middle of the table.

Joanna Adler looked up from the tiny stretch-terry sleeper she had just lifted from a box and said, “My word, so there still is an Alex Jacobi! And she’s torn herself away from a law book to honor us with her presence. I’m touched to the heart, I truly am.”

Alex wrinkled her nose. “Don’t start on me, Joanna. You’ve stood me up for lunch just as many times as I have you.” She picked up a plate and put a big spoonful of crab salad on it, then added a whole-wheat roll and a wedge of lettuce.

“Who has time to keep track?” Joanna pushed her chair back and crossed the room to Alex’s side. Her walk was less graceful than usual, and her dress made no attempt to hide the fact that she was nearly nine months pregnant.

Alex, who hadn’t seen Joanna for several weeks, couldn’t keep herself from blinking in surprise.

“I know,” Joanna said. “I’m as big as a boxcar. I feel like a beached whale.” She gave Alex a warm hug. “If I’d known you were coming, I’d have waited to open your gift. I love it, Alex. It’s precious and wonderful and I’ll keep it forever—out of reach of the little darling so he can’t break it.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Alex murmured. But her mind had gone blank. She remembered asking Sharon just a few days ago to be sure to have a gift delivered for Joanna’s baby, and then she’d put the whole thing out of her mind. Had Sharon even told her what she’d chosen?

Alex spared a pang of regret for the gift she’d intended to make for this very special baby. It had seemed so simple seven months ago when Joanna had announced her happy news. More than half a year would be

plenty of time for Alex to piece together one very small quilt. She had gone straight out and splurged on the materials and the pattern.

But half a year hadn't been enough, after all. Alex had underestimated her workload, and so the delicate pink-and-blue quilt still lay partly assembled and wadded up in a basket beside the sofa in her apartment. It would no doubt stay there until, in some future fit of housecleaning, she threw it away so she wouldn't be reminded of yet another good intention gone awry.

She smothered her sigh of regret. Joanna, the personnel director at an investment-banking firm, would certainly understand the way a high-pressure job could soak up time.

"I'm taking six weeks' maternity leave," Joanna was saying as she unfolded the pink wrapping paper from another box. "And I must admit I'm looking forward to just staying home for a while."

There were howls of disbelief. Alex didn't join in, but she agreed. The high-powered Joanna puttering around the house?

Joanna put her hands on her hips. "Do you know, any of you, what simple pleasure it will be not to have to wear panty hose if I don't want to? But of course you don't—none of you needs a crane to put them on in the morning!"

The maître d' appeared with a telephone. "Miss Jacobi, there's a call for you."

Alex turned her back to the laughing group.

It was Sharon, and she sounded worried. "I'm sorry, but I thought I'd better let you know that Mr. Morgan is looking for you."

Alex wanted to swear. Neville Morgan, the senior partner Alex reported to, knew perfectly well that she was



going out for a rare lunch with friends; she'd told him about it herself just the day before. Still, when a senior partner at the well-respected firm of Pence Whitfield snapped his fingers, mere junior associates jumped—and previous arrangements went down the drain.

“I'll be right there, Sharon,” she said with resignation. She took two more bites of her crab salad, but the delicacy had lost its flavor. “Back to work,” she announced. “Sorry, but things have been awfully busy lately.”

“And a little edgy, I'll bet, with Kane Forrestal in exile,” a blond-haired securities broker murmured.

“What do you mean, exile?” Alex asked. “He's on vacation.”

The woman laughed. “Now that sounds like an official company line if ever I heard one. Pence Whitfield senior associates don't take vacations, Alex. The talk on the street is that he was fired.”

Another young business executive chimed in. “I wouldn't be surprised if it's true. That last deal of his can't have made the partners at Pence Whitfield very happy. Losing his nerve like that . . .”

“It was a perfectly reasonable outcome for our client,” Alex said stiffly.

“Backing down on a hostile takeover after all the strategy was in place?” The executive's voice was crisp. “Come on, Alex. You can't be that naive. Kane Forrestal is history. Of course, it leaves a nice opening for some younger associate.”

“He's on vacation,” Alex repeated.

But the words rang hollow in her mind as she made her way back through the skywalks to the new glass tower where Pence Whitfield, the biggest law firm in the Twin Cities, occupied three full floors. What was it the broker

had said? "Pence Whitfield senior associates don't take vacations." Yes, that was it. And she was right, Alex thought. They certainly didn't disappear for weeks at a time as Kane Forrestal had....

Or as he seemed to have done, Alex reminded herself. A mere junior associate like herself wasn't in a position to know where Kane Forrestal was or what he might be doing. His specialty was mergers and acquisitions; he could be anywhere in the world quietly negotiating some new deal by now. It certainly was none of Alex's business. She'd worked with him on only one case, not long after she'd joined the firm—before she'd settled into the group of attorneys who worked almost exclusively with wills, estates and trusts. And she had talked to him on a few other occasions—once at a company Christmas party, and now and then at the coffee machine, in the halls or on the way to the parking garage.

That was the extent of her acquaintance with Kane Forrestal, so it was dead certain no one was going to make a point of letting Alex know what he was up to. In fact, it would be pretty conceited of her to think that someone should!

Sharon looked up from her computer terminal as Alex came in. "Mr. Morgan said to go right to his office when you got back. He didn't say what it was about, but he called a group meeting for lunch. Here's the agenda his secretary brought down."

"Damn," Alex muttered. "I told him yesterday I wouldn't be available."

"Did your friend like the crystal baby bottle?"

"Ah, yes. That's what you sent." Alex didn't look up from the single-spaced sheet. "She said she adored it. Thanks, Sharon. I'd be completely lost without you." Running a hand over her sleek French twist to be certain

that each dark strand of hair was still in place, she headed off down the hall toward Neville Morgan's office.

*Don't anticipate trouble, she told herself. This summons will probably turn out to be nothing at all.* It certainly wasn't unusual for him to call an associate in alone to talk about a project.

As one of the eleven senior partners of Pence Whitfield, Neville Morgan had long occupied an enormous corner office, walnut-paneled and deeply carpeted—and so quiet that the view of downtown Minneapolis from the window behind his desk might have been a silent film projected on a blank wall.

The silver-haired lawyer was just putting down the telephone when his secretary sent Alex in.

"I'm sorry to have missed the meeting," she said. "If I'd known, I could have changed my plans."

"It wasn't critical for you to be here. Of course, I wouldn't like you to make a habit of missing group meetings. But that wasn't what I called you in to talk about." Neville Morgan leaned back with an expansive smile and waved a hand at a chair. "Alexandra, how would you like to spend a couple of weeks in Duluth?"

Duluth? Alex wondered how he would react if she told the truth and said, "Not at all, thank you. I'd rather have a root canal." She didn't have any particular prejudice against Duluth—she'd never been there—but what she did know about the place wasn't inviting. It was a small city, little more than an overgrown town, really. Because of its position at the western tip of Lake Superior, it was a shipping port for iron ore. And that, from everything Alex had ever heard, was about the biggest attraction it held.

But she knew perfectly well that, despite the phrasing of the question, she wasn't really being given a choice, so



she sat down and folded her hands primly on her notebook. "Of course. What will I be doing?"

Neville Morgan smiled. The expression was almost feline, because his incisors were noticeably longer than the rest of his teeth. "I knew I could count on you, Alexandra." He interlaced his fingers across the expanse of his vest. "It involves an estate, of course. A long-term client of ours, Geoffrey Wintergreen, died recently, and since it's an extensive estate, the executor—his nephew, Paul—requires legal counsel. Also, I'm afraid one of the other heirs is making noises about overturning the will—hopes to increase his share. So in order to be certain that nothing is overlooked..."

Alex wanted to groan. She knew what was coming.

"You can plan on being up there a couple of weeks at least, just getting things set up properly and the preliminary papers filed. We'll have to decide how to handle the troublesome heir first. Of course, I'll be available for consultation at all times."

Alex nodded. This was standard procedure, part of the learning period—almost an apprenticeship—for every young attorney. The associates took care of the paperwork, the drudgery, the details. The senior partners supervised and added the finishing touches.

"And of course, if you get into any trouble," Neville Morgan added genially, "you can call on Kane for help."

Warning bells went off in Alex's head. It would never have occurred to her to consult Kane Forrestal about how to settle an estate. Without a doubt he could get through the paperwork necessary to probate a will, but Pence Whitfield attorneys were all specialists, and Kane's field was about as far from estates and trusts as it was possible to get. Had he been demoted? Or had he tired of mergers and acquisitions and asked for a transfer? Or...

“In fact,” Neville Morgan continued, “that’s an order, Alexandra.”

She was silent for a moment, letting the implications of that statement sink in. Finally she said, “You’re telling me to get myself into some kind of minor difficulty and call Kane?”

He waved a hand. “Minor, major. Doesn’t matter. Just find an excuse to call him.”

Alex shook her head in confusion. “Where on earth is he?”

“In Duluth. Where do you think?”

She frowned. “What’s he doing there?”

“Living in a shack on the north shore of Lake Superior and not talking to anybody.”

“I see,” Alex said slowly. “But if he isn’t talking . . .”

“It isn’t that he *won’t* talk, you understand. It’s just that he doesn’t make any sense when he does. For instance, he told my secretary he’s going to be a beachcomber for a while.”

“A beachcomber?” Her voice was slightly shrill with surprise. “He isn’t . . . ill, is he?”

“You mean mentally? Hell, no,” Neville Morgan scoffed. “I believe he wants us to think he’s up there doing penance.”

“Penance for what?”

“He blew this last deal—the Quadrangle takeover—and he wants us to think he’s ashamed of himself. And he ought to be, to tell the truth. But we’re reasonable people. There isn’t a senior partner here who doesn’t have the same sort of skeleton in his closet. We’ve all made bad deals from time to time, and Kane knows it. So I don’t think he’s up there licking his wounds. He’s plotting something. I want you to go and find out what he really wants.”

Alex doodled her name on the corner of her notebook. "I'm still not sure I understand."

"He says he doesn't know if he wants to come back to the firm at all."

"That's ridiculous."

"My point exactly. If he intended to resign, he'd have carried out the threat by now. But officially he's on vacation. I want to know what he's holding out for—so I can offer him the least possible to get him back where he belongs. There are deals hanging in the wind all over the world waiting for him."

Alex nibbled thoughtfully on her thumbnail. "Why me, Mr. Morgan? Wouldn't it be better to send someone who knows him better than I do?"

His eyebrows lifted. "What kind of negotiator are you, Alexandra? It wouldn't be very smart to send a senior partner up there first thing, would it? We'd give away all our bargaining strength if we let Kane feel indispensable."

*Even if he is*, Alex thought. That was what Neville Morgan was really saying.

"Besides, you're the one with the best excuse. There just aren't any public-finance deals, or tax problems, or big bankruptcies going on in Duluth just now, or we'd send those people."

Alex considered that and nodded. "What if he really *does* feel too ashamed to come back?"

Neville Morgan's chair creaked as he stood up. "Then you offer him our forgiveness, my dear. But I doubt we'll get off that cheaply."

It was apparent that he considered the interview over, but Alex stayed stubbornly in her chair. "If I'm going up to negotiate, you'd better tell me what you're prepared to



offer him—otherwise there's no sense in my going. How far are you willing to go?"

"Quite a long way, actually. He wants a partnership? Fine. That's not far off, anyway, though you don't need to tell him that. Bigger office, another secretary, more money—"

"Even after the Quadrangle mess?"

"Everybody messes up once. Kane won't make the same mistake again, and next time he'll be a real tiger." He moved across to the door. "Just between you and me and this desk, Alexandra, the senior partners are so anxious to get him back that Kane can have just about anything he wants. Anything within reason, of course. I'll get a memo to you this afternoon about the Wintergreen estate. My secretary has the case file."

Alex nodded absently. For a moment she'd forgotten about the ostensible reason for her trip.

"Pull this off smoothly, and it will look very good on your record, my dear," Neville Morgan added. "It will probably speed your own climb up the ladder, if you get my meaning." He patted her shoulder. "Keep me posted, Alex. I'm counting on you."

IT WAS ALMOST NINE that night before she left the office, but all the paperwork on her desk was cleaned up, and Neville Morgan's memo was tucked securely in her calf-skin briefcase. She started to drive across Minneapolis toward the apartment complex where she lived, but half-way there she changed her mind and turned toward a less-desirable neighborhood, the section of the city where she'd grown up. She parked her little car in the empty lot next to a small building that housed a restaurant and bar and went in.

Jacobi's hadn't changed one iota since her childhood, when Alex would come in after classes, empty her schoolbag, climb up on the end stool at the bar and do her homework under her father's watchful eye. It even smelled the same, Alex thought, with the sharp spicy aroma of smoked pork and sauerkraut wafting from the kitchen to mix with the pungent scent of beer from the kegs.

Behind the carved-oak bar, a big man with pewter-gray hair and a bushy mustache stopped polishing a glass and looked Alex over from the top of her sleek French twist to the toes of her Italian pumps. For a moment she half expected him to bark, "Where are your books, young lady?"

Instead, Gus Jacobi said critically, "You're looking a little peaked."

"I stayed to work late, Papa." She climbed onto a bar stool.

Gus appeared to think that over, then shook his head. "Long hours never hurt anyone. But not eating, now, that hurts. Don't suppose you'd turn down a little sauerbraten." He didn't wait for an answer, just pushed open the swinging door to the kitchen and called, "Fix up a nice plate for my Alex, will you?"

Alex smiled. That, too, was an echo from her school-days. It was a wonder she hadn't been a blimp. Oh, well, she told herself, she *was* hungry, and Jacobi's served the best sauerbraten in the Twin Cities.

Gus selected a thick bar glass and filled it from a tap behind the bar. "Here," he said as he pushed the foaming brew across to her.

"Not on an empty stomach, Papa."

"Drink it. Beer's good for you. All kinds of vitamins. Builds up your blood, too." He went back to polishing

glasses. “What brings you out here in the middle of the week, anyway?”

“I have to make a business trip. I’m leaving tomorrow and I won’t be back for a couple of weeks at least.”

“Where to this time?”

“Duluth.”

One of the waiters appeared with a platter piled high with food. It looked, Alex thought, as if the chef had simply ladled on an ample helping of every dish the kitchen could produce. She opened the napkin-wrapped bundle he handed her and picked up her fork.

Gus grunted. “Duluth? Is that the best your fancy-schmantzy bunch of lawyers can do? How come you never get to New York? Or Paris? Or Tokyo?”

“People in Duluth have legal problems, too, Papa. And this is an important job. It’s going to take a lot of tact and diplomacy, and if I pull it off, it means I’ve got the quality senior partners look for. Mr. Morgan as good as said it’s a big step toward my being made a partner.”

His eyes narrowed. “Does that mean he’s going to Duluth with you?”

Alex chewed a bite of schnitzel and counted to ten. “No, he’s not. And if you mean, did he suggest that the best way to a partnership is to sleep with him—no, he didn’t. That kind of thing is not only unethical, it’s illegal, Papa.”

“Lots of things are illegal,” Gus said cynically. “Doesn’t mean they don’t go on.”

Her patience slipped a little more. “Why don’t you let me worry about that? I’m the attorney.”

“I’m not likely to forget it. Who put you through law school, anyway? Just you mind my words, girl. Don’t you let them tuck you away somewhere invisible where they can forget about you. Duluth!” He sniffed.