

# Chapter One

Jan stared up at the ceiling from her unexpected position on the floor. This day was not getting off to a good start. She turned her head, seeing her husband's laughing blue eyes only inches away.

"Are you alright?"

She could see Rob mentally conduct a quick inventory for pain or damage. "I think so. I must say, you dance divinely, my dear."

"Gee thanks." Jan eased her way out from under her husband's helpless body. Turning back to him, she straightened his limbs carefully, checking for any obvious signs of distress, knowing the multiple sclerosis-induced paralysis below his neck could mask an injury.

Satisfied for the moment that he was safe, she grabbed a cushion from the couch to slide under his head. The aborted maneuver was to have been a simple transfer from his wheelchair into his easy chair, but something had gone wrong mid-lift. Rob's involuntary spasm had been enough to off-balance Jan, and they had tumbled to the floor together.

Surveying the situation, Jan decided that Rob was unhurt and relatively comfortable, but now she had to figure out how to get him back where he should be. She was strong for her size. She couldn't have handled her quadriplegic husband for so many years otherwise, but she knew that even her short, sturdy frame couldn't dead lift Rob's 160 pounds from the floor to the chair unassisted.

Quickly she ran through her options. One neighbour, who was always ready to offer his friendly assistance when she needed it, was at work and not available. Her other neighbour was a gregarious old gentleman, too elderly to help in this situation. Her sister and brother-in-law were also at work and couldn't be called on. There weren't many other available solutions.

She sighed, looking down at her husband who was waiting patiently for her next move, "I think we're going to have to resort to calling on the firemen this time, Rob."

It wouldn't be the first time their local fire hall had sent rescuers, but Jan didn't like summoning them. It felt like an admission of failure, undermining her staunch independence. Nevertheless, there seemed to be no other option so Jan picked up the phone.

About to place the call, she glanced out the window and noticed their letter carrier turning in the front gate. Although she had an ingrained aversion to approaching strangers, she quickly changed her plan. Now wasn't the time to let her natural shyness stop her from seeking help, so she dropped the receiver, and hurried to the door to intercept her unknowing target.

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Terry Sanderson had been making good progress on her route that morning. It was a sunny, mid-summer day with nothing to slow her down except the usual challenge from the McFarlane's noisy dog. Terry had known when she took this job, fresh from finishing her English MA at the local university a few months ago, that weather and dogs would be two of the hazards she would face. Still, dealing with the McFarlane's pooch every day seemed to be above and beyond the Canada Post call of duty.

There were so many things she enjoyed about this job. The pay was good, all the walking kept her tall, lean frame in excellent condition and she enjoyed the time to plot further developments in her novel, the completion of which was her sole ambition at the moment. Granted, she hadn't yet had to work through winter, and she knew that would be an entirely different story, but for now she was content with her life.

Halfway through her daily route, though, Terry could count on that small mongrel yapping his head off at her and lunging at her from the end of his chain. She had no grounds for making a formal complaint since the dog never actually presented a physical threat, but he inevitably disturbed her peace of mind, shaking even her perennial good nature.

"Damn, I hate that lousy mutt." Grimacing, she admitted ruefully that, as much as anything, she hated letting the dog think he won every day as she retreated from his territory. It was silly, she knew, but Terry's ingrained competitive streak even extended to the McFarlane's mangy hound.

She amused herself by contemplating the day when she had had enough and dropped to the ground in front of the dog to go muzzle to muzzle with him in a growling contest. She pictured him retreating in confusion as she eyed him into submission, never to be bothered on her rounds again.

Striding on automatic pilot, she noticed that she had progressed several houses beyond the object of her wrath and was turning in to the walk leading to the Spencers' neat green and white bungalow. This, at least, was a calm, quiet household, set amidst tall spruce trees, lilac bushes and well-kept flowerbeds.

Terry occasionally saw Mrs. Spencer out tending those beds, and the woman always had a shy smile and a pleasant greeting for her when she handed over the day's mail. Absently, she noted the lady of the house coming out the front door, and she held out several envelopes for her to take.

Unexpectedly, the woman addressed her. "Please, would you mind helping me? My husband's fallen and I can't get him back into his chair by myself. If you wouldn't mind lending me a hand, it would only take a moment."

Startled, but willing to help, Terry nodded her assent. Slinging her mailbags off her shoulders, she followed the woman into the house. She stepped through the door into a sparsely furnished but book-lined living room and immediately saw the problem. A tall, thin man with a shock of thick brown hair hanging over his eyes was lying on the floor between his wheelchair and an overstuffed recliner. She grinned at him, and he smiled back.

"Are you my knight in shining armour?"

"Well, I can't say I've ever been called that before, but let's see if we can't get you back in your chair. Mrs. Spencer, you'll have to talk me through this. I don't want to hurt your husband accidentally or anything."

She started toward the man only to duck quickly as two feathered missiles shot over her head. "Whoa, what was that?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. That's Jamie and Xan, our budgies. They're not used to strangers, so I guess you scared them."

"I scared *them*?" Terry chuckled as she spied two sets of inquisitive eyes peering over at her from the top of the nearest bookcase. She had to admit that now that they weren't strafing her, they were pretty cute, but she hoped that they would stay where they were for a few minutes.

Returning her attention to the problem at hand, Terry walked over and crouched down beside the man. His wife directed Terry to his legs.

"Okay, when I say go, we're going to lift him into the easy chair. If you grasp him under the thighs, make sure your knees are bent, and don't lift with your back, it should go smoothly. Wait until I get set here."

Lifting her husband's head and shoulders, the woman rested them against her body and got a firm grip on his arms. Glancing up at Terry she asked, "Ready?"

Terry nodded nervously. "Ready when you are."

The two women lifted the man off the floor and awkwardly angled him towards the recliner. They got him into the chair and positioned most of his upper body, before Mrs. Spencer took over to make the final adjustments.

Terry backed away to give the woman room to maneuver, and accidentally knocked over the footstool that had been in front of the rocking chair next to the easy chair, sending the book and newspapers piled there to the floor.

“Don’t worry about it,” the woman said as she adjusted the man’s limbs more comfortably and got him settled. Terry picked up the book to return it to its place and noticed what it was with surprise. She glanced up from the book curiously, but the redhead only smiled as she straightened out her husband’s legs.

Terry set the book back on the righted footstool. “I like Laurie King’s ‘Martinelli’ series too, though I didn’t think the second book was as good as the first.”

The woman nodded her agreement. “I’m only up to the third one, but I’m looking forward to checking out her other books too. Anyway, thank you very much for giving us a hand. We really appreciate it.”

Her husband, who had been observing the exchange with interest, piped up, “Yeah, you can be my white knight any day.”

Terry grinned at the man, who despite his disability obviously retained a merry outlook on life. Mischief sparkling in her deep brown eyes she teased him, “Not that I mind riding to the rescue or anything, but try to stay off the floor for a while, will ya?”

He returned her smile and nodded. His wife escorted her to the door, and picked up one of the mailbags for her. Reshouldering both of her bags, Terry turned to leave.

“Thanks again,” the woman called after her as Terry started back down the path to pick up her interrupted route.

Resuming her automatic pilot mode, Terry idly wondered at Mrs. Spencer’s reading choices. She wouldn’t have envisioned a straight, suburban housewife reading lesbian mystery novels, but dismissed any possibility that the woman was gay. She certainly hadn’t set off Terry’s gaydar, the accuracy of which she prided herself on.

Terry herself had never even been closeted, having discovered and accepted her orientation with little angst by the time she was sixteen. It had helped that her parents and four brothers weren’t particularly fazed by her revelation.

She grinned as she remembered being virtually indistinguishable from her rowdy siblings for most of her childhood. Her mother had stopped trying to put dresses on her after Terry “accidentally” ripped every skirt that she was sent to kindergarten in. Oddly, the same fate didn’t meet Terry’s jeans and sweats, so her mother gave in with her customary good grace, resigned to the fact that she was never going to have the dainty little girl she had envisioned when Terry was born.

Turning into another walkway, Terry decided that it was most likely that Mrs. Spencer simply enjoyed good writing of any genre. After all, the woman obviously loved to read, judging by the overflowing bookshelves that dominated what she had seen of the house. Perhaps she was simply branching out beyond P.D. James and Elizabeth George. Shaking her short dark hair, Terry decided it was going to have to remain one of life’s little unanswered questions.