

Chapter One – Lana

When did walking start being so difficult?

Lana dragged her feet up the sidewalk to her step-sister's modest bungalow, feeling like a puppet that had its strings cut. After the day she had just had, she was surprised that she had mustered up the strength to drive back there. All she wanted to do was curl up in bed and cry. She had known something was wrong, but this . . . This was exactly what she had been praying would *not* happen.

The roses under the bungalow's windows were all in bloom, and Lana took a moment to soak in the life around her before squaring her shoulders and entering the house. Kari might have been ten years older than her, but she was still emotionally fragile, and it wasn't going to be easy to tell her. And the girls . . . She needed to tell them, too. But how could she explain cancer in a way a three-year-old would understand?

Kari was in the kitchen, wrapping up the little handmade soaps that she liked to make as gifts for the neighbors when Lana entered. The room was perfumed with mild floral scents. Kari smiled brightly, though worry was in her eyes.

"Hey. How was the doctor's?"

Lana wasn't ready to tell her what the diagnosis was right away. She had already cried herself out at the doctor's and felt too tired to say it out loud. "She's referring me to a specialist."

Kari's eyes widened. "It's that bad?"

"Were the girls good?"

"Little angels, like always," Kari said after a beat. "They're just watching TV right now. I know you don't like them having a lot of electronic time, but we just got home from the park and we were finger painting all morning. They looked about ready to go to sleep but wouldn't lie down, so I let them watch some old *Care Bears*."

"I bet Peter loved that," Lana said drily, referring to Kari's three-year-old son.

Kari shrugged. "That's what the girls wanted to watch, and he didn't fuss about it."

It was odd to hear about all three children agreeing on something. Normally Evie and Elaine were at each other's throats about everything. For some reason, they thought they should do everything together, including eating the same foods and wearing the same clothes. Yet, the two of them couldn't be more different. Evie liked science as well as discovering things and preferred sensible clothing. If Elaine had her way, she'd wear princess dresses all the time while playing in the mud and telling stories about how she was actually a fairy godmother. Why they thought they always had to match was beyond Lana. As for Peter, he was easily overstimulated and the twins could be exhausting for him.

Kari set her soaps aside and grasped Lana's hands. "Okay, we're finished beating around the bush. I can see something's wrong. Don't try to change the subject. What did the doctor say? Why are you being sent to a specialist?"

Lana's stomach churned. She took a deep breath, hoping that her emotions would stay in place long enough to get this out. The last thing she wanted was to be a wreck and scare the children. "It's cancer."

The already tense atmosphere got even tenser. Kari slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes watering. Lana swallowed hard. This was what she didn't want to feel right now. She'd already cried; she was already exhausted. She didn't want her girls to see their mother in this emotional state. She needed to be strong for them.

She opened her mouth to reassure Kari that the prognosis so far was encouraging, but couldn't get it out. Lana's mother had died of breast cancer when she was twenty-six, three years younger than Lana was right now. Her mother found out right after Lana was born. The pregnancy had made her case worse, and though she fought, eventually she had lost the battle.

"We caught it early," Lana said, repeating her doctor's words. "It's stage one breast cancer, and it's practically a hundred percent survival rate over five years when it's caught this early. I'm just glad I insisted on getting more tests."

Kari put her arms around her stepsister. "It's going to be okay. You've caught it, right? That's the first step. And you're being sent to the specialist. He'll know what to do."

Her voice shook, and Lana squeezed her a little harder. Kari's mother and Lana's father had married almost nine years after Lana's mother passed away so she never knew Lana's mom, but it was still a terrifying thought even if she didn't know anyone who had passed from cancer herself. Lana shuddered.

"Stage one," she repeated. "I have good odds."

"What are you going to tell your girls?"

Lana pulled back and forced a smile to reassure her sister. "Just that I'm sick right now. Until we learn more."

Kari wiped her eyes and turned back to the soaps she was wrapping. Her lips wobbled but, fortunately, her voice remained steady as she continued. "Who are you being sent to?"

"Dr. Something Wolfe. I don't remember his first name." Lana snorted.

"What's funny?"

"His name. Dr. Wolfe. I did some reading up on him in the doctor's office. He's a world-renowned doctor leading a breakthrough study on improving cancer survival rates with shifter blood. And he's a shifter himself. A *Wolf* shifter."

Kari broke down into giggles, the irony breaking the heavy tension. Or at least, allowing a small distraction. "So Dr. *Wolfe* is a *Wolf*? That's a bit on the nose, isn't it? What, did he change his last name to be ironic or something?"

"I don't know. He's supposed to be doing some groundbreaking work, though. And with the money Dad left me, I might just be able to afford his treatments. It's not going to be cheap, though."

She reached out to help with wrapping the soaps. Part of her wanted to say that she had already decided to have it removed surgically even if Dr. Wolfe suggested they just try chemo and radiation. She wasn't going to risk leaving her girls behind without a mother just for her body's sake. Besides which, she had enough money to get plastic surgery to reduce the scar that would be left. Being the daughter of a multi-millionaire who left half of his money to her and half to her sister had its perks for sure.

"I'm more worried about the girls than anything else," she said, her eyes darkening as she considered what this meant for them. "My mother got breast cancer and now I have it. That's a pretty heavy coincidence. I'm going to have to make sure that they know about it and that they make sure they keep an eye on their health in the future."

Kari nodded, looking troubled. "If I had known this would happen, I never would have asked you to surrogate for me and Robert."

"If I didn't have the girls, I probably would still have cancer. It was a crazy mix-up, but I don't care. I love them and I wouldn't give them up for anything."

They lapsed into silence, and Lana smiled as she remembered how her twins came into her life. Four years ago, Kari had approached her, asking her to be an egg donor and surrogate so she and her husband could have a child. They'd been trying

everything they could ever since they married to get pregnant, but nothing was working. How it was supposed to work was that Lana would donate her eggs, since Kari's were declared to be 'unaccepting' of the process, and they would be joined with Robert's sperm and implanted back in Lana's uterus.

Somewhere along the line, something had gone wrong. Instead of being fertilized by Robert, Lana's eggs had been fertilized by 'Donor 431.' By the time the mix-up was discovered, Lana was already pregnant with the twins. She had already been having doubts about giving up the babies to Kari, and, after the fact, it was discovered that Kari had miraculously gotten pregnant herself. The sisters came to a mutual agreement that Lana's children would be raised by her.

How the mix-up occurred, Lana was never able to find out, but it actually came as a relief. The tension caused by the planned surrogacy had caused a strain between the sisters. But the shared pregnancies and the agreement that Lana's babies would be hers was all they needed to smooth out their relationship again.

"Do you want to move in with us while you're having the treatments?" Kari asked, breaking the silence again.

Lana shook her head. The bungalow was nice, but as close as she and Kari were, she always felt like an intruder in her home. She wanted somewhere with lots of comfort and memories, somewhere she could be at ease. She chewed her lip. Kari hadn't been back to their old home since their parents had passed away in a car accident just before the children were born.

"I was hoping that we could move into the mansion together. I know that it's still painful for you, but I just want be some place where I can have all the wonderful memories of being a family. It's bigger, too. More room for the kids to be kids. Please?"

Kari hesitated a moment but nodded with a sigh. "I'll talk to Robert about it."

Lana embraced her again, grateful for her sister's willingness to go back home. She never told Lana why it was so painful to be in the house where their parents lived, but her discomfort was evident. It felt like a weight had been lifted off of Lana's shoulders, though. Now that their living arrangements were decided – or, at least, being considered – she could focus on the more difficult discussions that her diagnosis brought up.

"I need you to do something else for me."

"Anything. You know Robert and I are here for you. Always."

"I know. And so if something happens, if the treatment doesn't work, or if I'm part of that one percent that just doesn't make it—"

Kari squeezed her hand. "Don't talk like that. You're going to be fine. The odds are in your favor."

"I know. I know they are." Lana looked at her seriously. "But I need to make sure that you'll look out for the girls if everything goes wrong. I'm a single mother and you're my only family."

"What?" Kari pulled back, eyes wide. "How is that even a question? Of *course* I'll look after the girls. I love them and Robert loves them. I'd never let anything happen to them."

Tears flooded Lana's eyes. "I know. I just needed to hear you say it."

Kari embraced her again. "Of course. Now, are you still going to come to the benefit ball tonight? It might be good for you to get out and have some fun – forget about your troubles. You do look fabulous in that dress you bought. It really shows off your—"

She cut herself off, but Lana nodded. She poked her breasts, frowning at them. "Yeah, I'll go. These girls don't look good that often, and I've got to take them out before it's too late, right? Even if they are dirty little traitors."

"That's one way to put it." Kari wiped her eyes and smiled brightly, though it was clearly strained. "But I'm glad. No need for life to grind to a halt, right?"

"Right." Lana swallowed hard. "I'm going to go watch the show with the girls."

Kari nodded. "Yeah. And Lana? I love you."

"Love you too, sis. Love you too."

