

EXCERPT FROM *NORA ROBERTS LAND*

Meredith Hale scanned the bookstore window. There it was—the new Nora Roberts book—the cover a bold, powerful landscape of sky and water.

Her superhero alter ego, *Divorcée Woman*, couldn't override the rash of goosebumps on her arms or her knotted stomach. Meredith patted the red lace La Perla bustier hidden under her black suit jacket and took one hesitant step closer to the glass, her breath hitching as she scanned Nora's prominent display. She imagined *Divorcée Woman* telling her to suck it up. It was only a bookstore after all. It wasn't like she had to take a bullet for the president or anything.

She'd gone cold turkey on Nora's books a year ago, when her ex-husband, Rick-the-Dick, threw *Black Hills* at the wall, snarling that her favorite author had given her an unrealistic view of love. "Our marital problems are *her* fault," he said. "She's made you believe in happily ever after—something *any adult knows* is a myth. Grow up." Then he packed his custom-tailored suits and slammed out the door of their swanky Manhattan apartment.

At first she'd thought maybe he was right. But she missed Nora's books. And not reading them hadn't made the whole divorce thing any easier on her. It hadn't made the panic attacks go away.

She wanted her Nora Roberts back, dammit. It was time to reclaim her life.

Unfortunately, just looking at the cover had her hovering on the edge of a panic attack. Her hands grew clammy. She wiped them on her black suit and dug into her matching purse for her cell phone. Her sister would be able to talk her into going into the store. After all, Jill could talk anyone into anything.

“Hey, Mere,” Jill greeted, the ever-present sound of her favorite band, Abba, in the background. Jill wanted to live life like a dancing queen.

“Hey,” she said, making sure to sound calmer than she was. “How’s business at the coffee shop?”

“Well, after a regional dairy salesman tried to talk me into changing my store’s name from Don’t Soy With Me to Don’t Milk Me, I’m about ready to bash my head against the espresso machine. He was so dense. I tried to explain it’s a play on words, but he just blinked like one of those dairy cows and went, ‘Oh.’”

Meredith’s panic slowly eased. Jill and her stories were always a comfort. “Being in New York, I don’t run into too many milk salesmen. Does he wear a special outfit?”

“No, thank God. Speaking of milk, did you get my present?”

Ducking closer to the store window so she wouldn’t be mowed down by a rush of pedestrians, Meredith said, “You mean the coffee mug with the line, ‘You’re My Udder One’?”

“Yes. I tried to appease the milk guy by telling him I’d put those mugs out for display, but he wouldn’t leave. He even offered to teach me how to milk a cow. I think he was hitting on me.”

As Meredith muffled her laughter, a passing banker gave her a disapproving stare. His shoes, belt, and briefcase matched—the Wall Street uniform. “And I thought my love life was pathetic.”

“What love life?”

“Funny. Speaking of which, I’m outside a bookstore. I woke up this morning and decided I want to read.”

“Oh, honey, I didn’t know you were illiterate.”

“Hah.” She eyed the rush of people heading in and out of the bookstore on 82nd and Broadway.

“Okay, take a deep yoga breath. Jeez, Mere, you sound like Great Aunt Helen when she put down her oxygen to steal a swig of Grandpa’s scotch at Christmas.”

“Right. Breathe.” Was her vision blurring? “I’m taking a step.”

“Oh, baby, I wish mom and I were there to see it.”

Her sister’s wicked humor cut through the foggiest in her head. Meredith wasn’t sure she was in her body anymore, but it moved when she walked. Her hand managed to open the door. She walked in on legs wobbling like an untangled yoyo.

“Are you inside yet?”

She squeezed into a book aisle as people cruised by. “Yes.”

“Welcome back to the land of the reading.”

Was there anything more comforting? “Thank you. I’m standing by the thriller and suspense section. Makes me think of Grandpa. He’s convinced there’s some sort of conspiracy going on at the university. I’m researching the college drug trade for him on the side. Maybe I should buy him a John Grisham book instead.”

“I know! He keeps pumping me for information about the parties I’ve gone to. I told him people drink too much and puke. End of story.”

“Tell that to his infernal journalism gut.” Not that she could point fingers. Hale DNA had given her one too.

“I know the fam’s grateful you’ve been helping out with the paper after Dad’s heart attack,” her sister said, “But Dad’s still working too hard. He loves that paper like it’s a child—just like Grandpa.”

“I know, Jill.” Suddenly guilt pressed down on her, its force almost as strong as the panic. She *was* helping, but she wished she could do more. Sometimes being long-distance sucked.

Her sister cleared her throat. “I don’t know how to say this, but you need to know. Sorry the timing’s not great with the whole one-year-divorce anniversary thing, but…” Her sister’s breathing went a little ragged on the line. “The doctor’s concerned about dad’s progress and wants him to take some time off. Mom hasn’t wanted to ask you, but someone needs to help Grandpa. I know he can run circles around us all, but he’s in his seventies. Is there any way you can come home to help out for a few months? I’d do it, but I have zero journalistic instincts. Plus, I have Don’t Soy with Me to run.”

“Come home?” She bumped into a book display, and a whole parade of James Patterson hardcovers slid to the floor. Her lungs seemed to stop at the thought. “I can’t breathe…and I really want to.” She gulped in air.

“Go to the coffee shop and sit down. Put your head between your knees.”

She wobbled over to a chair and caught sight of the romance section. The tightness between her ribs could have competed with a boa constrictor as it killed its victim. She didn’t care what people thought. She put her head between her legs when she saw red.

Her phone buzzed in her clenched hand, signaling another call. She ignored it, breathing deeply. When her equilibrium returned, she took deep breaths until she was sure she’d inhaled all the circulated air in Manhattan. She put the phone to her ear again.

“You still there?”

“Yep. You okay?”

Question of the year. “I didn’t pass out, but it was close.”

“Meredith, your husband cheated on you, and then blamed it on you—and Nora’s books. You’ve been through an emotional wringer. Give yourself a break. I keep telling Jemma that too.”

Jill's best friend had just been dumped by her childhood sweetheart. "You're pretty good at giving advice."

"Practice. Jemma's devastated."

"Yeah, I get that." Her eyes burned, and she pinched the bridge of her nose. "I can't stand another night in my apartment. I miss my Tribeca place and eating out in restaurants and visiting gallery openings. I don't miss Rick-the-Dick, but I do miss being part of that jam-packed world."

"You have the Power Couple Blues, Mere. Maybe coming home to help the paper will give you a new perspective. You don't have any family there. Most of your friends changed when you got divorced."

True, she had become intimately familiar with the term "fair weather friend" over the past year. "I miss you guys." But going home? She'd been in New York since starting at Columbia. "Let me grab a coffee."

"I wish I was there to make your favorite. Then I'd give you a ginormous hug and tell you about Paige Lorton snorting whipped cream up her nose and old man Perkins giving her the Heimlich."

Her laughter popped out like the final popcorn kernels in the microwave. "Oh, Jillie, I love you."

"I love you too. You're my big sis. I miss you, Mere."

Holding the phone away from her face for a moment, she walked up to the counter and gave her coffee order—a tall, no foam latte—before shuffling back to her chair. She slumped against the metal back, returning the phone to her ear. "Let me think about coming home."

"Surely Karen knows how hard you've worked after joining her paper. You've been there for a year now. Plus, it's Rick-the-Dick's rival paper. That's gotta be extra bonus points."

Her coffee magically appeared in front of her. She looked up to see a petite barista with flat-ironed hair. “You look like you needed me to bring it over.”

Kindness didn’t happen often in New York. In her hometown of Dare Valley, Colorado, it happened more times than she could count. “Thank you.” A wave of homesickness hit her. “Maybe you’re right, Jill. It would be nice to be around people who know me.”

“Good! So think about it. Talk to Karen. Now, drink your latte, and then we’ll talk you into the romance section. Nora Roberts Land awaits.”

A smile tugged at Meredith’s lips. “I forgot how mom always used to call Nora’s books that. She’d point her finger at dad and say she was taking a few hours to visit Nora Roberts Land, and then she’d seal herself off in the bedroom. Like it was an adult version of Disneyland. Dad never got it.”

“Yeah, but at least he didn’t blame divorce on Nora’s books. Rick-the-Dick’s the kind of man who can’t take responsibility for his cheating, so he blamed it on you—and fiction. Isn’t that the most pathetic thing ever? It’s like blaming teen suicide on *Romeo and Juliet*. It’s asinine.”

“Actually, I think that’s been done.” She took the last drink of her latte and stood. Tested her balance. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“So strut your stuff over to the romance section.”