



# ROLLER COASTER

*Karin Kallmaker*

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by

Karin Kallmaker



2011

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## About the Author

Karin Kallmaker's nearly thirty romances and fantasy-science fiction novels include the award-winning *The Kiss That Counted*, *Just Like That*, *Maybe Next Time* and *Sugar* along with the bestselling *Substitute for Love* and the perennial classic *Painted Moon*. Short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies and collections. She began her writing career with the venerable Naiad Press and continues with Bella. She was recently honored with a Golden Crown Trailblazer Award, recognizing her more than twenty years of writing for lesbian readers.

She and her partner are the mothers of two and live in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is descended from Lady Godiva, a fact which she'll share with anyone who will listen, though she admits you'd have to pay her a lot to get on a horse, naked or otherwise.

All of Karin's work can be found at Bella Books.

Details and background about her novels can also be found at [www.kallmaker.com](http://www.kallmaker.com).

## Acknowledgments

It's called the Theater of Food, so what could make more sense than a story of theater and food? I found a great deal of inspiration in chefs Cat Cora, Elizabeth Falkner, Alice Waters and, of course, Julia Child. I don't think I could have even attempted this book without the lifelong example of my favorite cooks, Mom and Grandma. A pinch of this, a dash of that. It was writer's bliss to claim that every exploration of a new cheese or olive, soup or dessert was essential research.

This book would not have ever been completed without the outstanding support from the Bella crew of women who make every book a delight. Along the long road to its completion a number of readers and other writers gave me ceaseless encouragement for which I am profoundly grateful. For my family, once again, Moogie's done for now.

Twenty-Five, And Many a Woman is Now Alive

# **Part One: Staging Area**

## PROLOGUE

Another carload of shrieking riders soared over Laura Izmani's head. It took conscious effort not to duck. The fading tone of the screaming was then drowned out by the sharp, metallic roar of the rail. The riders were already at the next turn when the air in their wake sent bits of trash scurrying across the wooden planking of the staging area.

The long, snaking line of raucous, eager teens and adults finally moved out of the sweltering access tunnel. She welcomed the fresh air and clean sea breeze, but the lack of shade was immediately apparent. She ran a fingertip over the top of one ear—the tender skin there was already on its way to a sunburn. Her Santa Cruz ball cap was tugged down as firmly as possible over her short-cropped black hair, but it still wouldn't quite cover

her ears. She wasn't giving up now, though. She'd already been in the queue for thirty minutes.

There was no way she wasn't going to ride The Great Wave today. Today marked the anniversary of the day she'd left New York to come here. A fresh start was what she'd found, back in the town where she'd graduated from high school only a few years ago. She'd ridden this roller coaster so many times during those years. The memory of it was bright and true and uncomplicated. And before...The Big Mistake. Now that her life was firmly back on track, she was getting on a plane for New York tomorrow morning. The day after that she would see what she could pick up of her culinary training.

Another coaster load of riders disembarked and the line moved forward. She stepped into the way of the group of teens that had been angling at every possibility to slip in front of her. Sorry, dudes, anyone who'd ever ridden the subway in New York knew how to cut off a line jumper. It was all in the elbows.

After a few minutes she was on the final ascending stairs, bearing left because she wanted to be in the first car and she was willing to wait. Along the wall the old-fashioned drawing of a tidal wave looked exactly as she remembered it, as well as the bright red lettering that proclaimed, "The World's Most Fantastic Wooden Coaster! Only in Santa Cruz!"

Finally, the last coaster before hers departed, exiting the staging area to the left. She loved the *clack-clack-clack* of the pull chain ratcheting the departing car up the first incline in its fight against gravity. On her right she was bombarded with the combined screams of the riders on the cars that would slam to a stop in front of her. It had only been a couple of years since she'd ridden The Great Wave, and she'd changed a lot—mostly not for the better, she reminded herself—but she had every intention of doing the entire ride with hands up in exultation.

The approaching train of cars was rounding the final curve with a clatter and screech of brakes when the attendant asked if she was riding alone. After she nodded, the teenager shouted to the crowd behind her, "Any singles? Room for one!"

Laura had already tossed her ball cap on the seat and sat down on top of it when a woman settled next to her. They wordlessly

sorted out the seat belts and locked them in place. Moments later they both tugged the bar firmly down across their laps.

After the attendant walked the length of the train, tugging on lap bars along the way, a voice on the loudspeaker intoned brief, unintelligible safety rules. As she remembered, Laura could only make out the part about keeping hands and feet inside the car at all times.

With a jerk the cars lurched forward into the incline tunnel, which was constructed of crisscrossed wooden beams and closely fitted slats. Every joint was studded with huge bolts.

“Not much padding on these seats,” the woman commented. She had a white-knuckled grip on the bar.

“It dates back to when people were tougher, I guess.” Laura gave her a distracted smile. They emerged from the tunnel and she found herself grinning at the stunning view of the vibrant Santa Cruz Boardwalk and long, pale, curving beach beyond it. She heard the other woman’s breath catch too.

“Time for hands up!” She thrust hers in the air, her stomach lurching, anticipating the top of the rise, where the track appeared to drop away to nothing. For a moment there was only sky in front of her, then the car banked hard to the right, wheels squealing on the rails. She yowled with delight as gravity took over.

Twists, short rises, a tight swirl down, then a long steep run across the length of the coaster to a second rise, their momentum augmented briefly by another pull chain, then swooping again—through it all Laura screamed, hands above her head.

One year. *One year sober*. One year of hard work, good food, freedom from temptation, and she knew no drug could ever feel this exciting. The ride was as fabulous, spine-tingling, breathtaking, stomach-churning, *wonderful* as she remembered.

It wasn’t over—they surged up the third rise, jerked hard, and were caught by the last chain that would boost their falling speed, climbing more than halfway as high as their initial ascent. She took a deep breath, giving her throat a break from shrieking. Coming up was the ride’s steepest descent and the last series of twists before they were back at the staging area. *Clank-clank—*

With a back-breaking jolt the car stopped just a few feet

from the top.

It took Laura a moment to let her breath out. “What the hell happened?”

She realized then that the woman next to her had not released her death grip on the lap bar, and her eyes were tightly closed. Older than Laura, but not by much, she was pretty pale for a white woman, but now her pallor was so pronounced that at first Laura thought she’d pass out.

Then the woman spoke, her voice a thready whisper. “Please, dear God, tell me we’re not dead.”

“We’ll start up in a second,” Laura said. She’d never been on a coaster that had stopped before. But surely it wouldn’t be long. She gave her companion another look. “Are you okay?”

“No.”

“If you’re scared of roller coasters, why did you get on this one?” *And why, for heaven’s sake, did you get in the front car?*

After a convulsive swallow, the answer was, “I’m not scared of roller coasters. I’m scared of heights.”

“Okay. So why the highest coaster in the park?”

“This is my graduation test. I think I’m going to fail.”

She was glad to see a little bit of color come back to the woman’s lips, but her eyes hadn’t opened. “You’re not hysterical and you’re not throwing up, so what’s to fail?”

“Give me a minute and either could happen.” Her lips pulled to one side. “She said go to the Boardwalk, take a few rides, it’ll be fun.”

“Sounds like you want to shoot someone for the advice.”

“My therapist. Helping me with desensitization.” The last word was sounded out as if it was being repeated for a spelling bee.

Laura looked over the edge of the coaster. It had to have been at least three minutes by now. “It could be worse. This could have happened just a few seconds later and we wouldn’t be leaning back against the seats. We’d be hanging against the seat belts and lap bar.”

After an unsteady intake of breath, the woman said, “That’s not very comforting.”

“I’m Laura, by the way.”

“Helen. Helen Baynor.” With an air of absentminded rote, she added, “Remember the name. Some day I’ll be famous. If I survive this.”

“I read somewhere that there are three fatalities a year at amusement parks.”

Helen’s eyes cracked open slightly, then she scrunched them shut again. “That doesn’t help!”

“Same article said ninety million people go to amusement parks a year. You have better odds at winning the big Powerball sweepstakes than dying at an amusement park.”

“Like that’ll happen.”

“That’s my point.”

“We’re hanging by a thread hundreds of feet in the air and how come you’re not scared?” Helen sounded like she might cry.

“It’s not a thread. It’s steel on steel.” *Why did I end up next to a nut case who’s afraid of heights?* “And there’s lots of things they can do. There’s these locking brakes on the cars that keep them from rolling backward. They could release them and let us go back the way we came. We’d end up...” Laura leaned over the edge of the car, peering at the rail behind them. “We’d end up near a ladder.”

“Shoot me now.”

“You’d have to open your eyes, probably.”

“To get shot?”

“To get down the ladder.”

“Not happening. I had them open when we went up the first time. That was it.”

Laura cast about for something to talk about that didn’t involve heights, death or roller coasters. “I’m training to be a chef.”

“Really? Do you like cooking?”

She glared at Helen’s profile. “No, but all the glamorous jobs washing dishes are taken.”

Helen’s lips actually twitched in a near smile. “Stupid question. Sorry.”

Laura decided to let it slide. “I was training in New York, but came home for the past year. Well, as much as home is anywhere. I lived here with kind of distant relatives for a couple of years

after my mother died so I could graduate from high school.” No need to explain that her father had reluctantly found the living arrangement for her, after being confronted with the unpleasant reality of a mixed-race daughter turning up on his doorstep. She’d gotten on her own two feet the moment she could. He’d been embarrassed by her? Well, she had been even more embarrassed by him.

“Where’d you live before that?”

“Jamaica. My mother was a student in Florida when she got pregnant with me. I was born in Florida and we stayed there until I was eight and her money finally ran out. Then we went back to Jamaica.” People tended to think that meant she’d lived some place exotic, but the only difference she’d found between the tracts outside Kingston and a slum in Manhattan was better weather.

“I was wondering about your accent—it’s faint but comes out more in the cadence.”

“Really? I didn’t think I still had an accent. Are you like a Henry Higgins?”

“No, though I’ve studied Eliza’s part repeatedly.”

“Oh. So you’re an actress.” Helen was probably very attractive when she didn’t look as if vomiting was imminent. No doubt good looks were an asset, and lots of her good looks was due to sable brown hair that brushed her shoulders. It had been pulled back into a ponytail but tendrils had escaped during their ride, curling against her neck and temples. “And you’ll be famous some day so I should remember your name—that kind of actress.”

Helen nodded.

“What have you been in?”

“I was nearly in *Rain Man*.”

“Oh, that was a good movie.”

“And almost got to be a hostage in *Die Hard*.”

“Yippee-ki-yay, mother—”

“Don’t,” Helen said. “I have friends who think that’s incredibly amusing. Especially since I was nearly almost a hostage.”

“So are you rehearsing to be Eliza Doolittle?”

“I’m up for the role in *Pygmalion* for a run off-broadway. But

I'd have to leave L.A. I'd have to give up the idea of being a big movie star."

"Is that a really bad thing?"

"I like the stage more. I always have. But my agent says anybody who is anybody is in the movies."

"So let your agent be a movie star."

A ghost of a smile crossed Helen's lips. "My boyfriend says he doesn't care where we live."

"So why do you stay here? Are you forcing yourself to ride roller coasters to get a part in an action movie?"

"Yes. My agent says I need one big break."

"An unnamed hostage is a big break?"

"It's how the business works." Now that she was talking, Helen couldn't seem to stop. Her color had come back and she seemed oblivious to the passage of time. Laura guessed it had to have been eight or nine minutes now. The sun was mercifully to their backs or her ears would be turning into cinders. She'd have a burn on her neck, though.

"But you could actually be on stage if you went back. Actually working."

Helen nodded. "I'd have to dump my agent—she doesn't know the stage world as well and never did."

"So she got you out here to get into the world she knows. You don't sound happy."

"Two years of not working beyond a walk-on in a commercial. Thank goodness my boyfriend has money. His family lives up north. Cattle ranchers and gold pioneers, very old California money."

If I had someone to bankroll me, Laura thought, I would go after my own Chez Panisse with both hands, and not look back. Helen seemed to only know she wanted to be an actress, which was like herself saying she wanted to be a chef. What kind, how, where, for whom—those were the bigger, harder questions. She'd spent the last year asking herself every one of them.

"Whatever I do, I have to get over my fear of heights," Helen was saying. "A balcony scene—a producer called me directly to see if I was interested in an O.B. *Romeo and Juliet* but I didn't think I should leave L.A. and I turned it down." She chewed her

lower lip. “God, was that a mistake? I don’t know what to do.”

“So you decided the least you could do is ride a roller coaster.”  
Laura let her gaze turn to the palm tree lined streets.

Another smile flitted briefly across the expressive mouth.  
“That’s not crazy, right?”

“I’m not the best judge of crazy.”

“I couldn’t hide it any longer and there’s more wire work all the time these days. So I took desensitization classes and therapy and finished that and was doing pretty well. I can ride in glass elevators now, that sort of thing, when before I would break out in a cold sweat and barf. But she said—phobia therapist—that if I was at an amusement park, what a victory it would be to ride a roller coaster.” Her eyes opened a fraction.

“Is your guy really cool about moving wherever you need to for work?” Normally, Laura wouldn’t pry, but she didn’t want Helen to ask her about her love life. Women in relationships always asked. It was a I’ve-shown-you-mine-now-you-show-me-yours kind of thing.

“He says he’d go with me. He wants to get married. I think I’m going to say yes.” She smiled, finally, a genuine smile and her eyes opened all the way. “I’m kind of crazy about him too. He gets me. And wants me to be famous and as rich as he is and he says that being Mr. Helen Baynor would be the best thing he could want. So I have to be *somebody*. I gotta be a contender.”

The dead-on Brando impression made Laura grin. “I am going to run my own restaurant some day. I spent all of this year doing grunt work in a couple of places in San Francisco. Chop, peel, bake. I put away some cash and now I can pay more tuition.” And if I keep myself on limited funds, she added to herself, I won’t have any to spend on things that are bad for me.

Helen turned her head and they made eye contact for the first time.

She had amazing eyes. That was the first thing Laura thought, and she didn’t realize for a moment that she was staring. But they were exceptional—large and expressive, and a color somewhere between blue and gray. Her lashes, lips and brows worked together to emphasize the rapid shifts from fear to humor to

affection and back to fear again.

Then she blinked and Laura snapped back to their present predicament and what Helen was saying.

“You don’t sound as young as you are. I thought you were my age, from your voice.”

“I’m twenty-two next month.” Laura wasn’t sure if she should be offended. She sounded old?

“I’ll be twenty-seven this fall.”

“Why, do I sound old?”

“Oh. I don’t know. You’re so calm when every time the wind kicks up a little bit I think we’re going to blow right off the track.”

“They’ve had near gales and nothing’s fallen off.”

“People do this in gale-force winds?”

“Well, no...”

Helen arched an eyebrow. “You don’t say ‘like’ and ‘you know’ every other sentence either.”

“I could, like, change that, you know, if that would help.”

Helen gave her a smile, which faltered when someone in a car behind them started shouting as if someone on the ground could hear. Laura angled over the side to look, but didn’t think anything new was happening below. Maybe ten minutes so far? Or it could be fifteen? Her watch was hanging on her backpack, down on the ride platform.

“It can’t be much longer.”

The shouting continued behind them. Having looked at the track, Laura tried not to think about how they would get down if the ride didn’t resume. There were no ladders to this part of the track, no safety walkway. So they had to have a plan to let them roll back to where they could exit the cars, didn’t they? To get them from here to somewhere safe to walk down? She opened her mouth to say this, then realized she’d only upset Helen more. She’d have to keep her speculations to herself, for a while at least.

“So where in New York did you live?”

“Queens,” Laura said. “Took the bus to work. A bistro near Wall Street. It paid pretty well and they let me do more than prep.”

“And?” Helen closed her eyes again, but it seemed more

to fight the relentless sunlight than in panic. “What went wrong?”

“Why do you think something did?”

“It’s in your voice. Something went wrong.”

When you lie about your addiction you give it power over you, Laura told herself. But a stranger on a roller coaster? Did she really have to? But this is an anniversary, she told herself, and you should start the rest of your life the way you mean to go on. *She seems interested, so she gets the truth.*

“I did something stupid. I didn’t know enough to wonder why there was so much cash around. Restaurants are usually cash-strapped, and at New York rents, it’s brutal. But there was a lot of cash. Sometimes I got paid in cash. I was working at a better place than my mother ever had, and I was training to be a real chef. Then I found out where the cash was coming from and I thought I was invulnerable and one of the chosen cool people. There are users in my family in Jamaica, but I figured I was smarter than them, somehow immune to the fact that one line of coke leads to another and then to another. I took a freebie and I was hooked.” She paused for breath, feeling a little lightheaded.

Helen’s eyes had opened. “I know people—talented, together people—who fried themselves on cocaine. Smart people. A couple went from powder to that crack-rock poison. And you’ve stopped?”

Laura couldn’t meet Helen’s gaze. “After I burned through everything I had. No more school, and, of course, the restaurant got raided finally—the owners were selling out of the bar. The raid happened when I wasn’t there and I never got dragged into it, which was really lucky. I could have a record.” She decided not to go into the different treatment someone with her skin color faced on drug charges. She had reminded herself all through her twelve steps that not having a drug-related record hanging around her neck was through the pure grace of God.

“And I had to leave New York because...it’s my sense of smell.” She had to pause to swallow, because talking about it reminded her of the aroma of oil, garlic, burnt sugar and grilled veal mingling with the smell of the subway and on many nights, the dank, heavy scent of rain on dirty sidewalks. “Restaurant

kitchens in New York smell a certain way.”

“You mean a way other than with their noses?”

“Wise ass.”

“I truly can’t help myself. It got me into so much trouble in school. Anyway...”

“Anyway, maybe it’s how old they are. Right now that smell reminds me of how great the drug made me feel, not how awful my life became because I used it. I was turning into my kin. But I’ve been fine out here. The world smells different here. My sponsor said there’s research that links sounds and smells to craving triggers and it seemed smart to get away from it all. I’m kind of nervous about going back...”

Helen pried one hand off the lap bar to rest it gently on Laura’s arm. “You’re stronger than it is. You made it a year and you’re not freaking out about this damn roller coaster.”

“Actually, one of the steps is admitting you’re not stronger than it, God is.”

“Hooey.”

“Hooey?” Laura looked at her in shock, both because Helen was scoffing at one of the really big steps, not to mention divine power, plus she’d said *booeey* and who said that nowadays?

“Sorry, I don’t mean God,” Helen said hurriedly. “I mean if you’re strong enough to place faith in God, you’re already stronger than it is. It’s strength, not weakness, that makes a person realize they need help, and ask for it.”

“Is that from a play?”

“Maybe. I don’t know,” Helen said unexpectedly. She smoothed some of her escaped hair behind her ear. “But I think it’s true. Granted I’ve never been in those shoes, so what do I really know?”

“Believe me, plenty of people who’ve never been addicted to anything have all the advice a person could want about how to kick it. Nobody has a cure. Nobody is forever and always cured. I’m trying to be strong. It’s a choice I make every day.”

Helen put her hand back on the bar, wrapping her long fingers tightly around it. “Well, sounds like you have pulled it together. Why don’t you stay here in California?”

“Because...” Laura had thought about it a lot. “Because I’m

afraid to go back, that's one thing. Kind of like being afraid of heights and proving you're over it by going on a roller coaster."

Helen gave her a wry nod. "Okay, you have me on that one."

"I'm afraid if I don't go back I'll always be afraid, and culinary America is in New York, if you want to learn, and I really do. And if I can't handle it, even feel a spark of temptation, I'm outta there. I have a great sense of smell—that's another reason not to use the stuff. I could have lost my palate and that's my livelihood. So how can I be afraid to learn there, work in kitchens there? If I can't do it, if I start thinking that we had a really great dinner service and wouldn't the best dessert be powdery white stuff, I'll come back here. I could easily become an Alice Waters acolyte."

As she explained who and what Alice Waters and Chez Panisse were she realized she was babbling about things she'd never said outside of an AA meeting. It felt good to tell someone besides her sponsor about her fears, actually, and it was wonderful that Helen didn't seem shocked or put off. Her response was probably atypical—there'd be plenty of people who would think very poorly of her and wouldn't be afraid to say so. No doubt she'd meet them everywhere she went.

She'd made mistakes. She'd made the amends she could. She'd sniffed her mother's life insurance, her only nest egg, up her nose. What should have taken her three years was going to now take six or seven, and self-pity over having to eke out the means to pay for culinary school was not acceptable.

"There's something about live performance," Helen was saying. "The thrill of it. There's a rhythm backstage, this controlled furious outburst of energy all being directed out over the audience. I love being behind the curtain before it rises. There's always a little dip—a warning. Then it goes up and I feel like I'm flying."

"It sounds like a kind of drug." Laura put one hand over her eyes. The sky was an eye-searing blue, even with the sun behind them.

"It is, I guess." Helen gave her a half-smile. "I crave it, no doubt about that. I think about when I'll get it again, I scheme and worry and fuss to have it as often as possible. In between

parts I feel like a piece of me is missing.”

“Yep, those are the classic signs—but there’s one thing you don’t do.”

“Yeah?”

“You don’t do it in private and lie about it.” She had done a lot of lying, but not as much hiding. It had been used so openly in the restaurant stock room that there’d almost been no need. She’d been a fool—times were tough and no break in sight. The Reagan and now Bush years were seeing to that. But their customers had happily paid outrageous sums for simple cocktails, and she’d simply refused to see what was under the cocktail napkin and the meaning of the cash flowing from hand-to-hand.

“True. I have a hundred witnesses at least, every time I do it.”

Laura wasn’t sure why her voice suddenly quavered. “I’m not going back to it. I won’t.”

“Good for you,” Helen said. She opened her eyes and Laura fancifully thought she was being wrapped in comforting blue-gray velvet. “I know you can do it.”

Not sure why she cared so much, Laura said intensely, “You should go back to Broadway. Marry the sweet guy and go after what you love doing.”

“I don’t know if I’m brave enough.”

“You’re on this damned roller coaster.”

Helen was shaking her head.

“You have the money to live wherever you want. So what’s the real excuse for not doing it?”

Helen took a deep breath. “I’m afraid I won’t be famous anywhere. If I go back and wash out...then I don’t have anything at all.”

“Except the sweet guy *and* a pile of money. If you don’t go it seems to me that you’ll have a sweet guy, a pile of money and a lifetime of regret.”

“Is that from a play?” Helen frowned.

“Not that I know of—shit!”

Helen swore at the same time as their coaster jolted underneath them. They slipped backward and they both screamed, as did everyone else behind them. The car squealed to a stop again.

Helen was breathing in short little gasps. “I’m going to throw

up.” She gave Laura a look of pure panic.

“No you’re not,” Laura said firmly. “Tell me about Juliet. About Eliza Doolittle.” Helen gave her a blank look. “Tell me about the first play you were ever in.”

Helen was trying, Laura could tell. Her breathing took on a forced, steadied pace and her lips moved as if she was repeating some internal mantra. “Amateur? Or professionally?”

“When you got paid, the first one.”

“*Camelot*—anonymous teen. A singing role, before I’d had any voice training.”

“Training helped?”

“It did. But back then... ‘If an anvil could sing, it would sound like Helen Baynor.’”

“Ouch.”

“From a review in the local paper.”

“That’s mean.”

“It was truthful and it hurt.” Helen swallowed hard. “My friends didn’t tell me the truth so I’m grateful someone did. I took six years of vocal training. My voice got better. I’m no show-stopper, but I can carry an ensemble part. And I’ve gotten better about reviews. Sometimes they’re dead right. Sometimes they’re dead wrong. Sometimes a critic ought to be dead.”

Laura nodded. “I know what you mean. You can either stick the so-called critic with a cleaver and go to prison or smile and let them choke on your success. I plot to poison people years later when no one would suspect me. It passes the time.”

“If I ever need someone poisoned, I’ll call you.”

Pleased that Helen’s color was coming back, Laura decided that getting her to talk was the best way to cope. “So what do you think about *Cats*?”

Helen made a strangled sound that was probably as close to a laugh as she could get in their situation. “It’s good theater. I’m not a snob—entertain the masses. But I wouldn’t want Broadway to be nothing but *Cats*. There has to be some *Death of a Salesman* or *Angels in America*—that was fantastic, I saw it when it was still a workshop in L.A. It will go to Broadway, to the West End, it’s amazing. You have to have theater like that, plus *Cats*. The world would be so dull with only one or the other.” Helen took

a longer, steadier breath. “I’ve lost some people I know to drugs, but so many more to AIDS. After I moved out here I’d call up people I’d worked with and they’d read off lists of men who’d died recently. All those funerals. And it’s still going on.”

“Nobody’s doing anything much about it—at least not that I can tell.” Laura wondered if Helen would be ready for her other secret. The irony of being able to trust Helen with her drug-use history and yet doubting she could tell her she was a lesbian brought a wry smile to her lips. Would it ever change?

“That’s another play—what if I was the Angel? That’s on a wire, and being afraid of heights would make it impossible to take the part.”

“You’re doing great,” Laura said. “This will be a fantastic accomplishment. Tell your agent you had a near-death experience and you’re going back to New York. Your heart tells you what it wants and you’re a chump if you don’t listen. I didn’t get to go that much, but I saw *Cats* and *Edwin Drood*.”

“Drood was good fun—what’s that?”

“Loudspeaker.” Laura leaned well outside the car, straining to hear. “I think...” She listened as the message repeated. “They’re going to finish the run. Oh.” She sat back in the car. “They want our heads and hands inside again.”

“You mean we’re going to go the rest of the way?” Helen’s ashen pallor returned. “I was just getting used to this. I could do this for a while longer.”

“It’ll be okay.” Laura peeled Helen’s hand free of the bar. “Hold on to me. We’re going to be just fine. And it’s a roller coaster. You’re expected to be scared and scream.”

The *clack-clack-clack* sounded ominous as they jerked up the track.

Helen was holding her hand so tightly Laura knew it would ache later. She didn’t mind.

“When I am a rich and famous stage actress,” Helen said, “I will bring my rich and famous friends to your restaurant because I know you’re going to be a rich and famous restaurateur.”

“I’ll make you a fantastic meal,” Laura promised.

*Clack-clack-clack.*

“I know you’ll be fine.” Helen squeezed her hand even

harder.

Touched at Helen's blind faith, Laura wasn't sure which of them was acting as the lifeline to the other. She squeezed back. "We'll both be fine."

The chain released their car. Laura screamed too so Helen wouldn't feel so alone. Gravity took over, but neither of them let go.