

“The only Kingfisher I’m concerned with is you.”

Caleb bent his head closer. “And the only Callaway I want you to relate to is me.” Something clicked as soon as he admitted that. It was true, so true, but his emotions didn’t matter unless Winter felt the same.

“I don’t suppose you’d like to support the arts in Sweetwater.” Winter took a step closer and tugged on his jacket. “The gallery could use a wealthy benefactor like you to attend the grand opening next Saturday. Bring your checkbook, of course.”

“I’ll be there.” He needed to go. She should walk back inside where it was warm, but she wasn’t moving away. Not even after he gave her the answer she wanted.

“But don’t buy the bunny painting. That one’s mine.” She smiled up at him and it was impossible to stop. Caleb bent his head slowly, carefully, and pressed his lips against hers.

Dear Reader,

When you think of home, does a certain place come to mind? For me, it's the house I grew up in, my mother on the couch with a book and a beagle at her side or my father's truck winding along mountain back roads. The places we love shape us.

For *Winter Kingfisher*, the mountains of eastern Tennessee are her first love and she'll fight to protect them, even if it means losing everything she's worked for. Caleb Callaway has orders to challenge Winter and her resistance to the Callaway family's plans. I hope you enjoy reading how well that works out for him!

To find out more about my books and what's coming next, visit me at cherylharperbooks.com.

Cheryl

HEARTWARMING

Her Unexpected Hero

—

Cheryl Harper

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”



Recycling programs
for this product may
not exist in your area.

ISBN-13: 978-1-335-51063-1

Her Unexpected Hero

Copyright © 2019 by Cheryl Harper

All rights reserved. Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the written permission of the publisher, Harlequin Enterprises Limited, 22 Adelaide St. West, 40th Floor, Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

This edition published by arrangement with Harlequin Books S.A.

For questions and comments about the quality of this book,
please contact us at CustomerService@Harlequin.com.

® and TM are trademarks of Harlequin Enterprises Limited or its corporate affiliates. Trademarks indicated with ® are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office, the Canadian Intellectual Property Office and in other countries.

Printed in U.S.A.

 **HARLEQUIN**[®]
[™] www.Harlequin.com

Cheryl Harper discovered her love for books and words as a little girl, thanks to a mother who made countless library trips, and an introduction to Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House stories. Whether stories she reads are set on the prairie, in the American West, Regency England or on Earth a hundred years in the future, Cheryl enjoys strong characters who make her laugh. Now Cheryl spends her days searching for the right words while she stares out the window and her dog, Jack, snoozes beside her. And she considers herself very lucky to do so. For more information about Cheryl's books, visit her online at cherylharperbooks.com or follow her on Twitter, @cherylharperbks.

Books by Cheryl Harper

Harlequin Heartwarming

Otter Lake Ranger Station

Her Heart's Bargain

Saving the Single Dad

Smoky Mountain Sweethearts

Lucky Numbers

A Home Come True

Keeping Cole's Promise

Heart's Refuge

Winner Takes All

Visit the Author Profile page
at Harlequin.com for more titles.

This one's for my parents.

They're gone, and I miss them and home every day, but I'm grateful for deep, deep roots.

CHAPTER ONE

“DOES ANYONE ELSE smell that...?”

Winter Kingfisher glanced up from her phone as Macy Gentry paused to take suspicious whiffs of the air over their corner booth at The Branch, the answer to nightlife in Sweetwater, Tennessee. It was Friday night, prime time for fun and rowdy crowds, but still so early that the first unofficial get-together of Sweetwater’s single ladies was tame. Subdued. Almost boring.

The way first dates or professional networking opportunities can be.

Scanning blog posts and headlines, hunting for either the Kingfisher or Callaway name had distracted Winter from the awkward silence in the booth. Not to mention any untoward odor.

News of her part in ending an engagement with the man planning to be governor had had a longer life cycle than she’d imagined. For almost a decade, she’d worked with her

fiancé, Whit Callaway, Jr., in Knoxville's political arena to make sure all his press was favorable. Going head-to-head against the Callaways, one of the wealthiest families in Tennessee, in order to save her brother's job as head ranger of the Smoky Valley Nature Reserve had meant she'd returned the ring and landed both Kingfishers on the front pages.

Unfortunately, the coverage varied wildly from favorable to "literally the worst," but it had taken a turn for the better for the Kingfishers. She was the scorned woman. The innocent one. Her brother, Ash, had rightfully become a hero again. Whit Callaway's campaign had faltered.

Was saving The Aerie worth the hassle of canceling a society wedding, losing her job and her plans for the future?

Winter shifted on the hard wooden seat and tried not to focus too closely on the answer to that question.

After two months, Winter could feel her chance to directly challenge Whit's political campaign evaporating. Getting even was not the Kingfisher way, but what about a little payback?

But instead of forcing her way onto his op-

ponent's strategy team, what was she doing? Rusticating at home and not much else.

Well, other than reading about Governor Richard Duncan's terrible record on education and teacher pay while she waited for this first get-together to be over. Could she help this guy win reelection? Yes.

But *should* she?

It would serve Whit right for not listening to her. If he'd stopped his family's plan to develop a lodge at The Aerie and destroy one of the most important areas of the reserve she loved, they would still be together. He would still be winning, and Winter would be by his side in Knoxville.

Not here, where she definitely did not seem to be winning anything.

Governor Duncan needed better advice. The solution: a Kingfisher heading up his reelection campaign. Win-win. For her, at least.

"I'm not sure exactly what it is, but it's flowery. What is that?" Macy sniffed again. "Roses?"

Before Winter could change the subject, Christina Braswell stood. "Hamburgers all around. Don't waste your time with anything else on this menu. Trust your waitress friend to know." She marched over to the bar and

returned with a tray of drinks and hamburgers in baskets.

Macy craned her neck, clearly searching for the fresh spring meadow tickling her nose. Since her brother's girlfriend and coworker at the Smoky Valley Nature Reserve had become a staple at Kingfisher family dinners, Winter knew there was no way Macy would let it go until she had the answer.

"Lavender." Winter tugged her denim jacket and patted the large Choose Duncan Again button she had pinned to the lapel. "The fragrance is lavender. My mother grows a lot of it. If she has a signature scent, it's lavender."

All the women at the table turned to face her.

Christina held up a frosty mug in a salute. "She does speak. So far, the only forms of communication I've seen have been glaring at your phone and sighing. Your brother is a better conversationalist and he mainly speaks in single syllables."

The criticism hurt, even if it was true. Neither she nor Ash were known for their easygoing personalities or sparkling conver-

sation. Smarts—yes. Determination—yes. Easygoing charm? Not so much.

“I’ve got a lot going on right now,” Winter snapped and then realized it was so untrue. “Or I should have, I guess. I don’t have a job yet. No one on Governor Duncan’s reelection campaign will answer my calls, so that shoots my whole ‘make a difference in Tennessee politics’ plan in the foot. My engagement to a perfect man from a wealthy family destined for the White House is... Yeah, if you can read a newspaper or blog, you already know all about that. The smell? It’s lavender. My mother insists that I use the shampoo she makes herself from the organic ingredients she grows in her garden. Does it smell nice? Yes. Does it lather? No. Does it do anything other than strip every bit of gloss and shine from your expensive haircut?” Winter poked the frizzy fall of dark hair over her ear. “Hard to say. I’m still only a month into the experiment. It may totally remove every hair from my head. That’s the way life is going right now.”

You’re griping about shampoo. Your whole life is wrecked, but what you complain about is the state of your hair.

Yes. I deserve to complain.

Oh, poor baby. Rich husband fell through, and all that schooling and job experience have left you at the mercy of... What, again?

Angel on one shoulder, self-doubt and pity on the other. That was why she was exhausted.

For half a second, Winter was relieved to let off some of the pressure of the worries boiling in her brain. Then regret washed over her. Letting people know she was struggling was an un-Kingfisher thing to do. Her family handled their own problems.

Christina's eyebrows shot up. "Okay, you do have a lot going on right now, up there in your brain, anyway." She pointed a french fry around the table. "But Winter Kingfisher can spin all that on a dime. You know it. We know it. Some of us have halfheartedly resented you for it for decades, ever since they stood in your 'most likely to succeed' shadow." Christina nudged her burger closer. "Take a bite. Take a *breath*. We can help. Some of us are professionals at picking up the pieces after everything falls apart."

Christina had nailed her problem right on the head. Winter should be above this... floundering. The fact that the bad girl of Sweetwater was giving her a pep talk took some consideration, but Winter appreciated

it. She picked up her drink and took a sip because she couldn't decide whether to agree or disagree, and that ambivalence was irritating. She'd never hesitated in her life.

Now, having someone order her dinner for her was a relief.

"When Astrid and I first started planning this get-together, I had a much rowdier vision in mind. Young, single women. On the town. A bar with real choices other than beer and *light* beer. With all the excitement over the showdown with the Callaways about the proposed lodge at Otter Lake and the..." *Breakup*. That was the missing word. Macy shot a worried glance at Winter before straightening in her seat. "*Holiday*. Christmas slowed us down, but I'm glad everyone could get together tonight." She jammed her straw three times to loosen the ice in her drink and glanced toward the bar. "When we get on a regular schedule, we can move this out of town. The Branch is our starting point, not where we end."

The petite blonde seated across from Astrid, Leanne Hendrix, said, "I'm happy to have a chance to get out." She tugged on the shoulder of her T-shirt, the hot-pink uniform of Sweetwater Souvenir, the shop she'd been

asked to run. "I'd rather sit here quietly with you guys than clean my apartment and binge-watch some television show."

More awkward silence stretched over the table, but Winter silently agreed. She'd had to come to terms with the fact that she needed new friends. More friends.

"That's it. We aren't going to let gossip keep us apart, not anymore." Christina slapped her hand on the table. "In fact, let's come up with a name. It'll be like our little club then. We could do jackets."

"Have you lost your mind?" Macy drawled. "Let's start small. Dinner. A *successful* dinner." She pointed at Winter. "This girl is half a second from bailing on us, and we haven't even eaten our burgers yet. Let's make it through one night."

Christina rolled her eyes. "Fine. You want to start small, we'll start *small*."

Something about her exasperation amused Winter. She wasn't alone. Finally, their booth's atmosphere was closer to being a party than an interview going badly. How long had it been since she had giggled like that?

When everyone turned to look at her again, Winter said, "You guys would be off to a bet-

ter start without me. I'm not in the mood to party lately. I should get my burger to go."

Before she could stand, Macy grabbed her hand and held tight. "You are staying. You're eating. And if you want to talk about everything that has gone wrong or could go wrong or will go wrong or how you're going to conquer the world next, we are here to listen to it. You may have been too cool for all this *before*, but I am not. I want to be able to call *someone* when I need to talk about *things*. This is why we need girls' nights out." She shook her finger at Christina. "That is not the name of our group."

"Eat your burger. Burgers make everything better." Christina waved hers and took a big bite, staring around the table until everyone followed suit.

"You could smuggle your own shampoo into the bathroom." Macy pressed a hand to the center of Winter's back and ran it in small circles, her expression one of extreme concern. "Before I got to know you so well, I was pretty sure you were too cool to notice my existence. A lot of that had to do with how amazing your hair was. Sleek. Shiny. Every day. Like magic."

It took Winter a second to realize they'd

returned to her shampoo challenges, and the good hair was in the past tense. She understood the impulse. On the list of problems she had, it should be the easiest to solve.

Winter's whole life had fallen apart, and Macy was ready to cry over her hair. That was how well her mother's shampoo was working. Every time Winter stared in the mirror now, she was reminded that life had taken a fuzzy, out-of-control detour.

"I could, but it's pretty clear when I use my own stuff. The fact that I can run a brush through it gives me away. The lectures you get for bringing plastic bottles into my mother's house, and on the expense of salon shampoos, and the devastating research some companies perform on animals, although not mine, because I did my own research and paid twice what I needed so I could use it with a clear conscience but whatever, Mother... All that together?" Winter snatched the butterfly clip holding her bangs back out of her hair. "Nobody has time for that every day, not even the unemployed."

Clearly, her new friends were not quite certain how to react, but their small smiles and twitching lips were another reason to laugh.

And that felt good.

“I never appreciated the small things before,” Winter said, “but the small things have gotten much, much larger lately.” The tiny pinch of the butterfly clip she’d stolen from her mother’s stuff was easy to focus on.

“Any idea how long you’ll be staying with Mom and Dad?” Macy asked. “Ash has room in his cabin and there’s a couch in my living room. The space isn’t much, but you’re welcome to it. And there’s no way I’ll lecture you about your shampoo.” Macy lowered her voice, and added, “Unless you won’t let me use it, too.”

Christina elbowed her in the side affectionately.

“What? She has good stuff. Her hair was legendary.” Macy held both arms out to the ladies as if to say no one in town would blame her. “Before all this, I could hardly talk to Winter because she was so...together.”

Before. Macy didn’t have to explain before what.

That was something else everyone at the table knew.

Before the governor had read the environmental-impact report of the new lodge being planned for the Smoky Valley Nature Re-

serve and decided to attack his political opponent, Whit Callaway, Jr., over the damage to Tennessee's resources and history.

Before the lodge, which the Callaways were pushing through on the land they owned but held in reserve for citizens and voters in Tennessee, stalled and they turned on the head ranger, her brother, Ash.

Before Whit had threatened her brother and led Winter to end their engagement and showed his true colors.

Before she'd begged Caleb Callaway, Whit's brother, to fix everything, except her job and her engagement.

Winter had had it all together before that.

Begging was not an option for Winter Kingfisher, but she'd done it for the reserve and her brother, and a chance to keep the life she'd set up.

She'd been the public outreach officer for the reserve. She'd been juggling Whit's campaign with one hand and a society wedding with the other.

Now her hair was a mess, although it had nothing on the rest of her life.

"This is temporary." Winter had repeated the same words to herself so many times she was beginning to wonder if they had lost all

meaning. “First, I find a job. Since both the reserve and politics seem to be out of the question...” This was where she stalled time and again. “I’m open to suggestions.”

“I have all the time in the world for you at the library. Unpaid volunteering doesn’t help with the money, but the kids love your story times. You would not believe how many crayon drawings of Rabbit tricking Possum I’ve seen since you told that story two months ago. It’s like you have some special connection to them.” Astrid narrowed her eyes. “Have you ever considered teaching?”

Winter’s immediate panicked reaction, complete with shaking her head so hard her frizzy hair whizzed in front of her face, had them all fighting back grins, until Astrid drawled, “Okay, crossing that off the list.”

“I like to tell stories. Kids love stories.” Winter balled up her napkin. “That doesn’t make me a teacher. Teachers mold young minds and keep them in their seats. Storytellers waltz in, capture their attention and waltz back out. Me? In front of a classroom all day long? I’d either arrange them into military formation or take cover under my desk. Either way, it would end in tears for one of us.”

“Not teaching. Not the reserve. How are

you with food orders?” Christina asked. “The campground is staffed, but this place could use some help.” She wrinkled her nose. “Your tips would be better if you could fix your hair, though.”

“I was a hostess at a restaurant in Knoxville all the way through college.” Winter studied the beat-up interior of The Branch. Surely she could manage drink orders and the limited menu here. “How different could it be?”

As she glanced back at her companions, no one seemed convinced. Before she could argue that she’d discovered quickly how to suggest appetizers and the perfect pairing of wine, Leanne leaned forward. “The skills are different here, hon. Are you good with your hands?”

“Like, writing?” Winter mimed holding a pen and scribbling on a small notepad.

“That and often picking up broken things.” Leanne motioned at the big, noisy crowd of fishermen that had come in.

Sweetwater depended on the tourists attracted to the area by the nature reserve’s trails, campground and lake. During the busy summer season, the main street through town enjoyed a steady stream of families shopping

for souvenirs and breakfast, lunch and dinner. Late February was slow on Otter Lake, but there were still groups of folks that visited the campground for a weekend away. Since this was the only place in town serving beer, The Branch was must-see Sweetwater for nightlife.

“Have you searched for jobs in Knoxville or Nashville?” Macy asked. “I know your parents want you here, but the options open up in the city.”

She had, but Knoxville was too close to Whit, and Nashville wasn’t close enough to Otter Lake. Moving there might open up a spot for her on Richard Duncan’s campaign team, since she clearly had the insider info on Whit Callaway, but there was no safety net in Nashville. No Otter Lake, either.

On the other hand, in Nashville, she wouldn’t have to worry about every person she passed on the sidewalk, neighbors who’d known her for her whole life, wondering how she’d messed up everything so spectacularly.

“I’d like to find something here. For now. Later...” Winter let the sentence trail off. If she managed to win a spot on the governor’s team, Nashville would have to work. Until then, she’d stay home. She loved this place—

the reserve's beauty, the stories of the people who grew up there—and all she'd ever wanted to do was teach other people to love it, too. Working for the reserve and plotting Whit's race to win the state capital had been a solid plan. "I can wait tables. I've always been a good multitasker."

"You could pick it up, for sure. And the tips are decent. Unfortunately, the urge to drink them all away means no working here, not for me." Leanne turned her root beer in a slow circle. "I could talk to Janet. She mentioned finding a part-time salesperson for the art gallery she's opening next to the souvenir shop."

When everyone nodded and pointed in relief, as if they'd been certain she'd be a failure at waiting tables, Winter tried not to take it personally. She'd once taken success as a guarantee, but right now she was riding a wave of disappointment. All things considered, the art gallery was a better alternative for her than delivering burgers and beer.

"Better to have two chances than one. I'll ask Sharon on the way out if she needs any help waiting tables." Winter nodded at the fake smiles surrounding her. "And I'll call Janet on Monday to find out if she's hiring."

I need more than one option in this job market. I handled a lot before. I can do both of these things.” They nodded, so she did, too.

And she immediately felt better. Having a plan had always soothed her concerns.

To do anything more, she had to smooth out her life. Winter tugged her fingers out of her tangled hair, resolved to get herself together.

When the Callaways were faced with opposition to their plans to build at the reserve, they had targeted her brother as the villain of the story. Because of them, Ash had faced public criticism and the potential loss of his job as head ranger.

Even though they’d had no real proof of his guilt.

And after she’d spent years at Whit Callaway, Jr.’s side. Their engagement hadn’t stopped the drive to punish Ash.

Winter might have expected that from Senior, who valued the family’s standing above almost anything. That was business. Her anonymous release of the environmental-impact plan to the governor had been the same. Just business.

But the fact that her fiancé had gone along

with his father's efforts to hurt Ash? That's where the pain came in.

Her best revenge would be to get so stinking happy that Whit Callaway gnashed his teeth when he remembered her. To do that, she had to get out of her parents' house. Obviously.

She had a life to rebuild.