

A Deadly Change of Heart

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Chapter One

Diane Parker slipped her sunglasses into a hard plastic case as she stepped through the glass doors into the reception area of her husband's office. She stopped momentarily and stared at the collection of greasy handprints on the usually sparkling glass displaying the name of Bradley Parker's first love: Business Solutions, Inc., or BS Inc., as Diane liked to call it. The mauve carpet showed a grease stain in the shape of a shoe where a thoughtless delivery person failed to use the mat outside before tracking in the oily mess. Diane noticed droppings from the paper hole punch scattered on the floor. She ran her finger along the counter and drew a long, thin line in the dust. She gazed around the small reception area as she wiped the dust off her finger on a tissue she retrieved from Cathy's vacant desk. The place looked deserted.

"Cathy?" she called as she straightened the pile of old magazines scattered across the heavy oak coffee table in the corner.

"Be right there," a man's voice called from another room.

Diane searched for a wastepaper basket to toss her dusty tissue away. Bradley Parker emerged from his office and saw Diane with her back toward him. "Can I help you?" he asked.

Diane spun around in her dark burgundy pumps and nearly lost her balance. She was on her way to work and today was the first time she'd worn the new shoes—the dress, too. The dusty-rose-colored knit sweater dress fit snugly in all the right places. She'd bought it nearly three weeks ago, but purposely waited to wear it until she knew she'd be seeing Bradley—or rather— Bradley would be seeing her. It was the first time in eighteen years she could fit into a size eight and look this good. She finally gave up plucking the few strands of gray hair as they showed up and let Marcia down at the Visible Changes Hair Salon work her magic. The office fluorescent lights shone on her auburn highlights as Diane pulled a strand of hair away from her face. She smiled at Bradley.

"Oh, it's you," he said, amazed at the sight in front of him.

"Yeah, it's me. I can't stay long. I'm on my way to work."

Bradley gawked at the beauty standing in the middle of the room. He couldn't remember the last time a woman turned his head the way she just had—not even *her* when he proposed so many years ago. His eyes moved down her long, thin neck to the curve of her hips, then continued down the slender legs to

her perfect ankles. A dimple appeared in Diane's right cheek as she tried to suppress the smile she felt emerging from within. He just might be feeling something—maybe desire, maybe love, maybe regret.

She cleared her throat and initiated some conversation—any conversation. “Where's Cathy?” she asked.

The question didn't seem to register in Bradley's brain. Maybe he was too preoccupied wondering how this woman could have emerged from the frumpy, overweight housewife who had the nerve to leave him nearly thirteen months earlier.

Diane strolled over to the empty reception desk. “She does still work here, doesn't she?”

The fog finally cleared in Bradley's head. “Cathy? Uh, yeah...sure.” He checked his watch. “She's just late today—dentist appointment or something.”

Diane grimaced as she noticed a dusty smudge on her sleeve and proceeded to brush it off. “What's up with the cleaning people? They go on strike? This place is a mess.”

Bradley rushed over to help her clean the spot from her dress. “I'm looking for a new service. They weren't doing a very good job, so I...well, it's not important. What are you doing here?”

Diane stepped back from Bradley. “We need to talk about our...about the—”

Bradley stopped her before she could get the 'D' word out. She hadn't actually said anything about a divorce yet, but he knew it was the next logical step if a reconciliation didn't look promising. “Let's go in my office. We can sit down. You want coffee?”

Diane frowned as she checked her watch. “I really can't stay that long. I told Garrett I'd be a little late, but I don't think he'd appreciate me showing up in time for lunch.”

Diane followed Bradley down the hall to his office. He opened the door for her and breathed in the scent of her freesia body lotion as she passed. “Why? All you're doing is filing. They could hire a monkey to do that.”

Diane stopped in her tracks, clenched her teeth and turned on her heel. She glared at him through deep blue eyes—the daggers could have dropped him where he stood. In the past, his dehumanizing comments would have had her in tears in a matter seconds. Usually, he'd start counting out loud to see if he could break his record. Ten seconds was his best, so far. Diane would not give him the satisfaction. She took a deep breath and caught her reflection in the mirror behind Bradley. She was reminded how much she'd accomplished in the last year, driven by pure anger. She lost forty pounds—weight she could not diet and exercise away during nineteen years of marriage. She found a job that she really loved—one that gave her a sense of self-worth. She no longer felt lost. She

didn't wake up every morning and wonder why she existed anymore. She had direction in her life. She felt good. She tried to remember the last time she felt this good. Finally, she concluded that she felt better than she ever had in her entire life—too good to let this cold man get the best of her. “Well they didn't hire a monkey to do the job. Unfortunately, the San Diego Zoo couldn't part with any, so they're stuck with me.”

Bradley let out an uneasy chuckle. Humor was not Diane's usual response. He waited for her chin to quiver, but it never happened.

“But, they did have the sense to realize a high school kid with a basic grasp of the alphabet could file just as well as I could, for a lot less money,” Diane continued.

Bradley smirked. “So, you got replaced by a punk kid?”

Diane's lower lip protruded in a pout as she nodded her head.

Bradley grinned. “Maybe you could help out here, at least until—”

“They didn't replace me, Bradley. They promoted me. Remember that bachelor's degree you told me was such a waste of time? Well, the *San Diego Union Tribune* doesn't see a journalism degree as a waste at all, in fact, they think it might just come in handy for their newest reporter.”

Bradley choked on her words. “Reporter? You've got to be kidding. You can barely follow the plot of a Saturday morning cartoon.”

His words, which were meant to cut her down, only succeeded in fueling her fire. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She struggled to keep her voice calm. “I didn't come here to fight with you, Bradley.” She took a step closer to him—a move he wasn't accustomed to. Usually, she tried to keep her distance from him when they argued. Once again, he was distracted by the scent of her perfume as it wafted around his head.

“Well then, why are you here, Mrs. *Union Tribune* Reporter?” The sarcasm dripped from his lips.

Diane pulled an envelope from her purse and handed it to Bradley. “I filed for divorce. If you have any questions, you can call my attorney.”

Bradley's chin hit the floor. He stared at the papers in his hand as though they were the gun that had just fired a bullet into his chest. “Divorce? Diane, can't we talk about this?”

“I tried to talk to you about it. Remember? I couldn't hold your attention long enough to discuss the weather, let alone our marriage. What was her name? Clarissa?”

“Is that what this is all about? Because that's been over for a long time. I swear—”

“And before that, Cheryl. Oh, and let's not forget Tanya.”

“Come on, Diane,” Bradley moaned as if he were listening to a broken record.

“It’s not just about the affairs, Bradley. I realize I let myself go in the years we were married. I didn’t make much of an effort to be attractive for you. But you made me feel like I was nothing—and I’m not nothing. I’m something, Bradley—something special.”

“Special? You mean like a princess or a queen? Give me a break, and while you’re at it, why don’t you grow up. You couldn’t have picked a worse time to become *special*. I can’t afford to...business is not...I mean...no. No, we won’t do this. Just forget it, Diane.” Tiny beads of sweat formed on Bradley’s forehead. He tossed the envelope on the floor like an angry, spoiled child throwing a tantrum.

“Sorry, Bradley, but my attorney assures me that ‘I don’t want to’ won’t be an option available to you.” Diane stood her ground. For the first time in her life, she was on the offensive rather than defensive.

Bradley trudged to his desk and sat behind it, resting his forehead in his palms. He could see his usual tactics weren’t effective against this new Diane. She wasn’t going to be bullied. He remembered how compassionate and softhearted she could be, especially with their two sons when they came to her with their problems. He used to criticize her and say she was making mama’s boys out of them, but at the moment, that quality could work in his favor. “I can’t take this now. Cathy isn’t at the dentist. I had to let her go, along with Mark and Tom. The cleaning people, too. I couldn’t make the payroll. I’m being sued by three clients.”

Diane didn’t flinch. She knew what he was up to. She looked him square in the eye and didn’t show one emotion—not fear, not hate, not love, and definitely not sympathy.

Bradley felt as though his skin was transparent, and she could see right through him. He felt a drop of perspiration run down his side from his armpit. He finally came to the realization that he had no control of her anymore. “The business is in trouble, so I’m really not interested in this new discovery of how special you are.”

“You never were interested. That’s the problem.” Diane opened the door to leave. “Look, I don’t want your business. You can have it. Everything else will be split fifty-fifty. I’ve already talked to the boys. They can’t believe I waited this long to get away from you. I explained that I had to wait until they were both off to college. I could never leave them with the tyrant who lives in our house.”

Bradley glared at her. “You’ll fall flat on your face. You’re not smart enough to make it on your own. You’ll be crawling back on all fours when you can’t pay your rent or fill your cupboards with bonbons and potato chips.”

Diane smiled, displaying the dimples in her cheeks that so many men found disarming. "In case you hadn't noticed, I don't eat bonbons or potato chips anymore." She turned to leave, then stopped for one last jab. "Oh, by the way, you might want to catch *The Flintstones* Saturday morning. Wilma's gonna throw Fred out on his...well, you get the picture. See, and you thought I couldn't follow the plot." The smile left Diane's face. "Yaba-daba-doo, Bradley."

Diane closed the door behind her and slipped quickly out of the building. She jumped into her car, jammed it into gear and sped out of the parking lot. She was sobbing by the time she reached the first stoplight.

The mascara stains were dry by the time Diane arrived at the *Tribune*. She waved at the guard in the security shack as she eased her car into the lot and searched for a place to park. Since she was late, the only spot available was a narrow slot next to Garrett's Humvee, or the Hummer, as he liked to call it. Diane bit her lip as she worked to maneuver her Toyota into the skinny spot. "Don't hit the boss's car," she whispered to herself as she set the brake and opened her door, careful to not bang the shiny black paint job on the glorified Jeep. Garrett stood at the entrance of the brick and glass building and watched with amusement as she struggled to squeeze out of her car.

"Don't ding the Hummer," he called to her, grinning.

Diane smiled, but didn't reply. As she got closer, Garrett noticed the dark streaks on her face. His grin turned to a frown. "You okay?" he asked.

Diane nodded and brushed past him into the building, then directly to the ladies room. She cleaned up her makeup, combed her fingers through her thick hair, and smoothed the wrinkles in her dress. She gave her reflection an approving nod then pushed through the door and headed for her desk. Garrett fell in step behind her, carrying two coffee cups. Diane dropped her purse into a drawer then collapsed into her chair.

Garrett set the steaming cup of coffee on the desk in front of her. "Here. Thought you could use a little boost. No cream, no sugar, just the way you like it."

Diane smiled at him. "Thanks, Garrett."

Garrett watched and waited as she took a sip of the coffee. "So, I'm sure it's none of my business, but...can I...is there anything...are you okay?"

Diane nodded. "I'm fine, but thanks for asking."

Garrett pulled a chair up to her desk and sat down directly in front of her. "You can't get rid of me that easy. I'm just going to sit here until you open up that box full of trouble you carried in here and lay some of it on me."

Diane took another sip. "How long have I worked here?"

Garrett scratched his chin. "Let's see, about a year, I guess."

"In all the years I was married to Bradley, he never paid enough attention to know a simple little thing like how I take my coffee."

"He's a fool, Diane." Garrett took her hand and gave it a little squeeze. "I take it you stopped to see him this morning. That's why you had to come in late?"

Diane nodded. "I gave him the divorce papers. He didn't take it well."

"I wouldn't either, if I were losing something as terrific as you," Garrett said, still holding on to her hand.

"He's not worried about losing me. He's worried about losing his business. The divorce is just another headache he doesn't want to deal with right now." Diane took her hand back from Garrett and continued drinking her coffee. Garrett wasn't the first man in the office to wear his heart on his sleeve in her presence. She was flattered by all the attention she'd received lately, but Diane had a mission, and she wasn't about to be distracted by romance.

Garrett pushed his chair back and stood up. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "I'll leave you alone. If you feel like talking, you know where I am. Okay, kiddo?"

"Thanks, Garrett. You've been the greatest boss...friend I could ever ask for."

Garrett winked. "Get to work, missy. What do you think this is—marriage counseling 101?"

Diane laughed as she watched Garrett stroll back to his office and close himself in behind a wall of glass masked by rows of blinds. She pulled the stack of yesterday afternoon's mail from the basket on her desk and sorted through it. One bulky package slipped out of her hands and landed on the floor. She picked it up and tore it open. It contained a videotape labeled "Science Project." Diane searched the envelope for a note of explanation, but there was nothing else. It was not addressed to any specific editorial department—just general delivery to the *San Diego Union Tribune*. There was no return address, but the postmark indicated that it was mailed from San Diego. She regarded the tape curiously for a moment, then set it on her desk so she could finish going through her mail. If the conference room wasn't tied up, she'd use the VCR to view the tape later, after lunch, if she had time.

Saturday morning found Diane staring forlornly at the ugly black contraption sitting in the corner of her bedroom. The treadmill could be so boring. She peered out the window at the fog and decided it wasn't too thick to keep her away from Point Loma. Sunset Cliffs was a beautiful place to run, and this early in the morning, only a few pelicans and possibly one or two die-hard surfers would be around. She threw a bottle of water, her ankle weights, and a towel in her sports bag and climbed in her car.

She parked her Toyota in a secluded parking area away from the beaten path. Most of the surfers tried to get the spots as close to the water as possible so they wouldn't have to carry their boards too far in their bare feet. Diane didn't have to compete with anyone for the parking spot she chose. This was a favorite place for her to get away from the world. The trails ran along the coastal cliffs and the view of the Pacific could be breathtaking as soon as the fog burned off. She strapped the additional five pounds of weights on her ankles, stretched for a few seconds, then jogged down the path at a steady pace.

She felt good. She'd forced the memory of yesterday's confrontation with Bradley out of her mind. She had a whole new life in front of her—new challenges, new opportunities, new experiences. She felt a twinge of excitement as she thought of the possibilities, then smiled and picked up her pace. She was on her second wind in more ways than one.

Parts of the path were clear and the view to the ocean unobstructed, while other parts were surrounded by dense growth. Diane headed up a short rise, then around a sharp turn in the path that wove through a thick stand of trees. As she rounded a second turn, she spotted a tall man standing a short distance off the trail. She'd startled him and he spun around to see who was coming down the path. Diane stopped. She squinted at him, slightly irritated. She'd run along this trail many times and never before had she encountered another human being this early in the morning. This was her private world. How dare he invade her sanctuary? She never told anyone about this place—at least no one she could remember.

"Good morning," Diane said.

He didn't reply. His face was angry. Then Diane noticed the second person, a dark-skinned man in an expensive suit. He looked foreign, but Diane couldn't ascertain his nationality. She noticed the tall man's enraged expression. *How dare you be mad at me? This is my personal space. I didn't invite you here,* she thought to herself.

The foreigner looked over at his companion. "Is this going to be a problem?"

Diane's eyes moved to the open case sitting on the ground between the men. It was full of cash—bills stacked in thick bundles. Next to the case was an aluminum box with heavy-duty handles riveted on both sides. The box was closed tight and a piece of white tape with red markings was wrapped around it as a seal. Diane returned her stare to the tall man. She put the pieces together in her mind. This was some sort of private transaction—illegal enough to require a secluded meeting place—and dangerous to be a witness to.

"Afraid so," the taller man replied to his associate's question.

Diane listened to the words and tried to make sense of the scene. Her initial reaction was confusion. She shouldn't have felt fearful, but her intuition told her

to run. She turned and sprinted down the trail in the direction she'd come. The two men started after her. Diane ran as hard and fast as she could. She wanted to shed the ankle weights, but couldn't stop long enough to pull the Velcro straps off. She felt like she was trying to run through wet cement. She wasn't sure if it was the added weight or the knowledge of what she'd just witnessed that caused her heart to race. This section of trail had a lot of switchbacks, but Diane tried to run a straight line to shorten the distance between her and her car.

The foreigner gave up the chase when he snagged his silk jacket on a tree branch. The other man pursued Diane relentlessly. His long legs carried him easily through the brush. Diane glanced back once to see if they were gaining, and stumbled over an exposed tree root. She fell and cried out with pain as the rough ground ripped through the knees of her sweat pants. She yanked the Velcro strap on her right ankle as she sprung to her feet but missed the left one. She made three strides before he leapt through the air and tackled her to the ground.

Diane yelled, but no one was around to hear her screams. The foreigner arrived at the scene a few seconds later. The two men dragged Diane, kicking and screaming, across the trail toward the ocean. She'd managed to finish the job started by the tree branch and ripped the sleeve completely off the expensive silk jacket. She also landed a well-placed blow to the taller man's shin, but couldn't free herself from their grips.

The men dragged her to the edge of the cliff. Her eyes widened with terror when she realized her fate. The high cliffs dropped sharply to the rocky coast, at least a hundred feet below. The deafening sound of the waves pounding on the rocks drowned out Diane's screams of terror as she tumbled over the edge.