

Tough Love

By

Lynn Forest

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CHAPTER 1

Nick Bennett glanced at the wall clock in his small office. An hour later he was about to sign out for the day and embark on what was for him a remarkable event – three consecutive weeks off on vacation.

Since he had come to work five years ago at the regional rural hospital, he had never even been able to take a single week off. His contract had called for two weeks annually, but within six months of his hire, a budget cut back and a severe economic downturn in the coal mining region had taken its toll. The economic reality required the hospital to postpone hiring a replacement for the other staff social worker who had departed three months after Nick's arrival.

For five years, he has served as the hospital's only social worker. It was not as if the job paid so well that he never minded not having time off. He simply loved the work too much to walk away. Month after month, year after year, he had dealt with families of patients struggling to accept deaths of loved ones, or their impending deaths.

Some days it seemed as if he was coping with an endless stream of bickering families, or patients who had no family at all. Those were the greatest challenges that Nick faced, a patient needing to be released from the hospital, not ill enough to go to a nursing home, but needing some kind of support for a while.

Some of the most difficult situations of that type involved cases of alcohol and drug abuse. Over the course of time, such afflictions became Nick's specialty, and when the medical staff ran into a dicey situation of that nature, Nick was the person they went to. After finishing his master's degree three years before, he had been an active member of the coalition that was successful in establishing a group of three church sponsored homes for those with ongoing or past issues of substance abuse.

Now he sighed a sigh of relief as this monumental event neared. Five months earlier, the hospital had found its way to hire a second social worker, and upon the new staff member's completion of training, all of it done by Nick, the justifiably tired thirty-three-year-old was summoned to the office of the hospital administrator.

Nick had never expected to hear such an apology. The administrator had confessed that Nick's good nature and dedication had been taken advantage of over the course of the past years. Now it was time to waive normal policy that limited vacations to two consecutive weeks.

It was not lost on upper management that Nick could go to work at another hospital. He was not only dedicated and capable, his coworkers liked him, and he captained a staff basketball team that competed in a community league. He was the guy with ready advice and the spot-on analysis of tough personal and family situations.

As he finished some paperwork, Nick glanced once again at the clock. There were only thirty more minutes left before he would have three weeks to seclude himself from work and the summer heat in his modest but air-conditioned apartment and catch up on the tall stack of books and a list of movies that awaited him.

He needed the time off even more after the past three days. He had dealt with a family in conflict over stopping life support for their elderly father. There was the nettlesome attorney for

an ex-spouse demanding to be given confidential medical information of a patient. And he had spent several hours trying to locate any offspring of an old woman who was dying and who had given her children up for adoption sixty years before.

His quiet moment was interrupted by a rap on his door. He glanced up to see Belinda Cartwright leaning in, Belinda being one of the nursing supervisors on the general care floor. "Nick... I hope this is not an imposition under the circumstances, but I would like for you to come to our floor... I really want you to check in with a patient about to be released."

Nick nodded in his usual agreeable manner, and accompanied Belinda to the elevator as she explained the situation. "We have a thirty-one-year-old woman who was found passed out outside one of those dingy apartment buildings on the east side a couple of days ago.

"It took a couple of hours in the ER before she became lucid. We really don't have much on her, and she's not very inclined to share much with us. But all of the tests and observations tell us that she had been using a lot of alcohol over the previous day or two, and she tested positive for marijuana. And she denies it, but her nasal passages indicate that she has used coke at least once or twice.

"The doctor says that he really cannot declare that she's an addict to anything. But there's no medical reason to keep her any longer, and she's really evasive when we ask her where she could go." The elevator door opened, and right after they stepped out, Belinda stopped Nick.

"There's something else about her that I can't put my finger on. It's the way that she talks, and her general demeanor. When we asked her how she has supported herself, she just makes vague comments about doing 'this and that'.

"I guess you could say she has a sense of refinement to her. She's really quite a mystery to us." They walked on and Belinda knocked on the door of the private room and opened it slightly. "Teresa... I have someone with me... a man. Are you covered?" A soft voice replied, "Yes."

Belinda opened the door wider and they stepped inside. In the bed was a petite, pretty woman with dark brown hair, but it was obvious that life was exhausting her.

"Teresa... I want you to meet Nick Bennett. This is Teresa Walsh. Teresa, Nick's one of our social workers, and I'm going to leave for a few minutes while he talks to you... okay?"

The woman's features were as soft as her voice, and she nodded her consent, although she appeared to be reluctant. Belinda turned and nodded to Nick as she walked out of the room and he pulled a chair up next to the bed. He had immediately thought to himself that this woman was familiar to him for some reason.

"Teresa, I understand that you were not conscious when you came here. But right now, I really need to know if you have a home to go to from here."

The woman turned away slightly and shook her head. "Look... Nick... I'll be okay if they'll just let me out of here. Really, I can fend for myself." It was apparent that she did not have any form of a Carolina accent.

"Do you have family or friends nearby? Is there someone who can give you a place to live for a while?"

She turned back slowly to look at him, and then forced a meek smile. "My husband and I moved here from Indiana, so we socialized some with his friends and coworkers, and of course, some of the other teachers at my school. Our marriage broke up... I became somewhat of a pariah among the teachers. But I will be fine on my own. I have a modest income, so I can rent a new place of my own. So, please, Nick... I just want to leave."

Nick folded his hands in front of him and leaned closer. "We have a home here in town for women with substance abuse problems. I think that we could get you in there for this evening and you could probably stay there for a while. You need to be in counseling."

Teresa shook her head vehemently. "I can't go to someplace like that... I would feel..."

Nick leaned closer. "Teresa, please tell me. I want you to tell me what you would feel about going to someplace like that that bothers you."

Teresa took a deep breath and seemed to harden her demeanor. "If the hospital does not have legal authority to make me stay here any longer, I want to leave right now."

Nick took a deep breath and thought for a moment in silence. "Teresa, I don't want to see you go out on your own under the circumstances. But if you want to leave the hospital, it's your right, because from a medical standpoint your treatment is done. I just wish you would reconsider."

"I want to leave... and I want to leave now."

Nick nodded and pulled a business card from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. "Call this number if you want to talk to someone. I won't be here, but they will connect you to my colleague Jim Hyland. I guess all that I can say now is that you need to be careful. And please, do not spend too much time outside in this heat." He nodded to her, and had to fight an unusual urge to reach out and take her by the hand.

Just as he was about to walk out the door, Teresa's soft voice called out to him, "Nick, I want to thank you for your kindness. I can tell that you really do care. Thanks!"

He found himself suddenly reluctant to walk away, and that seeming familiarity about this woman was haunting him. All that he could manage was a quiet, "Call that number if you need us."

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As Nick drove home, the elation he had been feeling about his three weeks off had been clouded by his concern for Teresa Walsh. He was also nearly driven to distraction by wondering why she seemed so familiar. When he got back to his apartment he leaned back against the door and exhaled a deep breath. He was going to walk into his tiny, crowded kitchen and open a can of beer from the refrigerator. His vacation had finally begun.

He put a frozen dinner in the oven, opened his beer and stretched out on his sofa with one of the books that had been awaiting him. After dinner, he continued to read, had another beer, and fell asleep on the sofa.

He had not felt so relaxed in years, and he had slept the most soundly that he could remember in some time. He woke up on the sofa feeling stiff, stretched and went into his bedroom and undressed before hopping into the shower. He had just gotten dressed and finished a quick breakfast, then glanced at his watch to see that it was already 9:30 a.m. He felt a great sense of satisfaction, as he had purposely begun his vacation on a Thursday, eager to have the experience of being off the job while the rest of the world was at work.

He headed back toward the sofa, sat down and flicked on the television to catch up on the news. He had to turn the volume up slightly, because a heavy rain was falling, and even though he was on the first floor of the old brownstone apartment building, the rainfall was loud against his windows and door. That was when he heard his cell phone chime, and when he looked at the tiny screen and saw that it was Jim Hyland calling, he moaned at how quickly his vacation had been interrupted by a work-related call.

He answered and Jim began to give him an apology before explaining that he had been called to the police station, because a woman found inebriated on a street corner by an officer on routine patrol had handed the officer, in the station, a business card with Jim's name and phone

number. However, the woman was asking for Nick to be contacted. His coworker then went on to tell him that the woman's name was Teresa Walsh, and that the police were asking for Nick to come to the station.

He closed his eyes and shook his head and moaned loudly and dramatically for Jim's benefit. It took all of his resolve to not refuse to go there, but he took a deep breath and promised Jim that he would get to the station as soon as possible.

As Nick got in his small Honda and began to drive toward the police station, he was filled with a vexing combination of emotions: he was angry, very disappointed that his vacation had already been interrupted, but also extremely curious. He was still trying to place where he had met this woman, Teresa Walsh, as he pulled into the parking lot of the police station. He also could not deny that he felt a peculiar level of empathy, something that made this soft-spoken, seemingly refined and very pretty woman stand out from many of his other clients over the years.

He walked into the building and went to the front desk, showed his identification badge from the hospital, and gave the clerk the name of the officer who had called Jim Hyland. A minute later, a young uniformed officer opened the secured lobby door and invited Nick inside. They stepped into an interview room, and the officer began to speak, "This Teresa Walsh... I happened to see her on the corner of Rose and East. She seemed to be having problems standing, and when I walked up to her she had leaned up against the lamp post and was barely awake.

"The captain really didn't want to file charges against her for public intoxication, because she seems pretty harmless. More than anything, we're more worried about her than her harming anyone else. I really couldn't get much out of her, except that she started pleading for us to get in touch with you. She was really out of it, and she kept passing out. But we could make out something about feeling that you cared about her, and there was some reference made to listening to you talk. We couldn't understand any of that."

Nick shook his head. "That last part doesn't make any sense to me. I'm really kind of at my wits end with this."

The officer looked at him with a serious expression. "Is this something that maybe... I mean, can you take her somewhere?"

Nick shrugged. "Yesterday she turned down every suggestion I had. I don't know what else to do with her." He laughed softly, but not out of any feeling of humor. "She's pretty much a stranger to me, and it's not like I can take her to my place."

The officer leaned forward with an expectant expression. "But what about just for a few hours until she sobers up. I know that's asking a lot..."

Nick closed his eyes and shook his head. "Oh, my gosh... I need to make a call." He pulled out his phone and pressed a couple of buttons, and a moment later he was on the line with the hospital's director of human resources.

When Miranda Bolton answered, Nick slowly and reluctantly began to give her the rundown on what he was facing. The hospital executive listened carefully, then began to respond in measured words, "Nick, I don't think we have very many staff members in the whole organization who would even consider doing this. You need to understand, as softhearted a fellow as you may be, you're under no obligation to do this. She was discharged, so neither you nor the hospital have any obligation for this situation.

"I just don't want for you to be taken advantage of. But there is certainly nothing about this that violates any hospital policies or ethical standards. You have always been a straight arrow, so I don't have to go into the usual cautions and warnings that you may have been expecting to hear from me. She is not under the care of our facility, so I guess that at the bottom line, if you want to

go above and beyond and take in a guest for part of the day... or however long... that's totally your decision.

"In fact, Nick, since her relationship with the hospital was terminated when she was dismissed, as far as I'm concerned, she is just another private citizen that you have chosen to spend time with. If you want to you can run off with her to Las Vegas and get married. You have never given me any reason to not trust your judgment or your intentions. Good luck, Nick."

He turned off his phone, and then nodded to the relieved officer. "I'm almost afraid to ask this, but did she have anything with her... I mean like a backpack or anything that would have belongings... things like clothing?"

The officer shook his head slowly and frowned. "All that she has is a purse, and I swear, somehow she manages to keep a death grip on that thing even when she's unconscious."

Nick sighed deeply and leaned back in the chair and placed his hands over his eyes. "I assume you have a female officer somewhere in this building?"

The officer smiled and nodded. "What do you need?"

Nick shrugged and put his hands out wide, "I'm a bachelor. I need to have her clothing sizes, because I'm going to stop at the thrift shop and get her some stuff to wear."

About ten minutes later, as Nick sat alone in the interview room, a young blonde officer walked in and handed him a note with clothing sizes, as well as a small opaque plastic bag. She smiled and blushed as she put the bag on the table. "She's still a young woman... I donated a few female necessities out of my own locker, just in case." She placed her hand on Nick's shoulder and patted it. "I hope that if I ever find myself down and out, somebody like you comes along for me."

Nick felt his face turning warm as the attractive officer left the room, and immediately Teresa Walsh was unsteadily walked into the room and placed in the chair next to his. The young officer nodded and thanked Nick, "She's all yours."

Nick was alarmed to see that Teresa had apparently experienced some significant difficulties since he had seen her the previous afternoon. Of course, she was then in a hospital bed, wearing a standard patient gown, and covered by a sheet. Now as he saw her, she was wearing dirty and scuffed cut off denim shorts, a yellow T-shirt with the logo of some industry he had never heard of, and rubber sandals on her small feet. The brown hair that had obviously been brushed in the hospital, was now disheveled and chaotic.

What bothered him the most was that there were abrasions on both knees and her left elbow, and the hint of a bruise next to her left eye. Suddenly he felt much less put upon at the prospect of sheltering her, if not for more than just a few hours. "Teresa, I'm going to take you to my place for the rest of the day until we can figure out someplace for you to go tonight. I'm going to get you some things to wear on the way home, and then I'm going to get you something to eat. Okay?"

She nodded her head silently, as Nick wondered if she was about to go to sleep once again. He helped her up from the chair, picked up the list of clothing sizes and the bag, put his arm around her waist to steady her and walked her out to the car.

At six foot tall, he was eight inches taller, and it was somewhat awkward for him to walk that way with her. He carefully placed her in the passenger seat, and by the time he had walked around and got in the car himself, she was asleep once again. He sighed and shook his head, wondering what he had gotten himself into, then drove toward his apartment building knowing that the thrift shop would be right on their way.

Five minutes later, he pulled into what was the parking lot of a large church, a large house on the corner of the property having been converted into a place for people of modest means to



obtain everything from used or new donated shoes and clothing, to things needed for everyday grooming. He turned toward Teresa, then saw that she was asleep once again after having woken for a moment and uttered something unintelligible. He took a deep breath, feeling his face turning warm at the prospect of the type of shopping he was about to do, then got out of the car and walked into the building.

Once inside, he told the older woman who greeted him a very skeletonized version of the story. She smiled and took the list from him, asked him how extensive a collection he was wishing to purchase at the next-to-free prices, and began to walk Nick through the women's clothing room as he pushed a battered shopping cart that had obviously belonged to some long since departed grocery store.

After a few minutes, the cart, being pushed by the very uncomfortable Nick, contained two pairs of used but quite presentable jeans, two pairs of shorts, several pullover tops, two nightshirts a sweater and socks. Next, they added a pair of donated new tennis shoes, a pack of panties in assorted pastel colors and a plain terrycloth bathrobe, topped off by Nick making very awkward gestures of estimation when the woman asked him about possible bra sizes.

She took him to a cabinet where new, donated personal care items had been stored to be given away for free as needed. As Nick nodded with a red face, the woman put a box of tampons into a special bag, along with some shampoo, body wash, deodorant, a comb, and a hairbrush. From another shelf, she retrieved a plastic bag of basic makeup and lipstick. The last incidental thing was a packaged set of toothpaste and toothbrush. All that remained was the used, wheeled suitcase.

Relieved that the ordeal was over, Nick went back to his car, then grew alarmed as he approached and could see that Teresa was wiping tears from her face. He opened the back door and tossed the large bags onto the seat and quickly got inside. "Are you okay? Are you feeling sick?" Without realizing that he had done so, he had reached over and placed his hand on her back and was gently stroking it.

She took the handkerchief he offered her, shook her head, blew her nose and wiped her eyes. "I'm just sick of myself right now. I can't believe you are actually wanting to take me home. Why would you do that?"

Nick suddenly pulled his hand away. "I just didn't know where else to take you. You turned down the offer of the shelter." He felt his temper begin to boil, then put on his seatbelt without another word, started the car and drove toward his apartment as Teresa sat in silence at the scolding tone of his comment.

In five more minutes, they arrived at the aging apartment building that was just on the edge of one of the less desirable parts of the town of 30,000. Nick opened the back door and withdrew the bags, then walked around to her door and opened it. She did not seem at first to wish to even look at him, but she finally took his extended hand and allowed him to help her out of the car.

Since it was during the day, most of the occupants of the apartment building were absent, so they had been able to park right in front of his unit. By this time, she had become a little more stable, and was actually able to walk on her own as they went into the modest apartment.

Nick guided her to the only really comfortable chair, that being a recliner of good quality, but one he had purchased used. She sat down, and began to slowly look around at her surroundings. The living room was small, and the only other furniture of significance was a sofa that matched nothing else, and a brown coffee table holding some sports and current events magazines.

Nick placed the bags on the sofa and looked around. He had never before seriously pondered how he would accommodate a guest in the event of an overnight stay. There had been a

couple of times in which he had a female guest spend the night, but nothing had been planned. He had dated very occasionally, but was hardly the playboy type. He just considered himself an average guy who had been fortunate to spend a couple of nights with women he had found interesting and attractive.

He had been dedicated to his work for a long time, having worked as a child welfare caseworker before going to work for the hospital. His time for dating had been self-limited, even though he possessed a personality that women found quite intriguing, going along with his quite handsome face and the athletic build of the former small college basketball player he had been.

But all of his previous experiences, including his education and many years as a professional social worker had not prepared him for this. When he first agreed to take her home with him, he was assuming that he would spend the rest of the day making phone calls trying to find an alternative place for her to be. Now he was beginning to wonder if she was really in such a temporary condition or if she would need to be under someone's very watchful eyes.

Having placed the bags from the thrift shop on the sofa, he walked back toward the chair, and knelt on one knee next to her. "Feel like you can eat something?" Suddenly she had this look of horror on her face and her fingertips rushed to her lips while the other hand was clutched at her stomach. Without much time to think, Nick scooped the petite woman up in his arms and rushed her into the bathroom. As she knelt on the floor vomiting into the toilet bowl, he closed his eyes and looked away while pulling her hair back from her face until he heard the welcome sound of the flush.

Now Teresa moved from kneeling on the floor to sitting with her knees drawn up in front of her as she began to sob. Nick closed his eyes and shook his head and rubbed his fingertips against his temples, then sat down on the floor next to her. As soon as he had done so, the sobbing woman leaned against him and placed her head on his chest as she soaked his shirt with tears.

He haltingly placed his arm around her shoulders, and then suddenly he heard an almost inhuman sound come from inside of her and she was once again kneeling in front of the toilet and vomiting. This time she simply stayed in that position, resting her head on her arm that was draped across the toilet seat. In yet another of many awkward moments for the day, Nick placed his hand on her upper back and began to softly stroke her to help her calm down.

It took a couple of minutes before she finally leaned back, then turned slowly to face him with an expression of total humiliation. "Nick, I don't know how to adequately say I'm sorry for all this. Nobody should have to put up with this."

There was something about her expression, the nearly puppy dog look in her eyes that softened any remaining irritation he felt toward her. "I've done this before. You should have known the guy who was my roommate in college."

She smiled and laughed softly, then once again leaned on his shoulder, this time putting her arms around his neck and giving him a hug. "Now, I'm finally hungry."