

DOUBLE DIPPED by Terry Korth Fischer

EXCERPT

Retta looked beyond the gaily painted house to the next in the row. Gram's.

She gasped. Then she couldn't catch her breath. "D... D... Dean," she stammered.

He hunched his shoulders. At the Taft bungalow, he pulled to the curb, put the truck in park, and shut it down. Retta heard lake noises through the open windows: an outboard motor sputtering, hawk crying, breeze rustling the leaves on the trees.

"I'm sorry, Retta. I didn't know how to tell you."

The cottage where she'd spent her happy, carefree summers sat surrounded by knee-high weeds. Paint peeled on the façade; the window boxes were filled with spiderwebs. A trash pile sat on the porch, and the wooden swing hung from a single chain, twisting slowly in the breeze. The flower bed Gram had loved was dead. The mulberry bushes, untended, reached above the eaves. Retta gazed at the dilapidated bungalow, and the FOR SALE sign leaning against the door.

As she took it all in, her mind flooded with memories. Where were the birdhouses they'd hung in the trees?

Her voice cracked. "How did this happen?"

"I'm so sorry."

"I was twenty when Gram sold it, in my sophomore year at college. I remember crying when I heard but I never dreamed ..." She opened the truck door and slid out. "How did it get into this condition?"

"When the Tafts didn't step forward to buy it, Magruder did."

"Were you still living next door?"

His eyes were sad when he reached for her hand. "For a while."

She stepped away. Dean followed her up the stone walkway. "I guess Magruder thought he'd make a killing by scooping up a lakefront home and turning it into a summer rental." He spread his arms, indicating the yard, cottage, and empty flower beds. "When rental property is ignored, it runs

down quickly.” He kicked at a weed tuft. “He neglected it, collected what money he could, then finally abandoned it.”

At the porch steps she stopped, put her hands on her hips, and asked, “Who is this guy? I don’t remember a Magruder family.”

“I don’t know. One day he isn’t here and the next he’s muscling up to anyone who can help him work his land grabs. He’s throwing money around, buying property.”

“You make him sound like a gangster.”

“More like a loan shark.”

She eyed the sign. “No one thought to reclaim the house when he put it up for sale? Not my aunt? Cousins? Another family member?”

“I think your aunt was already ill. Your cousins were off at school as you were.”

She turned toward the lake. A modern ranch style home blocked her view. “Even if Gram’s wasn’t run down, who would want it? It’s no longer on the water. It’s a block from the lake, and that’s if you cut through private property and use someone else’s launch. The public beach is a mile down if you follow the shore.”

“It’s still a lake house. It needs a little love.”

They both looked at the Zwack cottage. It had been identical to the Taft home with soft colors, hanging baskets filled with vibrant colored flowers and large windows where the lake breezes blew the curtains through the windows.

Now, a calypso-pink cottage with wind chimes clanking in the gentle wind. A dozen beach towels flapped on the clothesline, marking the boundary between the two properties. Happy children voices escaped through an open window. Someone was frying bacon.

Dean let out his breath. “Magruder learned his lesson before he stole our home.”

Retta wanted to ask what had happened, but before she could, a boy, aged ten or eleven, rushed through the bright pink cottage door. He let the screen door slam behind him, grabbed a towel, and headed across the street to the footpath to the lake, leaving the remaining towels bobbing on the line. Two others, about the same age and size, followed in his wake. Then a very pregnant mama waddled out the door, waved a cheery hello, and crossed the road trailing the kids at her own pace.

“Maybe I could talk to Magruder about rent-to-own?” Retta said.

“He’s not known to make deals, so he’d likely ask an exorbitant price you couldn’t afford.”

“Maybe another Taft?”

Obviously, sheer foolishness. If they'd wanted it, it would have been theirs long ago. At thirty-two, she had an opportunity to reclaim the dwelling key to her childhood happiness. Besides, she needed a place to stay for the summer and Moon Lake Motel wasn't the right choice.

But this broken, lonely cottage that held all her childhood memories would be perfect.

She stepped onto the porch and peered through a dirty window. When she turned back, she saw Dean wandering across the barren yard. He disappeared around the house. She found him seated on the back stoop, elbows on knees, chin resting on his fists, staring at his old home with a faraway look in his eyes.

“I plan to spend the summer in Moon Lake. I'll have time to fix up the place.”

“It would mean doing business with a heartless man.”

“Magruder?”

He shook his head. “Not a happy thought. Give him a call. But I wouldn't mention Taft if I were you.”

“I'm a Curt, former Taft,” she countered. “Do you suppose anything works inside?”

“Hard to tell. Go ahead, see what Magruder says. Use my phone”—he held it out— “I have him on speed dial.”