

Chapter One

It was early Saturday morning and something was scratching against my bedroom window. *Scritch. Scritchy-scratch.* I knew that sound. It was the branches of the maple tree. They tapped on my window when the wind blew. It was too early to get up, so I ignored the scratching. I was almost asleep again when the maple tree spoke, "Callie Powers. Wake up."

Never in the twelve years that I'd slept in this bedroom, never in my whole life had the maple tree talked. It often reached over and tapped on my window, but I had never heard it talk. Not until now.

I slipped out of bed and went to the window to take a closer look.

Mom was perched on a branch of the tree, right outside my window. I blinked and looked again. Mom waved. I blinked once more and rubbed my eyes. She was still there. The June sun was already up, and I could see her clearly as she reached out to poke at my window with the bristly end of a broom.

"Dream," I said to myself and turned around to go back to bed. "This has got to be a dream."

"Callie, come here," called Mom, and she rapped hard against the windowpane with the stick end of the broom. "Right now!"

That was not a voice Mom uses in my dreams. It was the voice she uses when she wants something

done immediately. I was not dreaming. Neither was Mom. But she was sitting in a tree, and even for my mother that's unusual.

"What are you doing?" I asked, sliding the window open and yawning at the same time. "Why are you in the tree? Why is that chain around your ankle?"

"I need your help, Callie. Go downstairs. Beside the phone is a list of places I want you to call."

"Before breakfast?"

"Before anything. Start phoning."

"But it's too early. No one will be up yet."

"You'll be calling offices. Newspapers. TV stations. They'll have answering machines or voice mail. Read what I wrote for you to say—every word, Callie—and make sure you give our address."

"But Mom, you promised to take me shopping for jeans this morning."

"Your new jeans will have to wait. This is important."

“But, Mom...,” I began again.

“Just do it, Calendula.”

She was using her “or else” tone of voice. She also used my full name, another danger sign. The last time I argued with her when she was in that kind of mood, I found myself grounded for a week.

I didn’t even brush my teeth or grab a glass of juice before I began phoning. The first call was the hardest because I got a real newspaper reporter, not the answering machine I had hoped for.

“*Westside Tribune*, Peter speaking.”

“Hello, my name is Callie Powers and my mom is up a tree.”

“Don’t you mean your cat is up a tree, kid?”

“No, my mom.”

“Try the fire department. They’re good at getting cats out of trees. Maybe they also rescue mothers.”

“You don’t understand,” I said. “I’ll read what Mom wrote down.”

“Okay, I’ve got a minute. Go for it.”

I read, “I, Dianthus Powers...”

“Dianthus? What kind of name is ‘Dianthus’?”

“It’s a flower, like a small carnation. Why don’t you just call her Dian? Everyone does.”

“Dianthus is fine. How do you spell it?”

I spelled it for him, then went on reading Mom’s press release. “I, Dianthus Powers, have chained myself to my neighbor’s maple tree and will stay here until he agrees to leave it standing. I will be holding a press conference at the tree at ten o’clock this morning. Please attend.”

“Your Mom wrote that?”

“Of course she did,” I snapped. “I’m not up the tree, am I?”

“She sounds like an interesting lady,” he said.

“That’s not exactly the word I’d use to describe Mom.”

He chuckled. “I know what you mean.”

“How could you? Do you know my mom?”

“No. But...”

“Look, I’ve got a lot of calls to make. Are you coming to the press conference or not?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. But what do you think about what your mom is doing, kid?”

“Think? I think this is the strangest thing she’s ever done, and she’s done some really weird stuff. And don’t call me ‘kid,’ please. I’m twelve.”

He laughed. “I look forward to meeting you—and your mom,” he said. “I’ll be there. Count on it.”

I put a check mark on Mom’s list beside the name of his paper, *Westside Tribune*. “Okay,” I said. “Here’s our address.”

“See you soon,” he said and hung up.

Twenty calls later, I put down the phone, grabbed some juice and went upstairs to talk to Mom. She had disappeared, but I knew she was still there. The long chain that was locked around a branch snaked into the door of the tree house.

I pushed the window open as far as it would go.

“Mom? I called everyone on the list. I’m going to get breakfast now.”

The chain rattled, then the broom popped through the door, followed by Mom’s head. She had bits of cobwebs and maple leaves stuck in her hair and a smudge of dust on her cheek. It must be cramped for her in there, I thought. It was a great tree house with glass windows and a real door, but it wasn’t very big. Even I could barely stand up in it anymore. It was dirty too, because I hadn’t kicked out the spiders since last summer.

“Good idea,” Mom said. “I’ll have tea and toast.”

“You want breakfast too?”

“I’m protesting, Calendula. I am not on a hunger strike,” she said, tossing the wicker basket at me. It slid along a wire stretched between the tree and a hook above my window. Mom had put the wire up a long time ago. She’d sent me a lot of

peanut butter sandwiches and lemonade in that basket over the years.

“Make me a thermos of tea, Callie. Put blackberry jelly, the calorie-reduced stuff, on my toast. Four slices, please.”

Mom pulled her head back into the tree house and I heard the broom swishing away, the end of it banging on the ceiling. Except for the noise and the chain sticking out of the door, you’d never have known she was tucked away in my tree house. Not unless you were the one who had to bring her breakfast. And lunch too, I thought. And dinner.

She had promised to take me shopping today, I thought. She had promised! I should be heading to the mall, not to the kitchen. When was I supposed to find time to do my homework if I had to do all this cooking and phoning?

I sighed and reached for the basket. Maybe

Mom would come down by lunchtime, I thought. Maybe.

How long did she plan on protesting, anyway? How long was my mother going to live in a tree?

Chapter Two

While I made Mom's toast and filled the kettle, things started to make sense. Not that anything Mom did made much sense. That's one of the reasons she and Dad split up. Mom says that Dad didn't understand her creative nature. She also says that Dad is a boor who'd rather watch pro wrestling than read a book. I don't remember

much about the divorce, and I don't remember Dad ever watching wrestling. He does watch football and hockey. Sometimes I really miss him. Watching a hockey game with Mom isn't the same. She doesn't know the names of the players or the teams or anything.

I figured that Mom was in the tree because of the fight she'd had with Harold Wilson the night before. He's our next-door neighbor, and the maple tree grows on his side of the fence. His family bought the house next door years ago, about the same time my grandparents moved into this house.

I had been on my way to the kitchen to make popcorn when I heard their voices in the living room. Both Mom and Mr. Wilson sounded upset. I forgot about the popcorn and stayed in the hall to listen.

"It's time that tree went, Dian," he told her. "The