Who Knew a Food Fight Could Lead to More?

She threw two more eggs at him, but they flew by him and landed on the floor. "Stay back!"

"You're having fun."

"I am not!" she fibbed.

"I see a smile forming on your lips. You like getting messy."

"Are you crazy? I have to clean myself and the kitchen up."

"I told you I have the kitchen covered. And I'll be happy to take care of you too."

She knew she couldn't hold onto the sprayer once he grabbed it. He was too strong for her. She shrieked as he sprayed water all over her.

He stopped and stared at her. "Aren't you going to run out of the kitchen?"

She hesitated. If she did that, she would get the living room messy.

As if he could read her mind, he asked, "Can I do anything I want to you in this kitchen because you refuse to get the rest of the cabin dirty?"

She struggled to make her wet feet move but her mind refused to go. She was covered in wet flour. It felt like paste. How could she leave a trail of this awful stuff on the floor so she could get to the shower?

"I'm getting closer," he warned her, stepping towards her.

She anxiously looked at the doorway. She turned to the eggs and threw one at his chest. Before she could throw another one at him, he took her in his arms and kissed her.

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With This Ring, I Thee Dread

# With This Ring, I Thee Dread

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Ruth Ann Nordin's Books
Springfield, Nebraska

This is a work of fiction. The events and characters described herein are imaginary and are not intended to refer to specific places or living persons. The opinions expressed in this manuscript are solely the opinions of the author and do not represent the opinions or thoughts of the publisher.

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Dedicated to Lynda Noel Feng, a beautiful friend with a generous heart. I thank God for you.

Romantic Historical Comedies by Ruth Ann Nordin

*An Unlikely Place for Love* (nominated for the 15th Annual EVVY Award)

*The Cold Wife*

*An Inconvenient Marriage*

A complete list of her books and samples of upcoming books may be found on http://www.ruthannnordin.com.

# Chapter One



Ryan Jackson and Jacob Hackman finished giving their presentation to the two Intensity cologne executives. Ryan thought it went well, but now it was up to the executives to determine whether to accept or reject the commercial idea.

The blinds were drawn over the large three windows of the room, but Ryan took a moment to peek through them to see the hustle and bustle of downtown Omaha, Nebraska. The February sun melted the snow into piles of slush as cars drove on the streets. He took a deep breath to calm his racing heart before turning his attention back to the executives.

His dark brown hair was neatly trimmed. His face was clean shaven, and his dark blue eyes matched his dark suit. His six foot frame was slender and well-toned. However, despite the fact that he looked his best, he felt uneasy because one of the

executives from Intensity was a woman. The man would be impressed with the facts and figures of the presentation, but what would the woman think?

The man said, "In your presentation, you outlined the dance number you want to use. It is apparent that the men in the commercial are actively leading the dance. Is there a reason for this?"

Ryan nodded. "Our research shows that men like to pursue women. They like a challenge, so they lead the dance. Though the women are coy, they let the men win. So this speaks to the man's urge to be dominant in a relationship."

"We are not saying that women aren't equal to men," Jacob quickly added. His dark face revealed a warm smile. "But there are differences that exist between men and women."

"What appeal does this commercial have for women?" the female executive asked. "Why should a woman buy this for her boyfriend or husband?"

Jacob spoke up. "That is why we have the dancers wear formal clothes. Women are romantic. They love to dress up and go dancing. I also think that women want to be pursued, though not aggressively. The way the men approach them in the commercial is not demanding and the women are treated with respect."

She nodded, obviously content with the answer.

Ryan silently thanked Jacob for his quick thinking. Jacob was ten years older than him and was happily married with three kids. *If anyone knows how to handle women, it's a married man.*

The male and female executives quietly consulted each other while Jacob helped Ryan take down the charts for their presentation. Ryan's father, who was the president of Jackson Advertising Firm, sat farther down the table. He offered Ryan an encouraging smile.

Finally, the woman spoke up. "We will take the account.

Only, let's leave out the narration at the very end."

Ryan's father stood up and shook their hands. "Thank you. We will be in touch with you as we film the commercial. We should begin our first shoot next week."

The male executive smiled. "We're looking forward to it."

After they left, Jacob breathed a sigh of relief. "Did you see the look on her face when you were talking about men's need to pursue women? I thought we lost the account."

Ryan sighed. "Are women repulsed by being pursued?"

"No but they don't want to be sex objects. They want to be treated like human beings."

"You did a fine job," his father said. "In fact, I need to talk to you alone when you finish putting your things away."

After his father left the room, Ryan turned to Jacob. "Do you think the only reason I have this job is because of my dad?"

Jacob shook his head. "No. You are creative."

"Yes but you know how to handle the women clients better than I do."

"It comes with the territory. I ask my wife for her opinion on a lot of things and she's not afraid to tell me the truth, whether it's good or bad."

He supposed that did give Jacob the advantage. Who would understand women better than a married man? "Perhaps you should be the vice president."

Jacob crossed his arms and smiled at him. "How can you be so confident when you're in front of a group of people?"

He shrugged. "I guess it comes from years of pretending to be something I'm not. I have to act like I enjoy talking to clients I can't stand."

"We can't like every client who walks through the door."

"I'm relieved to know I'm not the only one who has difficulty with some of the clients."

"Do you also hate going to the business parties?"

"If I had someone to talk to, they would be doable. But you know I have a hard time with women."

"You have a hard time with them because you don't let them see the real you."

"If I did that, they wouldn't like what they saw. I'm boring. Why else would Carmen leave me for another man?"

"Carmen was a model. She had no substance. You need a woman who can maintain a conversation for longer than five minutes. Relationships aren't all about sex. The best thing you can do is stop and wait for the right woman."

"That's not going to be a problem since I've never had sex."

"That's great, Ryan. It's good that you're not using women."

"I don't want anyone to know though, Jacob. I don't want people to think I'm weird because I'm a twenty-nine year old virgin."

"Your secret is safe with me."

His father's secretary knocked on the open door. "Can I take the computer back to the media room now?"

Jacob nodded. "We're done." He turned to Ryan. "Don't forget to see your dad. I'm sure he'll want to congratulate you on a job well done."

"Thanks to you," he added.

Ryan went to his father's office and knocked on the closed door.

"Come on in, Ryan," his father called out.

He opened the door and saw that his father was typing something into his computer. Rowan Jackson was a slender man with salt and pepper hair and a big smile.

"Close the door," Rowan said.

Ryan complied and sat in one of the crimson chairs in front of the large oak desk. Pictures of him, his mother and his

father decorated the top of his desk, and several plaques and certificates and degrees hung on his walls. He had accomplished many things in his sixty years, and he was proud to show it.

"You and Jacob make a good team," Rowan stated. "I hate to break you two up but you have earned your spot as vice president. I know you spent many hours on the Intensity account."

"And I would have lost it had Jacob not stepped in to save the day."

"You've always been modest."

"Dad, I'm not ready for this position and we both know it. I do a good job, but I only excel because I have Jacob's help. Can't you make him vice president instead?"

"But you'll take over this company one day since you're my son. Don't you want to do that?"

"Yes. I enjoy working here, but I'm not in touch with the female clientele."

"That will come with time. I'm sure Jacob can give you some pointers to consider on that count, though a wife would be a bigger help. You should consider getting married. You'll be thirty soon."

He didn't care for the reminder. His father was anxious to get him married off. Part of it was to see his son find a suitable companion but another part was for him to get some grandchildren. Ryan used to think that women were the only ones who felt pressured into marriage.

"Are you dating anyone?" his father asked him.

"No."

His father looked thoughtful. "There is that party the Hendersons of the Henderson Hotel chain are hosting. Our firm and the Valentine Professional Decor Firm will be attending it. It will be held at the Henderson Hotel right here in Omaha. The Hendersons are interested in having us advertise for their hotel."

"Why are the Valentines going to be there?" He was familiar with the Valentine family since his parents were best friends with Harold and Lillian Valentine. Unfortunately, that meant he had to bump into Elizabeth Valentine, their twenty-seven year old daughter.

"Barry Henderson wants the Valentines to redecorate the interior look of his hotels."

"Will there be a lot of people at this party?"

"Yes."

He breathed a sigh of relief. He might not run into Elizabeth at the event.

His father shook his head. "I don't know why you insist on hating Elizabeth Valentine. She is actually a sweet woman."

He rolled his eyes. *She's as sweet as a bulldog.*

"Anyway, if you don't have a date, I was wondering if you would take her," his father continued.

"No! I already have a date," he lied. Anyone but her would work out. He would have Zack Richards fix him up with one of his girlfriend's friends.

"I guess Elizabeth will be showing up without a date again. I don't understand why she can't find a man ever since Preston Edwards broke up with her for Carmen Burton."

"Because she's clearly anti-male."

"She's not anti-male. She's just been hurt. She needs someone to come along and show her that men aren't as bad as she fears."

*Good luck to the man who has that kind of courage. She won't be likely to leave him with his balls intact.*

His father cleared his throat. "At any rate, I want you to seriously consider settling down. Marriage is a good thing for a man. I've been married to your mother for thirty-five years and would do it all over again."

"I understand," he finally said.

"The Henderson party will be Friday at six. Don't be late," his father said. "You'll want to make a good impression since you'll put on vice president once Victor Tyrone retires next year."

"Don't I always show up on time?"

"You do. But don't stop."

He smiled. "I won't."

"Okay. There's a sexual harassment seminar tomorrow morning. All the employees have to be there."

"I got the memo."

He chuckled. "Just wait until you see who's giving the seminar."

"Who?"

"The new occupational psychologist at the Valentine Professional Decor Firm."

"Who's that?"

"You'll see."

He didn't share his father's enthusiasm for secrecy but decided not to press the issue. Instead, he left the office and went to lunch with Jacob.

# Chapter Two



The next morning, Ryan groaned with dread when he realized Elizabeth was giving the sexual harassment seminar. The room was filled with a couple hundred employees who grumbled and yawned. Ryan sat in a chair at a table next to his childhood friends, blond-haired Zack Richards and redheaded Ben Fisher. Jacob sat on the other side of him.

Elizabeth didn't look intimidating to people just by looking at her. She was a slender 5'4" auburn haired pretty woman who appeared as if she was still twenty-two. She had big blue eyes, a button nose and thin pink lips. Her complexion was fair and her figure was nice. Anyone who looked at her for the first time would think she was a sweet and quiet woman, but Ryan knew better.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen," she greeted the

tired crowd.

She wore her shoulder-length hair back into a tight bun, and her gray pantsuit was baggy enough to hide the figure he knew was there. She wore her black square framed glasses which slid down her nose. She handed out a stack of papers, and he rolled his eyes when he saw that each person got twenty pages of sexual harassment notes that were neatly stapled together. *What a waste of paper. I bet this stuff can be condensed to one piece of paper.*

"What did she do? Spend her whole night writing a book?" Zack shook his head. "This is going to be a major snooze fest."

"Give her a break," Jacob told him. "She just started her job. She's enthusiastic."

Ben yawned. "And extremely thorough."

Ryan had to agree with Zack and Ben on this one.

At the front of the room, she spoke. "My name is Ms. Valentine, and I'll be your instructor for this one hour seminar. Please look at the second page of your sexual harassment packet."

He reluctantly flipped to it. Zack and Ben had already turned their attention to scribbling their own notes on the paper.

"The first thing I want to point out is the definition of sexual harassment," she said.

As she talked, his mind wandered to what he would be doing that evening. Most likely, he would go home to his spacious one bedroom apartment and work on a possible advertisement for the Henderson Hotel chain. He liked to get a head start on his upcoming projects. Since Barry Henderson was leaning toward an old-fashioned atmosphere to his hotels, Ryan considered that the commercial for the Henderson Hotels should have an older song playing in the background. Either a sepia or black and white video for the commercial would give it an old-fashioned feel too.

Zack nudged his elbow. He glanced over and saw what

Zack and Ben had come up with so far in their attempts to make fun of the seminar. Ben had written, "harass = her ass." He forced himself to smile. He didn't really think it was funny. In fact, it was downright childish.

"On page seven," Elizabeth continued, "are a couple examples of sexual harassment."

He blinked, not realizing she had gotten that far into the presentation already. He quickly flipped to page seven.

"I think Darlene looks hot," Ben whispered to him and Zack. "She's been smiling at me for the past week. I should ask her out."

"She's on the rebound from a serious relationship," Zack replied. "She'll probably do it with anyone."

"She's vulnerable right now," Jacob hissed. "Do you really think it's a wise idea to treat her like that?"

"Look at the skirt she's wearing. She's practically asking for it."

Despite Ryan's better judgment, he glanced over at the pretty blond and saw that her skirt reached her mid-thighs when she sat down. It was hard not to be attracted to her long legs.

As if she could read his mind, Elizabeth said, "I am tired of watching women dress inappropriately at work. From this moment on, the women in the room should dress modestly. Men are visual by nature, so it is the woman's responsibility to dress in such a way that will not draw the wrong kind of attention to her."

"Which explains why she looks so frumpy," Ben whispered.

"She's just upset because she'll never look as good as Darlene," Zack agreed.

Elizabeth stopped talking and walked over to their table which was in the middle of the room. "Do you have something you wish to share with everyone?" she asked Ben and Zack.

*Here it comes.* Ryan was relieved she didn't pick him out.

"We just want to thank you for your fine example on how to turn men off," Ben replied.

Most of the people in the room chuckled. Ryan was among them.

She crossed her arms. "That is an example of sexual harassment, Mr. Fisher."

"No, it's not. I'm complimenting you on your ability to get my attention as far away from sex as possible."

"Meanwhile, I can see that you and Mr. Richards are staring at Miss Giles' legs. This brings me to my point, ladies and gentlemen." She turned to Darlene. "Do you really think such apparel is appropriate for work?"

"There's nothing wrong with my skirt," Darlene argued.

"Not if you want someone to view you as a sex object."

"What's wrong with being attractive?"

"There is a time and a place to be attractive. The work place is not it."

"I disagree," Ben said. "Women should look their best when they can. Just because you don't share the same good looks as Darlene, it doesn't give you the right to criticize her."

"I saw the way you looked at her. You have one thing on your mind and it has nothing to do with respect." She turned back to Darlene and kept her voice low so the rest of the people, except for Ryan and those around him, could hear her. "I've known Ben and Zack for years, and they were notorious for their sexual escapades in college. They used to tally up who could have sex with the most women by the end of each semester, and from the way they are acting this morning, it doesn't seem like they've changed at all. Unless you want one of these men to have a one night stand with you, you shouldn't be wearing that skirt. And it would help if you buttoned your blouse. There's no need to show off so much cleavage." She shook her head and went back to the front of the room. "Sexual harassment isn't funny," she told the

entire group. "People can get hurt by it."

Darlene frowned and quickly buttoned her shirt. She shot Ben and Zack a dirty look.

"Leave it to Elizabeth-won't-let-you-get-any-Valentine to ruin things," Ben muttered.

*There's no way I would ever tell them I'm a virgin.* Ryan couldn't handle their harassment, but he had to admire Elizabeth for standing her ground.

Elizabeth made them watch a cheesy video that was mostly humorous since the actors couldn't act at all, but the subject matter was supposed to be serious so everyone managed to hold in their giggles.

"Sexual harassment is a two-way street," she said once the ten minute video ended. "It isn't popular to talk about but men do face pressure at work that they don't need to. Harassment can come from a number of avenues. There may be some men who don't engage in sexual activity but feel pressured from their co-workers to lie about it. This is a form of sexual harassment."

Ryan felt his cheeks grow warm.

Zack nudged him again. "She is so out of touch with reality. Doesn't she realize that there are no more male virgins our age?"

"She's living in a dream world alright," Ryan quickly replied.

Jacob raised an eyebrow at him.

He shrugged.

To his credit, Jacob kept quiet.

*Why do I hang out with Zack and Ben? The older we get, the less we have in common.* Ryan glanced at his watch. When was the seminar going to end?

"Sexual harassment isn't confined to speech," Elizabeth continued. "It can be a look, a touch, or an image. For example, if someone has a swimsuit model on their screen saver at work,

someone might find that offensive."

Zack raised his hand.

She sighed but politely asked what he wanted.

"I think it's unfair that you're singling out men as being the ones instigating these objectionable behaviors," he said.

"Please explain how you conclude that."

"Your example is of someone putting a swimsuit model on the screen saver."

She stared at him, not blinking. "And?"

He rolled his eyes. "Do I have to spell it out for you?"

"Apparently, you do."

"Come on. Who but a man would put a swimsuit model on the screen saver?"

"Did I say whether the model was a man or a woman?"

He paused.

"Aren't women capable of putting a male swimsuit model on their screen savers?" she asked.

Jacob grinned but quickly hid his smile by covering his mouth with his hand.

Realizing that Zack wasn't going to respond, she picked up where she left off in her speech.

"Burn, baby, burn," Ben whispered to Zack. "She got you good with that one."

"Shut up!" he hissed. "I can't stand her. Ryan, what did you ever see in her?"

Ryan didn't hide his disgust. "I was stupid back then. Leave me out of this."

"You went out with her?" Jacob wondered.

"No."

"Then what was Ben talking about?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing." He turned his attention to page fifteen and pretended to be acutely interested in it.

Jacob understood and turned back to the seminar.

Ryan breathed a sigh of relief. He couldn't wait for the seminar to end so he could go home and forget this day ever happened.

# Chapter Three



Elizabeth Valentine returned to her new office at Valentine Professional Decor Firm just in time for lunch. Her office had a view overlooking the city, and it was decorated with her honor awards and undergraduate and graduate diplomas. She also had a bookshelf full of psychology texts.

She tried not to let her encounter with Zack and Ben upset her but they always found a way to get under her skin. She was relieved to be done with the seminar so she could go back to her life and forget about them. They constantly ridiculed her, and she had hoped that once they graduated from college, they would grow up but that was hoping for too much. They were still adolescent creeps.

"Are you ready for lunch?"

She relaxed as her friend, Lucinda Lopez, entered the

office. "Hi." She smiled. "Let me get my purse and I'll be with you."

"How did the seminar go?"

"I had to write Zack Richards and Ben Fisher up for the way they were looking at a co-worker. I can't believe they had the nerve to sexually harass her while I was right there. Sexual harassment was going on right in front of me while I was giving a speech on it!"

"It's good that you didn't let them get away with it. You taught them an important lesson."

"Like it'll do any good. They're as bad as they were when I went to high school with them. I'm just glad I don't have to deal with them anymore."

She bit her lower lip. "You might run into them during the Henderson account."

"What?"

"Jackson Advertising is going to do the advertising for Barry Henderson while we work on the decor."

Elizabeth groaned. "Of course, we'll be forced to go to meetings together."

"Right. Though your part will be limited since you're not an interior designer."

"That helps."

She had hoped when she entered the real world that she would be able to put her school days behind her, but it didn't seem to be working out that way. She shrugged. If there wasn't anything she could do about something, there was no need to dwell on it.

"How do you like being the occupational psychologist?" Lucinda asked.

"So far, so good. I am eager to add video cameras to the daycare center. I need to conduct informal interviews on what else I can do to make this place a better work environment."

"I'm looking forward to seeing my little girls on the monitors while I work. I like knowing what they're doing during the day."

"How is the divorce coming along?"

"It's rough but I'm hanging in there. I got custody and Nick gets to see them two weekends a month. It's not what I planned when I got married but I can only handle so much arguing."

"So the marriage counseling isn't working?" She liked both Lucinda and Nick and was sorry to hear they had separated.

"He won't even go. He says it's a waste of time because the counselor blames him for everything. That's not the case but he seems to think it is."

"Wow. It's almost scary to get married this day in age when there are so many divorces."

"But it's probably good for marriage counselors and lawyers."

"Yes but the counselors are trying to help keep the marriages together. Do you want to stay married to him?"

She shrugged. "One day I do and the next day I don't. It's very hard. I know the kids are hurting. We're doing everything we can to make it easier for them, but it's not easy to tell them that he's not going to be home that night when they want to have dinner with him."

Elizabeth sighed. "I'm sorry. Maybe you should see another marriage counselor. I wish I could help, but I'd only make things worse. There's nothing I can do but listen."

"I know, but you've been a big help through this."

It was hard for Elizabeth to want to get married when she watched things like this happen. She had been Lucinda's maid of honor at her wedding five years ago, and she really liked Nick. She thought they made a good match. *What happened to make them fight all the time?*

"Where do you want to eat?" Lucinda asked, interrupting her thoughts.

Realizing her friend wished to change the topic, she said, "Hmm...Let's go to Mario's. I want a big plate of spaghetti and meatballs."

***

The next morning at work, Elizabeth was surprised to see her father. He shut the door behind him once he entered the room.

She sat up in her chair, her excel spreadsheet forgotten, wondering what put him in a serious mood.

"Beth, I heard about the sexual harassment seminar. I think you singled out Zack Richards and Ben Fisher yesterday for a specific reason. Granted, it's true that they aren't the best example of what it means to be a man, but I don't think singling them out in front of a room full of people was a wise idea. I know your past with them has been less than ideal, but in the future, it would be best to talk to them alone. Writing them up was appropriate but public humiliation is rarely a good tactic."

"I can't believe you're taking their side."

"I'm not. I would say this regardless of who you did this to." He paused. "Do you think all men are like them?"

"No. Why did you ask such a silly question?"

"Because you haven't dated anyone since Preston."

"I've had a couple of dates."

He considered her reply. "True." He nodded in acknowledgment. "But you haven't had a serious relationship since him."

She groaned. "So I haven't met the right man yet. Is that a crime?"

Instead of answering her, he asked, "Have I been a

horrible husband to your mother?"

"Of course not. You've always treated Mom with respect and love."

"Then why are you sour when it comes to marriage?"

She rolled her eyes. Did they have to go through this conversation? By the way he stared at her, she knew she had to respond to his inquiry. "I'm not sour when it comes to marriage. It's just hard to find a man who is as good to women as you are, Dad. Men seem to think women are sex objects."

"Is that why you dress so poorly? Are you afraid men will find you attractive?"

"I can't believe this. I spent yesterday morning giving a seminar on sexual harassment and you're telling me to dress provocatively?"

"I'm not saying that at all. What I am saying is that there is nothing wrong with looking nice. You can wear clothes that aren't too loose for you, and you can fix up your hair. There's nothing wrong with wearing a sweater and skirt that show off your better features."

"I can't believe we're having this conversation." She gagged. Like she wanted to talk to her father about this!

"I want to see you with a man who'll treat you right, but in order to get the man's attention, you will have to pretty yourself up. You're such a pretty woman but no one would know it to look at you."

"I'm busy with my career. I just got this job, Dad. I don't have time for romance."

"That's a shame."

She glanced at the clock. It was still too early to go to lunch, so she couldn't end this discussion with that excuse.

"Marriage may be risky but it can still last," her father said. "You have to find the right man. It takes two people to make a marriage work."

"I'll give it my full attention later."

"Or I'll give it some attention sooner than that." He stood up to leave.

"What do you mean by that?"

He walked over to her door and turned back to her. "I want what's best for you, Beth. I'm afraid if you continue down this path, you'll miss out on something wonderful."

Before she could ask for clarification, he left.

# Chapter Four



That Friday was the party at the Henderson main hotel. To her shock, her mother stopped by during lunch to take her dress shopping and to the salon to fix up her hair.

"Mom, I'm not a child," Elizabeth protested as her mother took her by the hand and led her out to her car. "I can buy my own clothes and fix my own hair."

"I know, honey, but your dad feels that it is important to put your best foot forward this evening, so he asked me to help you."

She rolled her eyes. "Is this about him wanting to see me married?"

"Partly. He also wants you to make a good impression to the Hendersons. The entire Henderson family is going to be there and Barry wants to personally meet the top people at our

company. He wants to get a good idea of who he'll be working with."

That made good sense, so she stopped fighting her mother. She actually enjoyed the day out. It was fun to try out different dresses and see which ones looked better on her and her mother. Her mother chose a dark green sleeveless dress that went down to her ankles. Elizabeth thought it complimented her mother's green eyes. Elizabeth finally decided on a black dress that reached the top of her knees. "Black goes well with your hair," her mother encouraged.

Their last stop was at the salon where they got manicures and had their hair styled. Her mother chose to wear her long light brown hair down in soft curls. Elizabeth chose to have her hair pulled back with pins but curled at the ends. Elizabeth had her mother help her with her make-up since she hadn't worn any in so long that she wasn't sure which colors would look best on her.

"You are such a pretty girl." Her mother grinned at her as they looked in the mirror at her parents' house. "You should take time to dress nicely. Who knows how many men miss the diamond in their midst because they can't see past your baggy clothes."

"Those clothes are baggy because I lost weight. I haven't had time to buy new clothes yet."

"Well, you should. There's nothing wrong with being proud of your weight loss. You worked hard to slim down."

She was secretly pleased by her mother's kind words. She had spent most of her life chubby, but it wasn't until the past two years that she started exercising and eating better. She accepted her mother's onyx necklace and earrings. She didn't have a date but that didn't bother her. She was used to going to places by herself.

She went to the hotel with her parents and left them to mingle with her friends. She found Lucinda standing by the patio

window overlooking the large outdoor pool and hot tub. She smiled at her friend and walked over to her.

"Beth, you look great," Lucinda greeted. "I had no idea you lost weight. How many pounds did you take off?"

"Twenty."

"You're so slender. I can't believe it."

"I wanted to keep the weight off this time so I took my time losing it. It wasn't easy to be patient but it was worth it."

"Your hard work has paid off. It's nice to see you out of those old clothes."

Elizabeth glanced at the night sky. The classical music played softly in the background while the party guests mingled. The servers brought glasses of wine or hors d'oeuvres by for people to sample. Elizabeth and Lucinda accepted a glass of white wine.

"How are things going for you?" Elizabeth asked. "I haven't seen you for a couple of days."

"Nick decided to try a different counselor. We've been spending a lot of time there."

"Is this counselor working out better for you?"

She took a deep breath. "I think so but it's too soon to say. I think ever since Nick lost his job, he's been intimidated by the fact that I make more money than he does."

*It sounds like your typical male ego.* She couldn't understand why so many men felt the need to make more money than their wives did. "Has he found another job yet?"

"He did but it doesn't pay as well as my job." Lucinda shrugged. "I didn't even realize that his job was the reason behind a lot of our fights. When he lost his job due to layoffs, I knew he was having a rough time but it never occurred to me he felt like he was less of a provider because of it."

"It doesn't matter who makes more money as long as everyone is fed and clothed."

"That's what I told him but he said I don't understand since I'm not a man. I guess he's right. I mean, I don't see things from his perspective."

"I didn't realize men could be sensitive."

"Anyway, I'm trying to be more understanding about his feelings. He said the breaking point for him was when I bought him a new car. He said it made him feel like he was worthless." She smiled. "At least this counselor is getting him to talk."

"That's a good sign then," she agreed. "Are you here with him tonight?"

"No. I came alone. He doesn't feel up to facing my co-workers because he's afraid they'll laugh at him. So he's at home with the children."

Barry Henderson stood at the center of the room and called everyone to gather around him. The two friends joined everyone else and waited for him to speak.

"Good evening." He was in his mid-thirties and seemed like a good-natured person, if his infectious smile was an indication of his temperament. "For those of you who don't know me, I'm Barry Henderson and I have recently taken over the hotel chain. I would like a chance to meet everyone, so I'll work my way around the room throughout the night. If I don't talk to you, please come to me. There are so many faces that it's hard to keep track of everyone. I'll tell you a little something about myself to help break the ice. I am the fifth generation Henderson to be taking over this establishment. My goal is to take my hotel guests back to the 'good old days' while maintaining the comforts of our modern conveniences."

As he continued to talk, Elizabeth glanced around the room. Between the hotel, advertising, and decor employees, the huge room was full. *No wonder parking was a pain.* The serving staff ran back and forth to fill up their trays so the guests could enjoy wine and food.

"My hobbies include running, skiing, and coaching the Special Olympics," Barry concluded.

"He sounds like the perfect man," Lucinda whispered. "Do you suppose he's as good as he sounds?"

"No one is perfect," Elizabeth softly replied.

"True. But some are better than others."

She looked over at Ben and Zack who were standing too close to their dates. How did they get dates? Were there that many desperate women out there? She wondered why Ryan wasn't with them. The three were inseparable in high school and college. *Not that I care. I have more important things to think about.*

"I'm going to get the business part of the evening over with," she told Lucinda. "Do you want to join me?"

"In a little bit. I want to call Nick and see how the kids are doing." She took her cell phone out of her purse. "I have to admit that I kind of miss him after he opened up to me."

Elizabeth nodded and walked over to Barry who was talking to Mr. Jackson. She liked Ryan's father, even if she couldn't stand his son.

"My son, Ryan, will be heading the advertising for your commercials," he told Barry.

"I've seen samples of his work. Will he be working with Jacob Hackman after he promotes to vice president?"

"No. He'll be on his own. He and Jacob make a good team but it's time for him to do his own thing."

"I am thinking of shooting the first commercial in eight months. I still have a lot of work to do with the interior design."

"Speaking of which, Elizabeth Valentine is the occupational psychologist over at the Valentine firm." He smiled at her. "How are you doing this evening?"

"I'm doing well. Thanks for asking." She smiled back. She shook Barry's hand. "I wanted to say hi before you met the people who you'll actually be working with. If someone put me in

a room to decorate, I'd mess it up so badly you would swear a three year old did it."

Barry chuckled. "It's good to see you have a sense of humor about it."

"Elizabeth has a good head on her shoulders," Mr. Jackson complimented her. Turning to her, he asked, "Where is your date tonight?"

"Oh, I didn't come with anyone," she replied.

"It's hard to believe a lovely lady such as you isn't being courted," Barry said.

"Courted? I haven't heard that expression before." She found that she liked him. He had a natural enthusiasm that affected those around him.

"Ever since I've been studying up on the 19th century lifestyle, I've allowed some of the vocabulary from that time to infect my speech."

"Well, it's charming."

"I hope my staff will think so as well. I am planning to have my staff talk and dress as if they came right from that time period. The hotel isn't the only thing I intend to change."

"What a unique idea. It will give you distinction over your competitors."

"As an occupational psychologist, what would your recommendation be?"

She thought for a moment. Then she chuckled. "Keep the air conditioning. I can't imagine having to wear 19th century dresses in the middle of summer without some kind of relief."

"Very sensible. If I wasn't already promised to another, I'd ask to court you."

"Oh." She waved her hand as if to dismiss his words. "You flatter me too much."

"Are you engaged?" Mr. Jackson asked him.

"Yes. It's through an arrangement my parents made with

the bride's parents."

"An arranged marriage? I didn't think that still happened," she commented. *He really is taking this 19th century stuff seriously.*

"I have trouble finding a good woman in the circle I hang around. It's hard to tell who's sincere and who's not. I figured that my parents would know who best to choose for me, so I agreed to let them fix me up with someone who shares my values and beliefs. Did you know most marriages end in divorce because of in-laws, religion, and money? This way, I'll be getting a wife who shares those three things in common with me. It should improve our chances of success. I don't wish to be another statistic."

*It's not very romantic but if it works for him, then so be it,* she thought, sipping her wine.

"That's not a bad idea," Mr. Jackson thoughtfully stated. "I see the women my son dates and they leave a lot to be desired."

Elizabeth forced herself not to roll her eyes. That was an understatement. They were all mindless women whose only qualification was their ability to look good. She refrained from making the comment. Instead, she politely excused herself so they could continue their conversation. She greeted a few people she liked and made small talk between sips of wine. She glanced at the clock, wondering when it would be appropriate for her to leave. She had been so busy that afternoon that she hadn't taken time to eat dinner, and the hors d'oeuvres weren't filling enough to satisfy her hunger. Besides, she didn't want to eat so many of them that she looked like she was pigging out on the food. She went back to the patio overlooking the pool. She wondered where Lucinda went. She hoped if she stayed there, her friend would return.

To her dismay, Ben and Zack came over to her.

"We don't appreciate being written up," Ben said, crossing

his arms.

She shrugged. "Then don't sexually harass people."

"I wasn't sexually harassing Darlene. I was admiring her. There is a difference," Ben insisted.

"Really? So you had no intention of sleeping with her?"

"What's wrong with that? It wasn't like I was going to do that at work."

"How thoughtful of you." She didn't hide her sarcasm.

"You almost cost us our jobs," Zack remarked.

"The only reason you have those jobs is because you're friends with Ryan. I've seen your work and you don't have any talent."

"So you're saying that Ryan doesn't have talent either? He just landed a major account with Intensity cologne."

"I said that you and Ben don't have talent. I may not like Ryan but he is talented. I can set my personal opinion aside when it comes to someone's work. If I almost cost you your jobs, it's because your employer recognized that you don't have talent either. There's a reason why you haven't moved up the ladder since you started working there."

"Well, there's a reason you still don't have anyone to date."

"Be careful. She might write us up for that comment," Ben said.

She breathed a sigh of relief when they walked away from her. Whenever they were around, she felt as if she was right back in high school and she didn't like it. She was relieved when Lucinda showed up.

# Chapter Five



Ryan shook hands with Barry and introduced him to Cindy Johnson who was his date, thanks to Zack whose girlfriend seemed to have a bunch of airhead friends. Cindy was a model who rivaled Carmen in looks but she didn't have anything interesting to say. He was relieved when Barry came by to talk to them.

"I hear you're going to be in charge of the commercials for my hotels," Barry told him. He turned to Cindy and shook her hand too.

Ryan nodded. "Yes. I'm looking forward to it. I am interested in discussing what your goal for the commercials will be, besides attracting customers."

"I suppose my overall goal is to make people feel as if they are back in time. I want the commercials to have the 'good old

days' appeal."

He decided that he would have to incorporate that theme into his idea for the sepia colored video.

"Anyway, I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to work on it," Barry said. "How are you doing this evening, Cindy?"

"Okay. I'm a model. I made the cover of Beautiful Woman magazine." She giggled.

"I'm not familiar with that magazine."

"They only put the best looking women on the cover. The competition can be pretty tough."

"Then that's quite an accomplishment," he politely replied.

"Yes. Ryan's lucky I'm with him tonight."

*No, I'm not.* Ryan hid his embarrassment. This was hardly impressive to a client. Hoping to steer the conversation to a better topic, he said, "You mentioned that you like skiing. I ski several times a year in Colorado."

"Colorado has some great slopes but I like Switzerland more. It is invigorating to be in Europe. I think it's the history there that intrigues me the most. I am a history buff."

"That must have inspired you to remodel the hotels then."

"Yes. I went to a hotel in Europe that used to be a castle and that's when the thought occurred to me that it would be nice to get back to an earlier time period in our nation's history."

Cindy waved her hand. "History is boring. All I ever read about in history when I went to school put me to sleep. Who cares about a bunch of people, places, and events that no longer matter? I like to live in the present where interesting things are happening, like the article about me in that magazine."

The knot in his stomach tightened. He didn't wish to be known as the man with the date who upset Barry Henderson. "He's transforming his hotel chain to the look and feel of the 19th century but it will still contain modern conveniences," Ryan quickly told her.

"Did they have television in the 19th century?" she asked.

"No. Television was a 20th century invention," Barry replied.

"So, will you put televisions in your rooms?"

"Yes. It is a modern convenience."

"That's a relief. I plan to be in the Sexy Bedroom commercial in the near future and want people to be able to see me."

Ryan closed his eyes for a moment and willed her to keep quiet.

Barry smiled. "Good luck with your career. I must meet more people. It was nice to meet you both."

"He seems like a nice person," she said as Barry walked away. "I find that all men are nice to me."

"When I was taking marketing classes, I learned that the more attractive someone is, the more favorably people respond to him or her. That's why attractive people sell more products."

"I could probably sell anything then."

*There's nothing that turns a man off more than a woman who can't get enough of herself.* Cindy was incredible to look at but her ego barely fit through the front door. *Why can't Zack find someone decent for once? Why can't I find someone without help?*

"Do you want something to drink?" he asked her.

"Okay," she nodded. "I'll be at the mirror making sure my extensions are in place."

He had no idea what she was talking about but decided he didn't want to know. *This night is taking forever to end.* He walked over to the refreshment table and decided to get her a soda. He didn't think she could handle anything with alcohol in it. After all, was she even at the drinking age? She looked like she was eighteen. *What am I doing with someone that young? I feel like a creepy old man when I'm next to her.* He should have just gone to this thing by himself. It was his father's threat of pairing him up with

Elizabeth that brought him to this low point in his life.

He glanced at the patio and noticed that Elizabeth stood alone. He didn't like to think that she was a pretty woman, though she could afford to gain a few pounds to fill out her curves. She didn't have the startling good looks that Cindy did, but she was definitely nice to look at. He forced the thought aside. Instead, he considered how she didn't mind standing alone in a crowded room. She was never afraid to speak her mind in front of a group of people or be by herself. He hated that he couldn't do that. He was always afraid of what other people would say about him if he didn't go along with what they wanted. He was a thirty-year-old coward. He just hoped no one else suspected the truth about himself.

He looked over at one of the mirrors in the room and saw that Cindy was fiddling with her hair. He guessed that the extensions she mentioned had something to do with her hair. He took the soda and returned to Cindy and offered her the drink.

"Oh, you didn't put it in a cup." She frowned, her lower lip jutting out in a pout.

"I didn't know if you wanted me to do that. I thought you would want to make sure I didn't tamper with it." Not that he would dream of doing such a thing but there was the date rape drug going around and he wanted her to know that she had nothing to worry about with him.

"Is the drink cold? I don't like warm soda."

"It was in a bucket of ice."

"Can you open the can for me? I don't want to break a nail." She held up her perfectly manicured nails and admired them.

He nodded and opened it for her.

She took a sip and frowned. "I need this in a cup. The can is smearing my lipstick."

He sighed. This night was dragging on! He went back to

the table and put some ice into a cup before he poured the soda into it.

Zack and Ben came over to him. "Isn't Cindy hot?" Ben asked him.

"She's boring and crazy. Did you know she thinks that aliens are responsible for global warming? She thinks it's their plot to evaporate us from the planet so they can take over. Zack, where does your girlfriend find these girls? And that's another thing. How old is she?"

Zack shrugged. "If she's good looking, who cares? It's not like you're looking to get married or anything. Just relax and have a good time."

"How can I have a good time with someone who can't carry on a decent conversation?"

"So don't talk to her. There's plenty you can do that doesn't involve words." Ben laughed.

"How old are you?" He didn't mean to snap but it came out before he could stop himself.

Zack and Ben stared at him, as if they couldn't believe he would take that tone with them.

"What's your problem?" Zack wondered. "You asked for a date, so there she is."

"I'm tired of going from one woman to another. After awhile, it gets old," he finally admitted. "This was fun in high school and college but it's not fun anymore. There comes a time when a man wants to settle down and get married."

"Sure. Like when he's forty," Ben replied.

"We still need time to sow our wild oats," Zack agreed.

Ryan shook his head in disgust. "Is sex the only thing you guys care about?"

"I think someone took that sexual harassment seminar a little too seriously."

"As much as I hate to admit it, Elizabeth had a good

point. Women aren't sex objects."

"Hmm...I didn't think you were paying attention."

"It was hard not to get something from that twenty page book she gave us."

"Just so you know, we were talking to her a couple of minutes ago and she said that the only reason you have a job at this company is because your father owns it. She also said you have no talent, so it's a good thing that Jacob is there to save you from public humiliation."

He gritted his teeth. He didn't care what she thought of his work. She wouldn't recognize talent if it landed on her lap. "I have to get back to Cindy. If these ice cubes melt, she might send me running back to get more for her," he stiffly replied. *When is this night going to end?*

Once he handed Cindy the soda, she took a sip and gave it back to him. "I'm done. Oh, Maxine!" She waved her hand to the raven haired beauty who passed by.

Maxine stopped and smiled at them. "Cindy, what a pleasure it is to see you again. I just got back from Hawaii on my swimsuit shoot. Have you been there?"

Cindy pouted and crossed her arms. "Not yet. My agent keeps promising exotic locations."

While they discussed various places they had traveled to, he sighed and glanced around the room. Jacob and his wife were talking and laughing with Barry. They looked happy together, their arms intertwined and leaning into each other as if they were still newlyweds. *That's what I want, someone I can feel a deep connection with, someone who completes me.* He hadn't envied his business partner until that moment.

Cindy's giggles grated on his nerves. "I know," she agreed with whatever Maxine had said. "I have trouble deciding what to wear too since I look awesome in everything I try on."

Closing his eyes for a moment, he willed himself to be

polite, especially since he didn't think she was as great as she thought she was. "Would any of you like something to drink or eat?" he offered, desperate for an excuse to get away from them, even if it was for a few minutes.

"I am thirsty," Cindy replied. "Could you get some other soda? Something without caffeine?" She motioned to the cup he held and shook her head.

"No caffeine. And ice in a cup," he added.

"Right. How did you know?"

Was she kidding? "Lucky guess. Maxine?"

"I'll take soda in a can." Turning to Cindy, she explained, "I'm not as trusting as you are, Cin."

He left them alone and returned to the table with the beverages and food. To his surprise, Mr. and Mrs. Valentine walked over to him.

"Congratulations on the Intensity account," Mr. Valentine greeted with a warm smile.

"I heard the president of Intensity is particular about who he does business with, so you and Jacob Hackman must have pulled off an impressive presentation," Mrs. Valentine added in her usual soft voice.

"Thank you," he replied. Even though he didn't like Elizabeth, he did like her parents. "Jacob is a good man to work with."

"I saw the laundry soap commercial and thought it was well done. You two should be proud of your accomplishments."

"Your father says that you'll be vice president within a year," her father remarked. "He can't stop bragging about you, you know. He's proud of you."

Before Ryan could respond, Cindy gracefully made her way over to him and asked, "Can you take me and Maxine to Rita's party? I want to check out the other models who are going to be there. It's good to know who my competitors are." She

glanced at Mrs. Valentine. "Oh, you have lovely cheekbones." Just as Elizabeth's mother smiled, Cindy added, "It's too bad the wrinkles around your eyes draw attention from them." Without another word, she went to Maxine.

More embarrassed than he cared to admit, Ryan apologized on her behalf and politely excused himself so he could drop Cindy and Maxine off at the party and say good-bye to them for good.

# Chapter Six



Saturday morning, Ryan woke up in his apartment to the sound of his phone ringing. He opened his eyes and squinted at the clock by his bed. Who would be calling him at seven? He sighed and picked up the receiver so the annoying ringing sound would stop. "Hello." He yawned.

"Oh good, you're up," his father eagerly greeted.

"Barely. Why are you calling me so early?"

"I have important news to discuss with you."

"Does it have something to do with the Intensity account?" Suddenly he was wide awake. He sat up in his queen-sized bed.

"No. This is more of a personal nature."

He breathed a sigh of relief. For a moment, he was afraid the clients had decided to go with someone else for their

commercial. "What is it?"

"You're going to have to come to the country club at noon. I want you there on time."

"Why can't you just tell me now?"

"Because this is something I have to tell you in person."

"Alright. I'll be there at noon."

"Good."

"Dad?"

"What?"

"Why didn't you just call me around eleven?"

"Because I wanted to make sure your calendar was clear for the day."

"Fine. It is and I'll be there. Bye." He hung up the phone and lay back in the bed. He managed to fall back to sleep until ten.

When he finally crawled out of bed, he walked by his desk in the living room which had a pile of papers strewn around on it that consisted of his ideas for future accounts for potato chips, jewelry, and camping gear. He had to get those done before he was ready to tackle the Henderson account. He liked to work with a paper and pencil before he committed anything to his laptop. He wanted to work on the potato chip account but knew if he started drawing something, he would get lost in his work and he would miss his noon meeting with his father, so he kept walking. After he took a shower and got dressed in a pair of beige slacks and a navy blue shirt and brown leather jacket, he grabbed his car keys and headed out the door.

When he got to the country club, he ordered a cheeseburger and french fries. He didn't have time to eat something before he left and he didn't like cooking, so this worked out perfectly. While he was eating, his father arrived. Ryan waved him over when he saw him.

"You're always early," his father commented, obviously

pleased by this.

"It's no big deal. I came to get lunch. While you're here, why don't you tell me what's so important that I had to skip my usual Saturday morning routine?"

"That particular news will have to wait until two people get here."

He paused in eating his cheeseburger. *Why does this suddenly bother me?*

His father cleared his throat. "In the meantime, I wanted to ask you about that girl you brought to the Henderson party."

He rolled his eyes. "Don't remind me. I'm trying to forget her."

"So these girls you date, they aren't even meant to be serious?"

"Ben and Zack usually fix me up with them. I wouldn't voluntarily date someone like that. I know that girl's too young for me. I just didn't want to show up alone."

"I offered to fix you up with Elizabeth."

"Which is why I went with Cindy."

"Ryan, this little feud you two have has got to stop. She's a good woman. She would make an excellent wife and mother."

"I'm trying to eat."

His father shook his head. "Why do you let something that happened back in high school affect you at your age?"

He finished his cheeseburger and drank some soda. Finally, he took a deep breath. *Fine. So he's going to keep pestering me until I answer all of his questions.* "It's not just high school. Last night, Ben and Zack told me that she said I have no talent and the only reason I'm working for you is because you're my dad."

"That doesn't sound like something she'd say."

"I have no reason to believe she didn't."

He sighed as he watched his son eat his french fries. "I don't think she said that. However, while we are on the subject of

Ben and Zack, I have to be honest with you. I don't know how much longer I can keep them on."

He looked up from his plate. "Why?"

"Because they don't do their work. Most of the time, they're goofing off. Others have to pick up their slack, and they're starting to complain about it, which I can understand."

Ryan couldn't argue with that. He knew that his childhood friends weren't good employees. He just hated to think it.

"Sooner or later, you have to grow up and leave the past behind. You're thirty now. You need to think about the future. Ten years from now, you don't want to be in the same place you are today. Zack and Ben aren't likely to change but you've matured a lot over the past five years. I think separating you from them has done you a lot of good."

"Who else would hire them?"

"You're missing the point of this conversation. Stop trying to save people who need to take responsibility for themselves. It might force them to grow up if they're fired. After the way they behaved at the sexual harassment seminar, I gave them a final warning. I can't have my employees acting childishly in front of other people."

"You're actually going to fire them if they mess up again?"

"I'll give them the choice between janitorial work and finding employment somewhere else. When they actually do their work, their ideas for our clients are mediocre at best. But it's not your concern. I have a feeling something will happen with those two in the next few months, and you'll be safely out of the way when it does."

"What are you going to do? Fire me?"

"Of course not. You'll be vice president in a little under a year. I have other plans for you. You'll thank me in four months."

"Thank you for what?" He felt tense. *Something unpleasant is about to happen. I just know it.*

"You'll find out at noon. You'd better finish your french fries. You have ten minutes left."

He reluctantly finished eating, washed his hands, and joined his father in a private small room where they sat at an oak table meant to seat six people. *Why do I feel as if I'm waiting for my death sentence?* The tension in the room was thick, though his father remained calm and polite. As soon as he saw Elizabeth and her father enter the room, he tried to bolt for the door. His father put his hand on his arm to stop him.

"This is for your own good, Ryan," he whispered. "Stay seated."

He hesitated.

Elizabeth tried to leave the room but her father blocked her exit. When she stopped trying to open the door, he gently pushed her to her seat. She refused to look at Ryan. After they sat down, her father spoke up.

"You're getting married," he stated, as if he were discussing the weather.

Elizabeth and Ryan gasped.

Ryan thought they were going to have to work on a project together. He had no idea that their fathers were planning this.

"No way," she protested.

"Not in a million years," he argued as his shock began to wear off.

"See? They can agree on something," his father glanced at Mr. Valentine and smiled. "You two are getting married. You will make a good match."

"You can't force us to marry," Ryan said.

"Oh, we can do anything we want to," his father said. "And we are. She is twenty-seven. You just turned thirty.

Neither one of you is married nor do you have any romantic attachments. Harold and I agreed to this arrangement."

"You can't do this," she insisted. "Just because Barry Henderson is getting married through an arrangement, it doesn't make it right for everyone else."

"You have no choice in the matter," Harold replied. "We're going to marry you and Ryan at the courthouse and send you to Alaska to the cabin your mother and I own by the river. We will let you two stay there for four months. In that time, we're sure you will work out your differences and be happy together."

"What?" Ryan asked.

"You can't do that!" Elizabeth insisted.

"Do you two want to be poor?" Harold questioned.

She gasped. "You will disown us if we don't get married? But Dad, I'm your only child. What does Mom think?"

"She thinks it's a good idea. She likes Ryan for you."

Ryan shook his head in disbelief. "Am I going to lose my job too?"

"How can I put this?" Rowan thoughtfully began. "We have a deal for you since you are opposed to this arrangement. Ryan, you are my only child. Elizabeth, you are your father's only child. Harold and I are best friends and want to see grandchildren. If we have the same grandchildren, we can hand down our assets to both of you and you'll pass them down to your children. We always hoped you two would overcome your differences but you're a stubborn pair. So, if you are that persistent in not getting married, then we will allow you to go out into the world to make your own way. You won't inherit a dime of our money nor will you enjoy the benefits of our money while we live. However, if you marry and stay in the log cabin for four months, you will keep your jobs and receive the benefits of being our children. If during the four months, you are determined to not be married to each other, simply don't consummate the

marriage and we'll let you get an annulment. However, we're sure that you two won't want to end the marriage."

"How will you know if we don't have sex?" Ryan asked.

She gave him a look of disgust.

"That's how." Harold pointed at her.

"Oh yeah? Well, I don't want to have sex with you either," he told her.

"So we established that," Harold said. "If you two are as adamant about hating each other four months from now as you are today, we'll let you off the hook."

She crossed her arms and Ryan groaned. He realized he didn't have a choice. He had no desire to live without the comforts he enjoyed, and it was apparent that his nemesis didn't either. "You will actually disown me?" he asked his father.

"No, I wouldn't disown you. You just won't have access to my money and you won't work at my company anymore. You'll have to find your own job and never receive anymore birthday or Christmas gifts from me."

"Why four months?"

"Because we'll get started on the Henderson account at that time. Your input will be important."

"What about my other accounts?"

"I'll have Jacob and Kyle Matters take over those."

"But I was coming up with some good ideas for them. You can't just tear me away from my work."

"I can for four months. You need to focus on your honeymoon. Make your bride happy."

"Dad," she began, "I just started my job. How will it look if I take off for four months?"

"It will look like you're finally having a personal life. I have your proposal for all the changes you intend to implement. I can take care of those things while you are gone."

She sighed.

Ryan closed his eyes. He didn't like the thought of losing his job. He was looking forward to the Henderson account. It was just four months. *Certainly, I can survive four months in Alaska with her.* "Alright. I'll do it."

"One down, one to go," Harold said. "What do you say, Beth?"

"Fine. I guess he can sleep on the couch."

"No way," he argued. "You're always complaining that men and women need to be treated equally."

"Forget it, pal. I get the bed."

"No. I do."

"Kids, kids," Harold interrupted. "You can argue about that when you get there. Right now, we'll all go home. We have a big day Monday. We'll stop by the courthouse first thing in the morning. We couldn't find a preacher this late in the game. You'll be heading out to the cabin located outside of McGrath, Alaska. Ryan, McGrath is west of Denali National Park. It's a cozy spot in the interior of the state. We'll make sure you have all the supplies you need. The pilot will be bringing you items you need once a month and at the end of the four months, he'll bring you home."

"It's going to be a long four months," Ryan grunted.

"I'm not looking forward to it either," she snapped.

He rolled his eyes.

"Then it's settled," Harold smiled. "Monday, at eight o'clock, you'll be at the courthouse before the Justice of the Peace."

# Chapter Seven



Ryan sighed in dismay when the seaplane landed on the water. There was no airport. There were no other cabins in sight. All around the single cabin were lots of green trees with some snow still left on them from the previous winter, and the ground was covered in snow. It was March 1st but it looked like January. He pulled his coat closer around him and checked out the mountains in the background. The river that the seaplane landed on was roughly half a mile away from the cabin. He shook his head. Why was his dad doing this to him? Did he do something to make his dad angry? Though his dad insisted that Elizabeth was a nice young woman, his father didn't know her as well as he did. And now he had to spend the next four months of his life confined in the wilderness with her. It was going to be a long four months. What he wouldn't do for his job.

Once the seaplane stopped, the pilot turned to them. "Here's your home for the next four months," Kenneth Nicholas said.

"You're lucky," he stated as he stood up. "You get to fly out of here today." He bumped into Elizabeth on his way out of the seaplane. "Get out of my way." He jumped in front of her so he could get out first.

She stuck her foot out in front of him so he tripped. "Oops. Sorry." She pushed past him.

He growled as he watched her leave the seaplane. He couldn't stand her. If things had worked out with Carmen, he wouldn't be in this predicament. As soon as he got off the seaplane, he wanted to hop right back on it. The air was so cold that it felt like a thousand icy knives pierced his skin.

"What's the temperature?" Elizabeth asked Kenneth.

"It's ten degrees. That's the high for the day," the pilot replied.

She looked as happy about that as Ryan felt.

"I'll get your suitcases and the supplies out and bring them to your cabin," he told them. "Meanwhile, you should get the cabin ready. Your parents haven't been here since last August so things are going to be dusty and cold in there."

"Is it unlocked?"

"Yes. There's no one around here for miles. You're as far from civilization as you can get."

"Wonderful," she sarcastically responded as she walked over to the cabin.

He chuckled as he watched her stumble. *She walks like a clumsy bear.*

"Would you like to carry your suitcases in?" Kenneth asked him.

"Sure." He took his nice two brown leather suitcases and followed her into the cabin, enjoying it more and more each time

she almost lost her balance. He was six inches taller than her so it was easier for him to walk across the snow. As soon as he entered the cabin, he sighed. It wasn't as large as he hoped. He set his suitcases on the floor by the door.

The log cabin had a fireplace to the side of the living room, but there was a gas heater, so the fireplace was for show. The mantle above it featured pictures of Elizabeth from when she was a baby to when she graduated college. He wondered if he could find a nice hiding place for those pictures during his prison term. He didn't want to see her more than he had to.

Sighing, he turned his attention to the living room. The fireplace stood off to the side of the room. The brown couch matched the two brown soft recliner chairs that were on each side of the couch. There was an oak coffee table and a yellow shaded lamp on each of the two end tables that were between the couch and two chairs. The yellow curtains were draped over the two small windows overlooking the mountains in the distance. A small oak entertainment center with a thirty-six inch screen TV and a DVD player in it served as the focal point of the room. The hardwood floor matched the color of the log walls. There was a yellow shaggy rug in front of the entertainment center. That rug came right out of the 1970's. He pushed aside his disgust and turned his attention to the kitchen.

The kitchen was connected to the living room, and a doorframe and walls separated the two rooms. Why didn't they put in a door? The refrigerator, stove, oven, microwave and dishwasher were stainless steel. There were two sinks and lots of cabinet space. The yellow curtain framing the window overlooked the river. These people loved the colors yellow and brown. The oak table and two chairs were in the center of the room. He wondered why they didn't have three chairs but figured this was her parents' private getaway. *If I had her for a daughter, I'd bail out for a couple weeks during the year to get away from her too.*

He went out of the kitchen and saw that the bathroom was between the kitchen and the laundry room. The bathroom actually had a white porcelain toilet, tub and sink. He was relieved that there was actual plumbing. He worried that a cabin meant there wouldn't be running water. At least her parents liked to rough it in style. He was glad to see the medicine cabinet and the mirror over the sink since it was the perfect place for his shaving supplies. The yellow shower curtain didn't surprise him, nor did the yellow rug on the floor. But the blue towels hanging on the towel racks did. Why weren't the towels yellow?

The laundry room was between the bathroom and the closet that held cleaning supplies and fresh linen. The bedroom was next to the closet. The bedroom had an oak dresser, two oak night stands, a yellow shaded lamp on each night stand, and a small closet. The yellow sheets and comforter covered the queen-sized bed. How did her parents get all of this stuff out here?

He wondered where Elizabeth disappeared to. He walked out of the cabin and saw that she was checking out the shed. She was talking to Kenneth about the generator and gasoline supply. *Well, wonders will never cease. She actually knows something about taking care of a generator.*

He shrugged and returned to the cabin so he could put his things away in the bedroom. Just as he was about to put his last pile of shirts in the dresser, she ran into the room and stepped in front of the open drawer.

"This is my room," she said, glaring at him.

"I got here first. Move out of my way."

"Oh no you don't. This cabin belongs to my parents. I get the rights to this room."

"They're now my parents too, so I get as much rights as you do."

She stood her ground. "Let's flip a coin for it."

He almost protested but realized she would only throw all

of his things out later when he wouldn't be around to stop her. He sighed. "Okay. We'll flip a coin."

She took a quarter out of her pocket. "I call heads."

"I want heads."

"Why does it matter?"

"Because heads usually wins."

She rolled her eyes. "You are so petty. But to humor you, I'll let you have heads." She flipped the coin. She missed it and it landed on the floor and rolled under the bed.

He shook his head. "You are so pathetic. Here. Let me get it." He crawled under the bed and retrieved it. "I'll flip it this time." He flipped it and caught it. He frowned. "We'll do two out of three."

"No! I win. I get this room."

"Two out of three."

She tried to grab the coin but he held it up so she couldn't reach it. She screamed in aggravation. "That's not fair!"

"Two out of three," he growled.

She glared at him but stood still.

He took that as an agreement. He flipped the coin again and smiled. "Heads."

She tapped her foot on the floor.

He flipped it again and sighed. "Fine. It's yours."

She cheered as she threw his clothes out of the dresser.

"I'll do it myself, thank you," he snapped. "I'm going to drag one of those night stands to the living room. I need somewhere to keep my clothes unless you want me to get dressed in here."

She shuddered. "Take both night stands if you have to."

So the sleeping arrangements were made.

Kenneth brought in food, toilet supplies, more cleaners, and other necessities. "I loaded up the gasoline containers in the shed, so you'll be able to run the generator. I see that the

temperature in this cabin is already sixty degrees. It shouldn't be long before it's in the seventies. Everything looks like it's working like it should."

"How is the septic tank?" she asked when the three of them were in the kitchen.

"That's working properly too. Next time I come here, I'll bring someone out to clean it."

"Thank you, Kenneth."

"Is there anything else either one of you will need?"

"A ride back?" Ryan mused.

"I'm sorry, but that is something I can't provide. I will see you on April 1st."

"April's Food Day of all days," Ryan dryly replied.

"Yes, it is ironic," she said. "You would think that date would make a better wedding day since this whole thing is one big joke."

At least they could agree on something. Ryan watched in despair as Kenneth left. He stood by the front door and watched as the seaplane took off. How was he going to survive the next four months in this place alone with her? He didn't want to go back into the cabin right away because that meant he would have to be near her, so he shut the door and walked around the property. Why did her parents buy a cabin all the way out here? His parents had a house in the Bahamas. Now that was the way to live. If he was going to be stranded somewhere, it would have been better to be in the Caribbean. At least that place was paradise.

He sauntered around the property. The shed was a quarter of a mile from the cabin and contained two guns, ammunition, many gas containers, and an aluminum boat that would seat two people. The fishing equipment in the corner told him what he would do with the boat. He questioned the sanity of people who would put guns next to gasoline but shrugged and

closed the shed door.

There were many trees and lots of snow. The cold air was dry. He supposed he would get chapped skin out here. He was glad he brought lots of warm clothes. He had to admit that the view of the mountains beyond the river was spectacular. The front of the cabin faced the river. The back of the cabin faced the shed, and there was a forest beyond the shed. The bedroom window looked out to the shed. The living room window faced the river and mountains. He did have a better view to wake up to since he would sleep on the couch. It was a tiny consolation, but it would have to do. Besides, he would never admit it to Elizabeth, but he lied during the coin toss. She didn't really win the bedroom but when he saw how much she wanted it, he decided to let her have it. It was the only nice thing he planned to do for her while they were there.

He walked over to the river. Most of it was still iced over, but there were parts of it where he could see fish swimming around the rocks. He hadn't fished before, but he figured it couldn't be too hard. He yawned. It had been a long and exhausting trip from Omaha to nowhere Alaska. He found a large rock by the river and sat on it.

*I thought I would marry Carmen Burton, not Elizabeth Valentine.* He met Carmen in graduate school while he was working on his master's degree in Marketing. He had planned to ask Carmen to marry him when he secured the job at his dad's company. He had known Carmen for one year. She looked like a Barbie doll. She was graceful and elegant. And although she was a model, he could actually carry on a decent conversation with her. She had a lot of enthusiasm for life and cared deeply for animals, which was why she funded the animal rescue fund. If it weren't for Preston Edwards, Ryan would be married to her that very day.

Preston was a stupid football player at the college whose only goal was getting into the NFL which, Ryan grudgingly

admitted, he succeeded in getting into. He was also as intelligent as a vegetable. The only reason he got as far as he did in school was because of his athletic ability. Ryan shook his head. What was so great about an athlete anyway? Their careers were short-lived most of the time, and after they quit playing on the field, what good were they? Why Carmen would leave him to marry Preston, he would never understand. Didn't she want a marriage with substance? The only things Preston knew how to talk about was sports and himself.

Ryan recalled the day he proposed to Carmen. He took her to the ski lodge at Aspen which was their spot. They would go with their families and ski down the slopes during the day and drink hot chocolate in the evening before retiring to their separate rooms. On this particular day, he and Carmen were on their favorite couch in front of the fireplace. It was empty in the lobby since it was late at night. She had seemed unusually distant for the past month, but he figured it was because she wondered if he would ever pop the question. He wanted to wait until he received confirmation that he got the advertising job before he proposed, and he wanted the proposal to be in their favorite romantic spot.

"Wasn't today perfect?" he asked Carmen.

She wore the white cashmere sweater he loved. Her long blond hair fell seductively over her shoulders. She looked just like a snow angel in it. She sipped her hot chocolate and nodded. "It was a nice day."

He took a deep breath. He was sure she was going to say yes, but there was still that chance she would say no. She wouldn't spend a year of her life dating him if she wasn't interested in marriage. Reassured by the logic, he said, "Carmen, I love you more than I have ever loved anybody, and this past year has been the best time of my life." He set aside his mug and knelt in front of her. Showing her the engagement ring he bought for her, he asked, "Will you make me the happiest man in the world

and marry me?"

She looked stunned. "Oh, wow. I don't know what to say."

*You're supposed to say yes.* He frowned. He had been in enough relationships to know that this was a bad sign. Suddenly, he felt awkward. This wasn't the way he planned for things to go. She was supposed to say yes and hug him or put the ring on or smile or do something other than sitting quietly in front of him.

"Ryan," she softly began, "I'm already engaged."

His eyes widened. He tried to move but the unexpected news froze him in place.

"I didn't know how to tell you," she continued, wincing. "I'm sorry."

"When...? Who...? Why...?" He struggled to form a coherent sentence but his mind was having trouble understanding why she was at the ski lodge with him, pretending that they were still a couple for the past two days when she had already accepted another man's proposal.

She gently set her cup down and sighed. "I came up here to break the news to you. I meant to tell you yesterday but you were so happy that you got the advertising job that I didn't have the heart to say anything. I was going to wait until after we got back to Omaha."

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed someone walk by. The old man stared at him. Feeling self-conscious, he slipped the ring back into his pocket and sat next to her. He waited for her to finish.

"Preston and I never meant to fall in love. It just happened." She shrugged. "We originally got together to try to make you and Elizabeth stop hating each other because we got tired of hearing you two complain about each other. Then we started talking and realized we have a lot more in common than she has with him or I have with you. Anyway, one thing led to

another and we fell in love. He proposed five days ago, and we're going to get married in two months before he goes to the NFL."

He stared at her. "How long have you been seeing him behind my back?" His mind still felt like it was stuck in a fog.

"I think it was at Christmas."

"That was four months ago." Why didn't she say anything sooner? Now he felt like such an idiot.

"I'm really sorry, Ryan. I hope this doesn't create any hard feelings between us."

*She has got to be kidding me. Of course, it does.*

She had the nerve to kiss him on the cheek, wish him well in life, and walk back to her room. He didn't even return to his room. He simply left the lodge and went home.

Staring at the mountains in the cold state of Alaska, he marveled that one woman could ruin his life. Elizabeth was a thorn in his side. From the moment she moved to Omaha in high school, there had been animosity between them. If she hadn't been so unbearable, Preston wouldn't have sought comfort in Carmen's arms, and he and Carmen would be married. Instead, he was stuck with Elizabeth for the next four months. He didn't want to go back to the cabin because she was there, but he knew he couldn't stay outside forever. He would likely freeze too death if he stayed out all night. It was already getting to be twilight.

*Day one of my captivity is almost over.* He brought a pocket calendar to mark the days he had left before he could return home and pick up where his life left off. He sighed and resigned himself to his prison.

# Chapter Eight



Elizabeth finished putting the food away and narrowed her eyes when she saw that Ryan was sitting on a rock in front of the river. Leave it to a man to bail out when there was work to be done. Ryan was so typical of the average male, which was why she had sworn off marriage once her relationship with Preston ended. Preston was the first man she met who actually seemed decent. He took the time to listen to her and care about her thoughts and feelings. *But as soon as Miss Gorgeous Carmen showed up, he threw me aside.* Carmen was a model with the brain power of an insect. Elizabeth shook her head. Any man would overlook a woman's lack of intelligence when that woman looked like a doll in the department store.

Of course, Ryan would pick Carmen, of all women, to date. She was the true definition of a fairytale princess who was

looking for Prince Charming to ride in and save the day. And he did come. Only it was Preston who ended up carrying her away.

Since her break up with Preston, she went on a couple of dates but the men weren't interested in a confident, career-oriented woman. They wanted someone like Carmen. She wondered what was so attractive about Carmen. Just because she agreed with every little thing a man said and acted like she was there to do his bidding, she was desirable? It made her sick. Elizabeth prided herself on her self-reliance. She didn't need someone to come in and rescue her, but it would be nice to have someone she could talk to. She sighed, feeling miserable. It wasn't meant to happen. Women like her stayed single their entire lives. Couldn't her parents understand that?

She took out two skinless chicken breasts, frozen vegetables and noodles. She threw the vegetables into the skillet while she cut up the chicken and boiled the noodles. She would add the seasoning later. She did like cooking since it gave her time to listen to the music or audio books on her ipod. She was relieved she could at least bring her ipod, but she was dismayed that she didn't have a computer or internet access. She hated being alienated from the rest of the world. She wanted to stay in touch with her friends and family, but the only source she had to the outside world was from the television and the satellite dish that came with it. She had checked out the channels and they came in clearly. She set her ipod to play some music from one of her playlists. She chose upbeat music to listen to since she would be moping around if she didn't. She wouldn't let her circumstances define her mood. She believed in overcoming her obstacles through positive thinking.

She succeeded in bettering her mood by the time Ryan came into the cabin. She didn't bother to greet him when he took off his boots and coat. She frowned when she realized he just dumped his things on the floor by the door. She shook her head.

This wasn't going to continue. She paused her ipod, set down her spoon where she had been stirring the noodles, chicken, and vegetables together and replaced the lid over the skillet. She went to the living room where he was already flipping through the channels on the TV. She went over to the TV and shut it off.

"I let you have the bedroom. You're not going to take me away from the TV too," he protested.

"You can watch as much TV as you want as soon as you pick up your coat and hat and put them on the coat rack. Your boots need to go on the rug by the door. I will not be cleaning up after you."

He rolled his eyes. "I'll do it later."

"You'll do it now."

He sat still and stared at her. "How are you going to make me do it?"

She gritted her teeth. He knew very well she couldn't actually make him do it, and she wasn't going to nicely ask either. The timer went off in the kitchen. She didn't want to burn the food. He wasn't worth missing her dinner. "Fine. You win this round. But don't think for a minute you can eat anything I make until you put your things away."

His eyes widened in surprise. "You were going to share your dinner with me?"

"Not anymore." The only reason she was willing to do that much for him was because she usually made too much food at one time. Leftovers, however, were not always a bad thing.

She stomped back into the kitchen and quickly took the skillet off the stove and set it on the potholder on the counter. She took out a bottle of water and set it by her plate on the table. She wasn't intending to eat with him. She had assumed he would eat in the living room, but now he wouldn't eat at all so she put his plate back in the cabinet.

She took out a bowl to put the leftovers in. After she ate

her meal while listening to her ipod, she put the rest of the food in the bowl and placed the lid over it. When she was done, she went to her bedroom and shut the door. She lay on the bed, closed her eyes, and listened to an audio book she had been intending to listen to for awhile. She didn't realize she had dozed off until a slight movement by her bed woke her up.

She gasped and sat up. "What are you doing in here?" she snapped at Ryan. How dare he come into her only sanctuary in this horrid mess!

"I'm not coming to see you, if that's what you're afraid of. I came to get the night stand. I need something to put my clothes in, remember?"

She calmed down. "Oh. Right. Well, be quick about it. I don't want to be around you anymore than you want to be around me."

"Tell me about it." He set aside the lamp and clock that had been on the night stand and put them on the floor. Picking up the night stand, he hauled it out to the living room.

She turned her attention back to her ipod and shut her eyes. It had been a long day, so laying down felt unusually nice and relaxing. Soon she was fast asleep. In the middle of the night, she woke up, shivering. She got under the covers but still couldn't get warm, so she went to the living room with her flashlight and adjusted the temperature so it would get warmer in the cabin. She noted, with disgust, that Ryan snored when he slept. *He is so repulsive.*

After going to the bathroom, where she had to put the toilet seat down, she went back to bed. Three hours later, she woke up, feeling cold again. She groaned and went back to the living room. The thermostat confirmed her suspicions. Ryan had turned the temperature down. This time, she cranked it up higher than before and went back to bed.

By the time it was eight in the morning, she was nice and

warm in her bed. She reluctantly got out of bed and gathered her robe and towel so she could take a long hot shower before getting dressed for the day.

Ryan had thrown off all his covers and slept in a t-shirt and shorts. His arms and legs were spread out like he was ready to make an angel in the snow. He was still snoring. She shuddered at the sight of him and went to take a shower. She grunted when she noticed the toilet seat was back up. *Would it really kill him to put it back down?*

At least the water for the shower was hot. As soon as she was dressed and ready for the day, she grabbed a quick bite of fruit salad and went out for a nice, long walk along the river. She listened to some music on her ipod while she walked. She loved to walk by herself. The serenity of the South Fork river's gentle current and the scenery of the mountains brought her a sense of peace. She inhaled the cold, fresh morning air. It was invigorating. She had only been to the cabin one time in her life, and that was almost ten years ago when her mother wanted to enjoy one last mother-daughter bonding experience before she headed off for college. Her mother worried that as soon as she went to college, she would meet the man of her dreams and get married, so they wouldn't have as much time to spend together as they usually did. Little did either of them know, she would still be single at twenty-seven.

She never imagined that she would marry Ryan Jackson. She hadn't gotten along with him from the moment she moved to Omaha. Her family moved from Atlanta to Omaha so her father could expand his interior design business, and his desire to build a flourishing business worked. Meanwhile, she started her freshman year of high school at the prestigious private school her parents could suddenly afford to send her to. She got along with the other girls right away but the boys were a different matter. As soon as Ben handed her the dog bone that Ryan sent him to give

her, she earned the reputation among the boys in the school for being a dog. She sighed and kept walking.

*How could my father marry me off to Ryan? He knows what I went through with Ryan and his obnoxious friends in the past.* He was so sure that Ryan had matured, but there was nothing from the sexual harassment seminar that would convince her of that. He still associated with Zack and Ben, and those two intentionally gave her a hard time. Thankfully, she managed to remain calm during the whole fiasco at the seminar. At the very least, she got to write them up for sexual harassment. She knew that they would be docked a week's pay and have to attend five hours of sensitivity training. It was nice to know justice still happened in the world.

She slowly walked back to the cabin, trying to enjoy as much solitude and serenity as possible before she had to face Ryan. When she did enter the cabin, she gritted her teeth when she noticed that he still hadn't picked up his coat or boots. He was doing this just to make her mad...and it was working.

She forced aside the urge to put the coat and boots in their proper places and focused on hanging up her own coat and put her boots on the yellow rug by the door. She put her hat and gloves on the ledge by the window. She was relieved to see that he made the effort to put the couch back together, though the blankets he used were carelessly tossed in the corner of the room. *I can't expect miracles. I should just be glad he put the sleeper bed back into the couch and put the cushions back on.*

She found him eating cereal in the kitchen and quickly walked by the room so she could go to her bedroom and hide out for the next few hours. She hadn't thought to bring more than a few books to read, and the ones she brought were romance books. Shaking her head, she considered the irony in her choice of literature. She was hardly in a romantic situation. *When Kenneth returns, I'm going to ask him to bring some mystery novels. A good murder would be just the thing to ease my mind right now.* She entertained the

idea of killing Ryan and hiding his body. Who would find him so far out in the middle of nowhere? Of course, she wouldn't actually kill him, but it was fun to imagine the look of surprise on his face when she actually made him pick up his stupid coat and boots.

She had to fight the urge to take a nap. The bed was comfortable and with nothing else to do, it was easy for her to fall asleep. She reluctantly opened the bedroom door to go to the bathroom and groaned in aggravation when she saw the used, wet towel tossed on the bathroom floor. The toilet seat was still up and he had already put his shaving supplies in the medicine cabinet. He hadn't even bothered to draw back the shower curtain after he took his shower. She hated to think of where he put his clothes from the day before, but when she saw them crumpled up in front of the washer, she shook her head. How did he survive on his own?

Though she was hungry, she decided to fight the dragon first. She stomped over to him while he was watching TV. *Is that all he does on his days off?* When he refused to acknowledge her, she picked up the remote and pushed the off button.

"What is it now?" he asked, clearly irritated.

"We need to talk about the proper placement of our personal items," she replied.

"Who are you? My mother?"

"Apparently, you still need one. Really, Ryan. Are you thirty or five?"

He didn't answer her. In fact, he continued to stare at the blank television screen.

She realized this wasn't going to be easy. "Okay. So we're stuck together for the next four months, whether we like it or not."

"And we don't like it."

"Agreed." She thought about what she should say next.

"For the sake of my sanity, I need to set down some rules."

"You're not my boss."

"I can't live like this, Ryan. Your filthy lifestyle is going to drive me crazy."

His jaw dropped as he looked at her. "Filthy lifestyle? I took a shower and shaved this morning."

"Which I am grateful for. But I am talking about you throwing your things all over the place."

He looked around the room. "The blankets in the corner of the room bother you?"

"They aren't neatly folded."

"So? I'm going to use them tonight. What's the point in folding them?"

"It's not aesthetically pleasing."

"Who are we going to impress?"

She sighed. "There's also the towel on the bathroom floor."

He just stared at her.

"Can't you hang it back up so it dries?"

"I'll get to it later."

"Just like you were going to get to the coat and boots?"

"I'm not picking those up until I need to use them. I'm not going to pick them up just so you'll cook for me. I don't care to eat anything you make. I can make sandwiches and eat cereal. I'm not a complete moron in the kitchen."

"And the clothes by the washer?"

"Do you want them out here?"

She couldn't believe it. Why was he acting as if she was the one with the problem? "The toilet seat needs to be put down when you're done."

"Why?"

"Because I almost fell into the toilet this morning."

He chuckled.

"It's not funny."

"Why don't you just put the seat down when you need to? I put it down if I have to sit down. It only takes a second. What is it with you women making a big deal out of small details? So what if my dirty clothes are by the washer? Don't they belong in the laundry room anyway? And the coat and boots are by the door. I didn't put them in the kitchen. The blankets in the corner of the room are out of the way. I'll pick up the towel in the bathroom next time I'm in there."

"I can't take living with you. You are impossible."

"If it bothers you that much, then pick up after me."

"Ewe! Like I really want to touch your gross things."

"Then I guess you're stuck with the way I do things, just as I'm stuck with your quirky stuff."

She crossed her arms. "There's nothing gross about the way I do things."

"Oh no? I found a clump of long hair stuck in the shower drain this morning. I had to pull it out and throw it away. You're welcome for that, by the way. Then last night I roasted out here because you kept cranking up the heat to unbearable levels. The bed that comes with this couch isn't very comfortable. I woke up with a kink in my back, and I shouldn't even know I have a back at my age."

She paused. "If I pick up my hair in the shower, will you put the toilet seat down and put your towel back up right after you're done with it?"

He seemed to consider it.

She rolled her eyes. What was the big deal? She just made a simple request.

"Done," he finally said. "Can I watch TV now?"

She realized that she wasn't likely to get anymore compromises from him at the moment so she threw the remote his way before walking to the kitchen. She took the leftovers out

and listened to her ipod while she ate.

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That night around four, she woke up, just as cold as she had been the night before. She grunted as she got out of bed and went to the living room to check out the thermostat. He had turned it down again. She turned it up. She didn't care if it was turned to eighty degrees. She was tired of being cold.

He sat up in his sleeper bed and stomped back to the thermostat.

"Don't do that," she protested as she ran back to it.

"You have it set to eighty. What are you? A snowbird?"

"I grew up in Georgia, so technically, I am. I like it warm."

"I can't sleep when it's this hot in here. I don't like to spend the night dripped in sweat."

"It's colder in my bedroom then it is out here."

"Let me check it out." Before she could stop him, he went to her bedroom, flipped on the light and went over to the window. "You have a draft coming in. That's why it's cooler in here. I don't mind it. We can trade rooms."

"No. I like it in here."

He groaned. "Fine." He went over to the second window. "This one has a draft too." He thought for a moment. "I know what can fix it." She watched as he left and came back with a tube. She couldn't read what was written on it since his hand was wrapped around it. "I thought I saw this in one of the kitchen drawers. This stuff will seal up the cracks in the sides of your windows. Then you won't have the draft anymore. The room will still be cooler than the living room but with an extra blanket, you should be more comfortable." He finished his work. "There. Now we all go to sleep and be happy."

After he left the room and shut her door, she went over to the windows and admitted that the draft was no longer coming in. She breathed a sigh of relief and turned off the light. As she lay in bed, she was grateful to have the day finally end.

# Chapter Nine



Ryan couldn't believe someone could be so incredibly petty about the way he did things. He missed having his maid come and clean up his apartment for him. She did her work, got paid, and left. She didn't nag him about his habits. He pulled out his pocket calendar and flipped through to the month of July. July 1st was his day of freedom. He decided to number the days backwards. He started at June 30th and worked his way to March 3rd. He had 119 days left after that day. He groaned and put the calendar in the night stand drawer. Never did the number one hundred seem so overwhelming until it was connected with his captivity.

He waited until she left the kitchen and went back to her room before he went to the kitchen to grab a can of juice from the refrigerator. He wasn't planning to eat but his growling stomach informed him that he better eat something if he intended

to focus on his drawing pad that he had brought up with him so he could work on some ideas for his job. To ask him to stop creating new thoughts for future commercials was equivalent to cutting off his oxygen. He loved his work and had no intention to put it on hold just because he wasn't in the office.

He turned his attention to the cabinets when he didn't see anything he felt like cooking from the refrigerator. He hated to cook. He saw lots of food, but he wanted to make something quick and easy. He settled on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, which was the same thing he had the night before.

Where was the good stuff? There was no junk food anywhere in the place. Everything was geared towards good health and nutrition. He missed snacking on the miniature candy bars and mints he usually kept in a dish on his desk. *When Kenneth comes in April, I'm putting in a request for a ton of junk food.* He was going to pig out until he popped. He knew he'd be going nuts for something sweet or salty once April came.

He took the plate with his sandwiches on it and the juice to the living room. He set them on the coffee table and got his large drawing pad out. He set aside two pencils, a pencil sharpener and an eraser. Then he sat on the couch and flipped through some channels until he found some commercials. He ate the sandwiches and watched the commercials in interest. Watching them usually gave him some inspiration on how he could improve upon them or do something different for another company.

He was almost done with his sandwiches when Elizabeth came out of her bedroom. She stopped and put her hands on her hips. *What does she want now?*

"Are you trying to make more work for me?" she asked, obviously struggling not to scream at him.

"I made my own meal." *Really, what is her problem?*

"You're getting crumbs all over your shirt."

He glanced down and saw a group of breadcrumbs across his chest.

"Sit still while I get the handheld vacuum cleaner." She quickly ran over to the closet.

*Oh, she can't be serious!* What was he? Five?

She plugged the small vacuum into the outlet by the TV and went over to him. "Move the plate. I'm going to clean you up."

He was so stunned that she was actually going to do it that he sat still while she turned the machine on. She huffed when he didn't put the plate down and took it out of his hands. He jumped up when she started vacuuming his shirt. "Are you anal retentive all the time?" he yelled at her.

She glared at him. "Stay still! I need to clean this up."

He grabbed the vacuum from her and moved it over her shirt. "How do you like it?"

Shrieking, she rushed to the wall and yanked the cord from the outlet. She was definitely mad, but he didn't care.

"I've had enough of your nagging for today," he spat as he shoved the vacuum back at her. "Stop treating me like I'm a moron!"

"Were you planning to clean this room when you were done eating?"

"I didn't last night and you didn't even notice the 'mess' I made. I'm a grown man, not a child. This room is just fine and so is the bathroom and laundry room. I think you're just looking for ways to annoy me."

He picked up his plate and juice and took them back to the kitchen.

"I'm not doing your dishes," she hollered after him.

*Did I ask her to?* The dishwasher was there for a good reason. He was capable of putting a dish into it, which he quickly did before she could nag him about it. He shook his head in

disgust when he heard her start up the vacuum. It was amazing she could be more particular than his maid about cleanliness.

He couldn't take it anymore. He stomped back to the living room just as she put the vacuum back into the closet. He tore out a sheet of paper from his drawing pad and angrily wrote his name and her name. Then he drew a vertical line between the names. Next he wrote different times on the left side of the paper.

Though he was still angry, he forced himself to talk in a low tone so he wouldn't yell at her. "One thing we can agree on is that we want to see as little of each other as possible."

She slammed the closet door and turned back to him. "Right," she agreed.

"Okay. Then here's what we're going to do. We'll take turns doing what we want in this cabin so we can be in a room without the other one walking in and disturbing us." *Like you just disturbed me.*

She nodded. "So far, I like the way this sounds."

"Good. Unfortunately, there aren't two bedrooms so I'm stuck out here for most of the day. However, I will take a shower at eight and I'll go outside three times a day for twenty to thirty minutes. What times would like me to be out of here?"

She thought it over for a minute. "I like to eat breakfast at nine, lunch at two and dinner at seven."

"Okay." He marked a half hour to be gone for those times.

"Some meals take longer than a half hour to prepare."

He sighed. "It's too cold for me to be out there for too long."

"What if I let you go to the bedroom while I cook and eat?"

"That'll work. It will be nice to get some privacy too." He felt like he was too exposed out in the living room all the time.

"So when do you want me to leave the cabin?"

"How about four? Then I can watch Max Newell."

"Who's he?"

"He has a TV show to intermediate for people about the problems they are having."

*Maybe he should see us.* He shook his head. He had no intention of staying with her longer than the necessary four months. However, he wouldn't mind having Max give their fathers a piece of his mind. "Are there any other shows you want to watch?"

She thought for a moment. "I'm really not much of a TV viewer. Can I think about it and tell you later? Any time I want to watch TV out here, I'll let you in the bedroom."

"That's fair. Now, when do you want to do your laundry? I want to do mine first thing Saturday morning so I can get it over with for the week."

"I'll do mine Sunday evening at six."

He marked down two hours for Sunday evening where he would be out of her way.

"I'll want to clean the cabin," she said. "Judging from your cleaning habits, I'd rather take over all of the details on that."

"You're welcome to it." He was relieved he didn't have to do any of it.

"I would like you to fill up the generator with gas and burn the trash. Both tasks require heavy lifting and I'm not as strong as you are."

"I can do that." He feared he was going to regret asking it, but he continued, "Can you show me where the gas goes in the generator? I haven't needed a generator in the past, so I don't know how to use it."

"Do you need me to show you how to properly burn the trash too?"

To his surprise, she wasn't being condescending in her

question. Instead, she seemed grateful he was willing to do those things for her. He felt his anger cool down. "How hard can it be to burn trash?"

"Well, you have to make sure the area you're burning the trash is protected so that the fire won't spread."

"Alright. I better let you show me how to do those things."

She seemed startled.

"What's wrong now?" He didn't know whether to be upset again or not. Her moods were unpredictable.

"I'm just shocked you're willing to listen to me give you instructions on how to do something."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "I occasionally meet resistance from men when I try to teach them how to do something they aren't familiar with."

"Is it really that hard for a woman in the workplace?"

"You saw how the sexual harassment seminar went."

"But that was because Ben and Zack were there."

"I'm not a stranger to that kind of behavior whenever I give a speech."

"If those men are like Ben and Zack, then the reason they resist you is because you're actually intelligent. You can stand up to them and it intimidates them. That's why they date young women who don't have IQs."

"Then why do you go out with that type of woman?"

He felt his face flush. He didn't feel like talking to her, of all people, about his personal life. "I didn't realize you took note of who I went out with."

"Your dad mentioned it at the Henderson party."

He rolled his eyes. "Well, I was pressured into that one."

"Ben and Zack pressure you to date that kind of woman?"

"I'd rather not discuss this, okay?" He stood up and

walked to his coat and boots. "Will you show me how to burn the trash and fill the generator up with gas?"

She looked like she wanted to say something but decided against it. "Okay." She put on her coat and boots.

While he put on his coat and boots, he sighed. "I'll put my coat up on the hook and the boots on the rug." Since she was willing to let the issue of who he dated go, he was willing to do something she wanted.

"Thank you." He noted that she seemed both relieved and pleased. "It'll make my job of cleaning easier if I don't have to constantly mop the floor."

As much as he hated to admit it, he could see her point. He already knew that this was also going to lead him to pick up his towel every morning after his shower. But the clothes on the laundry room floor would have to stay there since he didn't have a laundry basket. He followed her out of the cabin and listened as she told him how to take care of his chores. He went ahead and filled up the generator so it was full again.

After they went back into the cabin, he put his coat and boots in their proper place and hung up the schedule they agreed on. Seeming to be content with their truce, she went back to her bedroom and shut the door. He picked up the drawing pad and turned his attention to the TV. He flipped through the channels until he saw some commercials that looked interesting. After watching commercials for half an hour, he shut the TV off and wrote down some possible ideas that popped in his head. He wasn't sure if his father was going to accept any of his thoughts for the potato chip, jewelry or the camping gear accounts but he figured he would send his ideas down to him via Kenneth and see what happened. He had to stay productive while he was stranded in the wilderness. He knew it would be another month or two before he saw the Intensity commercial. He was looking forward to seeing how it looked on television. He always got a thrill out of

seeing one of his and Jacob's work on the screen.

# Chapter Ten



Ryan and Elizabeth managed to fall into a routine that didn't involve them seeing each other for more than a minute at any given time. He was relieved that she did clean the cabin so he didn't have to worry about it. He hated cleaning. He did continue to make his own meals. The cereal and peanut butter sandwiches were starting to get old but he didn't know how to make anything else nor did he have the desire to learn to make anything else. He spent a lot of time working on his ideas and was pleased to see them develop into nice ads. By two weeks, he was already done with them. He didn't know what to do with his time after that. He watched some television shows which were mildly entertaining.

He wondered what kind of things Elizabeth did with her time so he browsed through her bedroom on one occasion when

she was cooking another meal in the kitchen. She had taken her ipod, so he couldn't check out what kind of music she listened to. He had taken his ipod as well but had already listened to enough songs to satisfy him for awhile. He wasn't going to look through anything personal so he kept his eyes on things she left laying out on the top of the dresser or on her night stand. He was surprised to see she read romance novels. He didn't take her for a romantic. She seemed unusually opposed to anything to do with love.

Finally, he decided to go outside more often than not. The temperatures had slowly climbed up to the mid-twenties for a high, and her father's parka that she found in the bedroom closet kept him a lot warmer than his coat. He was able to stay outside for an hour and not feel like he was trapped in an ice cube by the time he came back into the cabin. He spent most of his time sitting on the large rock and staring at the mountains and the river. It was hard to imagine that life continued as usual in Omaha when he was stuck in time, removed from any real human contact. The solitude was nice at first. He rarely had time to sit and do nothing in Omaha. He was usually busy running from one account to another or meeting prospective clients. But up here, he had plenty of time to reflect on how his life was going.

He considered why he still associated with Ben and Zack. After dwelling on the situation for a week, he realized that he had never been as close to them as he thought he was. They grew up together in a small private school environment and stuck together as they entered the larger student population in high school. Ben and Zack were naturally popular since they were outgoing and witty. Being around them made him popular too. He enjoyed being liked and admired by his peers, so he stayed with them even when they seemed to go overboard in their behavior. It was easier to stay with them than to venture on his own to find other friends. *That has always been my problem. I let fear of rejection hold me back.*

He didn't want to envy Elizabeth for her ability to do what she wanted regardless of what others thought of her. She had been unpopular in high school, but she still found a group of friends who were loyal to her. They didn't mind defending her when she wasn't around. She had an easier time in college since there were enough people on campus to dismiss all the teasing she endured from him and his friends. He wasn't proud of the way he acted.

When Carmen broke up with him to marry Preston, he became aware that he and Elizabeth had something in common. They had lost someone they loved to someone else. For the first time, he was able to put himself in her shoes, and that's when he stopped making fun of her. Ben and Zack continued to do it, especially whenever she made another accomplishment. Rumor was that she had potential.

He thought he did too, but according to his friends, she didn't agree with that notion. *Why does it bother me that she said Jacob has all the talent?* Did it really matter what she thought? Did it really matter what anyone thought of his abilities? He should've been focusing on what he thought of his career and where he was headed instead of what anyone else said. How could he just blow off other people's opinions when he had been caught up in them for so long? *Do I just play self-help audio books on my ipod until I start listening to myself instead of other people? What is Elizabeth's secret?*

*Do I just walk up to Ben and Zack and tell them that I don't want to hang around them anymore?* They were at the bottom of the firm. Their opinion wouldn't affect him anymore. At least it wouldn't affect his career or how others at his level saw him. The clients wouldn't care what they thought. It was amazing that their opinion carried so much weight in school, but in the real world, the roles had been reversed. Elizabeth's opinion was already affecting them when she wrote them up for sexual harassment. She was in the driver's seat now and it irked them to no end.

By the end of the third week, the solitude began to get on his nerves. He spent more time outside because he was feeling too cooped up whenever he was inside the cabin. He ventured farther out during his walks along the river. Elizabeth had warned him of the moose and bears in the area, so he made it a habit to carry a gun with him. Thanks to his target practice on the range, he was comfortable carrying it. Any moose he did see were usually far away and didn't have any babies with them so they didn't see him as a threat. He didn't see any bears. He took several pictures, more out of boredom than for a keepsake. He didn't really wish to remember his time out here. He simply wanted to go back home and act like the whole thing never happened.

His conversations with Elizabeth were confined to polite one sentence statements that were of little consequence and rarely occurred more than twice a week. Sadly, he was beginning to look forward to these formal and awkward encounters. He started leaving the cabin whenever she was cooking something because the wonderful aroma from her dishes only served to remind him that his own meals were getting more and more difficult to stomach. He used to look forward to eating but found that to no longer be the case. He even stopped watching commercials since most of them had to do with food. He recalled the last time he ate a cheeseburger and french fries. He never imagined that the desire for food could be so powerful. He spent nights dreaming of eating something other than cereal and peanut butter sandwiches. He was afraid to make anything else after he messed up a simple spaghetti meal. Who knew that someone could cook noodles too long?

Sometimes when he was out of sight of the cabin, he would pretend to talk to his father. He spoke aloud since he wanted to hear someone talk, even if it was his own voice. He told his father off several times for sticking him in an unbearable

situation. Then, just to humor himself, he told Ben and Zack how they needed to be mature and do their job. He also added how they needed to consider how lonely they would be if they really did turn forty and had no one to come home to in the evenings. Now that he was in isolation, he understood how difficult such loneliness could be.

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One evening, he decided to watch the news, which he never did before but decided to in order to connect himself to the world again. He wondered if Elizabeth felt as disconnected from reality as he did but didn't bother to ask in case she laughed at him for being weak. As he watched the news, he realized that little had actually changed in the world. The United States was still facing the global war on terror, politicians were telling people what they wanted to hear in hopes of gaining their votes at election time, and police were still chasing criminals. On Thursday evening, the McGrath local news anchor reported two bank robbers on the run from the Fairbanks police. He sighed and changed the channel.

He watched a commercial for a restaurant serving fresh fish. Maybe he should try some fishing. The river was thawing out enough to step into. And who would cook the fish? He changed the channel again, ignoring his growling stomach. He had no desire to eat what he could successfully make. He forced his mind off of fish and onto the next news broadcast which was a national broadcast.

"In the world of sports, the Raiders held a funeral today for one of their own. Preston Edwards, who died from a drug overdose on Monday, was buried in his hometown of Omaha, Nebraska. His wife, Carmen Burton, who had been separated from him for six months, is said to be engaged to actor Alexander Stewart."

This caught his attention. As the news anchor continued to explain the situation, he went over to Elizabeth's bedroom door and knocked on it. Then he realized that he hadn't even thought if she might want to hear the news. *It's no big deal. I'll just tell her and go. Surely, she'd want to know her ex-boyfriend died.*

She opened the door, her eyes wide. "Is something on fire?"

"No," he quickly assured her. "Did you hear about Preston?"

She nodded. "I saw it on the news on Monday. He's been on quite a bit over the past week. They even ran a segment on drugs and sports on Max Newell."

*She is still connected to the world. This isolation hasn't bothered her a single bit.* He marveled that she could withstand such a trial.

She shrugged. "I feel sorry for him. He was only twenty-six. He had such a promising future ahead of him and he blew it by making the wrong decision. I used to worry that he would cave into peer pressure. What a way to go when he was at the top of his career."

"Well, it wasn't all a bed of roses for him. Apparently, Carmen left him for an actor."

"She probably didn't feel like she had much of a marriage since he was a drug addict. It's hard to blame her for leaving. Marriage is so tricky. There are no guarantees. It's amazing anyone even takes the risk anymore."

"I didn't realize you were opposed to marriage." The thought unnerved him though he wasn't sure why.

"I don't like uncertainty."

"You can't control everything."

"True. But what I can control, I do. And what I can always control are the choices I make. I don't let other people determine my future for me."

*She is the opposite of me. We have nothing in common, except our*

*mutual dislike of each other.* "Anyway, I didn't know you already knew. I'll leave you alone now."

As he turned away, wondering why she didn't bother to tell him when she found out, she asked, "How are you taking it? I know you almost proposed to Carmen."

He turned back to her. "I'm not sure. It's hard to hear that their marriage was coming to an end. I like to believe that marriage is forever."

She raised an eyebrow at his comment.

"I'm not talking about us. We didn't choose this arrangement. But they chose to get married. I would have preferred it if they were still together." He didn't think he would say such a thing five years ago, but he was relieved to realize that he had put his relationship with Carmen behind him after all.

"Who knows, Ryan? Maybe you'll find the woman of your dreams someday," she said. "Just don't let someone else pick her for you. It needs to be your decision."

He frowned. "Do you think I let people dictate my life?" He wasn't comfortable with her reading him so well.

"I usually say the wrong thing despite my intention to help people." She sighed. "I'm not trying to put you down. Please don't take my comment the wrong way."

That helped him feel better. "You're trying to help me escape the same fate Preston experienced?"

She nodded.

"I won't let Ben or Zack choose my wife for me."

"Good because from what I've seen, they're horrible judges of character."

"I know."

She seemed surprised by his admission.

"What can I say? They aren't all they seemed to be in school," he replied. "I'll let you get back to whatever it is you were doing."

She nodded again and softly closed the door.

*She knows me too well.* He didn't like feeling so exposed to her, but he had to admit that it felt good to have an actual conversation that he didn't imagine in his mind.

# Chapter Eleven



The next week came and Elizabeth took her ipod off on Saturday morning. She was getting tired of listening to it. There was only so much music and audio books a person could take before they needed other things to do. In fact, she had a headache from listening to it so much, and she was tired of taking pain relievers. She left the ipod in her bedroom and took her morning walk without it. The silence around her was strange. She was used to constant noise in Omaha from the radio, TV, her ipod or listening to people talk. Instead, she heard the gentle current of the river and the rustling of the tree branches as the breeze moved them around. The temperatures were climbing and, as a result, the snow was slowly melting. The six inches that had been in front of the cabin had melted to four inches.

She sat on the rock that she often saw Ryan sitting on and

took time to really examine her surroundings. Without the ipod to distract her, she noticed the river and mountains, as if seeing them for the first time. She loved the view. *Why didn't I take time to appreciate it before?* She knew the answer to that. She usually kept her mind on something so she wouldn't have time to stop and think. She wasn't sure she wanted to know what would happen if she stopped occupying her mind with the convenient distractions of her safely built world back home. *I should have taken the ipod with me.*

Pushing aside the uncomfortable sensation, she focused on the details around her. She couldn't go back into the cabin for another half hour while Ryan was finishing up with his laundry. She hadn't talked to him since that night a week and a half ago when he told her about Preston. He looked disappointed when he realized she already knew about Preston's death. She didn't think he would care that he died. She also didn't realize he held such romantic views of marriage. In fact, judging from the women he dated, she wouldn't have thought he was remotely interested in a serious relationship. She had assumed that after Carmen hurt him, he swore off marriage. She hoped that he wouldn't keep letting Ben and Zack pick his dates for him.

He wasn't turning out to be such a bad roommate. Since their initial schedule and chores were set up, he had been abiding by his part of the deal. She was relieved and thankful he came up with the idea of establishing the routine. It made their lives a lot easier than it otherwise would have been. He was probably good at overseeing people at his job since he could manage difficult situations efficiently. She didn't realize he was considerate of other people's thoughts and feelings until she saw that he picked up after himself and put the toilet seat down. She had to admit that he was surprising her in ways she didn't anticipate.

Was he really the same person she had known back in high school and college? Perhaps her father was right. *It does seem like*

*he's grown up.* She did note that he was no longer giving her problems like Ben and Zack were. During the sexual harassment seminar, he had kept to himself. In the past, he would have joined Ben and Zack in pestering her, but this time he stayed apart from it. Maybe miracles did still happen. If she hadn't known him in high school, she would have sworn he wasn't the same person.

She took a deep breath, enjoying the feel of the cool air in her lungs. The air was fresh and clean up here. She heard a movement from a squirrel as it ran up a tree. The sunlight made the snow glisten brightly but she had gotten used to it and no longer needed sunglasses to shield her eyes from the glare it produced. There were a couple of puffy white clouds in the blue sky. The hum of the generator reached her ears. She hadn't realized she was close enough to the cabin to notice that detail.

She leaned over to pick up a few small rocks along the river's bank and tossed them, one at a time, into the river. She laughed when one rock spooked a fish which automatically turned to swim the other way. That was an accident but still funny to watch. She frowned. When was the last time she laughed? She often chuckled with her friends, but she couldn't recall when she had a good hearty laugh that lifted her spirits. *Did I really become so serious that I forgot the simple pleasures in life?* What exactly did the world up here entail?

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When Kenneth arrived on April 1st, she was relieved to find out what was going on in Omaha. She ran out to the cabin to meet him. Kenneth smiled at her as he stepped out of the seaplane. "Hi, Beth. How has it been?"

"Long and boring," she replied. "I don't know how I can survive the next three months. Did you bring any books or magazines?"

"I did bring some books and magazines that you requested from last time. Has it really been that bad here?"

"Ryan and I have worked out a system where we don't have to see each other for longer than a couple of seconds."

"Your dad had hoped by now you two would have worked out your differences but it's apparently going to take more time."

She sighed. "That is doubtful."

"Your parents remain optimistic."

"I'm surprised my mom is going along with this scheme."

He shrugged. "She wants to see you happy. A career can't take the place of love."

She shook her head. "Anyway, how is my proposal for improving work conditions going?"

"They are in place and seem to be satisfactory."

Her eyes lit up at her accomplishment. It was nice to know she could do something worthwhile. "Is there anything else I can do for work while I am here?"

"No. Everything is fine."

She sighed. Things would only continue in their boredom.

Another man emerged from the seaplane.

"Oh, I brought Jeff Cummins to take care of the septic tank. Are there any other things that need attention while I am here?"

"No."

She said hi to Jeff before he went to take care of the septic tank.

"I will bring more gasoline to the shed and bring in the grocery items." Kenneth paused. "I know you're not going to like this but your parents packed you a care package, of sorts."

She wondered why he said she wouldn't like it. He handed her a large rectangular box that was light in weight. "Should I accept it?"

"You never know. You might be in the mood for

romance in the next three months."

"Is this a dress?"

"If it helps you feel better, Mr. Jackson sent Ryan a suit."

"I'm not going to wear it but I'll take it anyway just so they don't send something else next time."

"I'll bring in the groceries soon."

She nodded and went back into the cabin.

Ryan came out of the shower. He was drying his wet hair with a towel.

"Kenneth is here. It's a good thing you're out of the shower because he brought someone to work on the septic system," she told him.

"Oh good. I have a couple of things to give my dad." He threw the towel on the couch and grabbed a letter and a manila folder. Then he raced out of the cabin.

Curious, she went to the door and watched as he ran up to Kenneth who had a box in his arms. Kenneth set the box down and took the envelope and folder from him and took it back to the seaplane. He brought Ryan a box similar to the one he gave her. As Kenneth talked to him, probably telling him he wouldn't like it, Ryan opened the box. Even from the distance she was at, she could tell he was upset by the contents in the box. He threw it on the ground and stomped on it. Then he ran back to the cabin and ripped a piece of paper from his drawing pad.

"Did you open your box?" he asked her, his face red.

"No. Not yet." Was it that bad? Maybe she shouldn't open it.

"I can't take it anymore. Aren't you tired of being controlled by our parents? Do they honestly think this is going to work?" He angrily wrote something on the paper. "They didn't even bring any kind of junk food or soda. What I wouldn't give for some chocolate! Instead, they're giving us things that we don't need."

She didn't see that they needed junk food. Apparently, Ryan didn't agree. "I'm sorry, Ryan. I told my dad not to send that stuff up."

"Why?"

"Because of my weight."

He stared at her as if she was crazy.

She sighed. "I just lost twenty pounds. I don't need to gain it back."

"What was wrong with the way you looked before? Personally, I thought you looked better." He folded up the paper. "Well, I need to eat something good for a change. I haven't had anything to eat in two days because if I have to make another peanut butter sandwich or bowl of cereal, I'll go nuts. And I can't cook anything else."

He didn't wait for her reply. He ran back over to Kenneth who had put the ruined box with its contents back into the seaplane. Ryan gave him the letter he had just written.

*Did he really mean it? Was he content with the way I looked before I lost the weight?* She assumed that men only liked women with model thin bodies. She had been on the chubby side, though not overweight.

She went to the bedroom and looked at the box in her hands. After a moment's hesitation, she opened it, not knowing whether to be appalled or embarrassed to see make-up, jewelry, a dress, shoes, perfume and birth control pills. She reluctantly picked up the note and read it.

*"By now, we are assuming you have found that Ryan isn't as bad as you feared. We have included some items you might find to enhance your honeymoon. And in case you don't want children right away, we added something practical. Love, Mom and Dad."*

She immediately threw the note back into the box and shoved the box under the bed. She could understand why Ryan threw a fit when he looked in his box. She figured his box held

similar items. She shuddered at the thought of her parents taking such an active interest in her sex life. *Like it's any of their business!* She decided she wouldn't mention the box to Ryan, and she hoped he wouldn't bring it up either.

She went back to the living room and helped Kenneth put the boxes into the kitchen. To her surprise, Ryan joined them.

"Is there anything decent to eat here?" he asked Kenneth.

"Just the same kind of items I brought last month," Kenneth replied.

She opened the boxes and started sorting through them. "There are some good foods here."

"But I can't cook any of this. The only things I know how to make are sandwiches, and there isn't any meat. There are just peanut butter jars." Ryan groaned. "I'll never do another peanut butter commercial for as long as I live. Peanut butter, it sticks to you better than glue."

She laughed. When he looked at her, she explained, "I thought it was funny. I just got a mental image of kids using peanut butter for glue in their schools. Can't you picture peanut butter coming out of the glue bottles?"

"Since when do you like anything I think up?"

She blinked in surprise. Why was he upset with her? "I always thought you had clever ideas for the commercials you worked on."

"Yeah right." He clearly didn't believe her.

Now she was upset. "I don't know what you're talking about. My dad updates me on your ideas."

"You only like the commercials because of Jacob."

"No. I like your stuff too. Both of you are very talented."

"Oh really? Then why did you tell Ben and Zack that the only reason I have a job is because my dad owns the company?"

"I didn't tell them that."

"Yes, you did. It was at the Henderson party."

"I told them that they only have a job because they're friends with you and your dad owns the company. I didn't tell them I don't like your work. I don't remember my exact words but I did say you had talent. I may not like you but that doesn't mean I don't appreciate clever commercials that actually treat women with respect. I'm tired of watching commercials where women are barely wearing anything. You and Jacob show good taste. I'm sure that even when you're doing your own work, you'll continue along that line of thought."

He looked at her as if trying to determine whether to believe her or not.

"It's true, Ryan. She's often complimented your work," Kenneth added.

He glanced back and forth between them.

She looked over at Kenneth who shrugged.

Ryan gritted his teeth and stomped out of the cabin.

She rolled her eyes. "What have I been telling you, Kenneth? He's impossible. You can't even compliment him without him going ballistic. Be sure to tell my parents that this is who I've had to deal with for the past month."

"Maybe the lack of junk food and soda have done some damage. I'll see if I can come back in the next day or two with some stuff he'll want to eat."

That was probably a good idea, though she hated the thought of that stuff being in her sight. She turned her attention back to the food and toilet items so she could put them away.

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Later that evening, she decided to make Ryan two cheeseburgers and potato salad. She couldn't bring herself to make french fries since her own cheeseburger was fattening enough. She didn't realize he had nothing to eat but peanut butter

sandwiches and cereal for a month. Even if she didn't like him, she couldn't cook a meal while he suffered. She would hate to confine herself to the same meals every single day.

When she realized he was sitting on his favorite rock by the river, she finished preparing the meal and went outside to talk to him. She wasn't sure what she should say. She walked over to him, aware that he was still upset. *What did I say that was so wrong?*

She cleared her throat, suddenly feeling awkward. "I made two cheeseburgers and some potato salad for you. Dinner's ready if you want to eat it."

He looked up from the river. "You made me something to eat?"

Why did he seem surprised? "Well, you said you had trouble cooking, so I thought I'd make something for you. I usually make too many things to eat and thought you might want to help me eat dinner."

"Thank you," he replied.

She shrugged. "It's no big deal. Do you want me to bring the food out here?"

"No. I'll come into the cabin." He stood up. "After dinner, would you mind talking to me?"

She wondered what he wanted to discuss after not talking to her for nearly a month. "Okay," she finally replied. She led him to the cabin and asked him if he wanted to eat in the kitchen or living room.

"Am I going to make a mess in the living room?" he asked uncertainly. "I want to make a list before I talk to you and it would be easier to do that out there since the coffee table is bigger than the kitchen table."

"Just try to stay over the plate and use a napkin, okay?"

He nodded.

She handed him his plate and a glass of juice. She didn't know what he wanted to talk about and she wasn't sure she

wanted to know. She slowly ate her meal before she rinsed off her plate and glass and put them into the dishwasher. She walked out to the living room and offered to take his empty plate and glass in for him since he was busy writing out his list.

Startled, he jerked up.

"That must be some list," she commented as she took his plate and glass.

"Unfortunately, it is," he softly replied. Turning back to her, he said, "I do appreciate you sharing your dinner with me. You're a great cook."

She smiled. "I took some cooking classes while in college. It was nice to cook for someone besides myself for a change. I'll share my meals with you for now on." She stepped toward the kitchen. "Oh, before I forget, Kenneth said he will come back in a day or two to bring you some junk food and soda. I don't know what you said to him out there but it made a big impression on him."

"I lost it. I think being stuck out here for a month hasn't been good for me. I never would have smashed a box and yelled at him like that under ordinary circumstances."

"It was a long month." She took a deep breath. "Well, when you're ready to talk, let me know."

She returned to the kitchen and started the dishwasher. She wasn't sure if she should go to her bedroom or not since he wanted to speak with her, so she sat at the kitchen table and waited for him to tell her he was ready. She was afraid and anxious about talking to him. She missed having someone to talk to, but she would have chosen someone other than him if she was given the choice. Finally, he came to the kitchen and sat across from her at the table. She tried to relax but couldn't.

"I wouldn't ask you all these questions if I had someone else to go to about this," he quietly spoke. "They may not seem relevant and some will bring up parts of the past neither one of us

want to dwell on, but I have to find out the truth because it has suddenly occurred to me that those who I thought were my friends may not be my friends after all."

She had no idea who he was talking about but realized that this wasn't going to be a pleasant conversation. She was ready to say that she wouldn't have any part in it when the sad look in his eyes stopped her. She cautiously nodded.

"All right." He took a deep breath and looked down at the paper. "I'm going to start at the beginning and work my way forward. Shortly after you started going to St. Mark High School, Ben was supposed to give you a note I wrote asking if you wanted to go to the Homecoming dance with me. Did he actually do that?"

"What are you talking about?"

He anxiously tapped the pencil on the table. "Did Ben give you anything from me?"

"Yes, he did." She struggled to force aside her bitterness. Did they really have to go through this? "But it wasn't what you said it was. He gave me a note with a dog bone attached to it. The message in the note told me to go back to the kennels where I belonged." She stood up. "I can't go through this again. Do you really want to make me relive this?"

Before she could leave, he grabbed her wrist. "Wait. Please."

She paused but refused to look at him.

"I never sent that. I would never have sent something like that. I was too shy to approach you so I was going to leave my note in your locker. I was going to ask you to the Homecoming dance, but Ben said you didn't know me so he would give you the note and tell you who I was so you'd know who was asking you to the dance. I was never good with girls, and Ben was so confident that I let him talk me into it. When he came back to me, he said that you laughed and said you'd never consider going out with

someone as pathetic as me."

She wasn't sure what to think or how to feel, so she just sat back down. He released his hold on her.

He looked back at his list. "Do you remember the church fair your first year at the school?"

*This is going to be a long night. He's actually going to check off that long list of events in his life.* He had already checked off the first question he asked her.

"Yes," she replied, resigned to the task ahead of her.

"Do you remember the charcoal drawing I did?"

"That was twelve years ago. I don't remember details from that far back."

"It was a drawing of a tree. I used the white from the paper to represent the snow on the bare branches, and there was a squirrel in the hole of the tree."

"I remember it. I liked it."

"You thought it was good?" He seemed pleased.

"You were gifted in that area. Look, I may not have liked the way you and your friends acted but I tried to be fair in making judgments on your work."

He crossed that item off his list.

"What is the significance of all of this?" she asked.

"Zack said you called that exhibit unimaginative and boring."

"I didn't say anything like that."

"Do you see my point? I didn't send you a dog bone and a cruel note. I don't know why, but my so-called friends made a decision to lie to you and me about what the other one has been saying all these years. And I'm sure if I go through everything on here, I'll discover that what I thought happened didn't really happen. The last one being that comment Ben and Zack made about how you said that if it weren't for Jacob Hackman, I wouldn't be successful because I have no talent."

"I do see what you're getting at, but you didn't have to join them in making fun of me."

"I know. And I'm sorry." He went to his next item.

She didn't share his enthusiasm for this but figured he needed to do it. This was something he had to work through in his mind and it wasn't going to be easy for him. Why was she going through this with him? Because she was tired of being alone all the time. Even if they went back to their schedule the next day, it was nice to have someone to talk to for that night.

# Chapter Twelve



After Ryan finished working through the list with Elizabeth, she went to bed. He spent the rest of the night unable to cool his anger. He wrote Ben and Zack each a letter telling them exactly what he thought of them for lying to him and Elizabeth. He didn't understand why they did it. *And why are they still doing it?* What did they have to gain by doing it? He was certain it wasn't confined to Elizabeth. He felt like such an idiot. How much of his life was dictated by what they did?

Zack had fixed him up with Carmen. Obviously, there was an underlying reason for it, though he couldn't imagine what it might be. Perhaps it was because Carmen was devastatingly beautiful. Elizabeth wasn't drop dead gorgeous, but she was pretty. But not pretty enough for them. It wasn't their business who he wanted to date in high school. If Elizabeth had been

doing drugs, he could understand why they would have a problem with him going out with her. Even now she irked them. *Because she stands up to them. She doesn't let them control her like I let them control me.* Well, the control was over. He was going to start taking responsibility for his own life instead of following what others wanted him to do.

He didn't fall asleep until six in the morning, and even then, he dropped on the couch, fully dressed and managed a fitful sleep. When he got up, it was ten. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He saw that Elizabeth was taking another walk. She went out every morning at this time. Now that the air was warmer, she stayed out for longer periods of time. He didn't feel like taking a shower or shaving but did as a force of habit.

Once he was dressed, he was surprised to find a note for him on the kitchen table. She had saved him some eggs and ham she made for breakfast that morning. Considering all the grief he and his "friends" caused her, he was surprised she would cook anything for him. She was right. He didn't have to be mean to her, because the fact he thought she rejected him didn't validate his ill treatment of her. She didn't deserve what he put her through. He had felt bad about it five years ago, which was why he stopped doing it. But after finding out she wasn't who he thought she was, he felt even worse.

He wasn't sure if she wanted to go back to the schedule they had agreed on the previous month. He was tired of not having someone to talk to, so he didn't want to go back to it. He had already told his father off in the letter he wrote to him. His father had received it by now. He let his father know that he was miserable up in Alaska and that he had no right to send him somewhere he didn't want to be with someone he didn't want to be with. He worked hard to get to the position he was at in the company. It wasn't right for his father to fire him just because he didn't want to marry someone his father wanted him to be with.

He was more than happy to send that letter to him via Kenneth. He would have enjoyed it more if he could've told his father what he thought in person but a letter was sufficient.

When Kenneth gave him that ridiculous package from his parents that included a suit, a bottle of wine, wine glasses and condoms--of all things!, he lost it. He hoped he destroyed everything in that package. He decided that two could play this game, so he wrote his parents a quick note telling them that if they pulled anything as sneaky and underhanded as that again, he would make it a point to never let them see the grandchildren they were so concerned about having. Really, if they wanted to play dirty, he could meet the challenge. He wasn't going to idly sit by and take it anymore. And that included not taking anymore manipulation from Zack or Ben.

When Elizabeth returned from her walk, he noticed that she had pulled her hair back into a ponytail. He hadn't realized her hair had gotten long enough to do that. She looked cute. He watched as she hung up her coat and put her boots away. *She's as clean and neat as ever.* Instead of being annoyed by it, he found that it was a funny kind of quirky behavior. He wondered what she would do if he dropped a piece of lint on the floor. She'd probably race on over with a vacuum cleaner to pick it up. He chuckled, despite his effort not to.

She turned around and looked apprehensively at him.

"I'm not laughing at you," he quickly assured her. "I was just recalling the time when you vacuumed my shirt. Looking back on it, it was funny."

She relaxed. "I guess it was."

She headed for the bedroom.

"Do we have to go back to the schedule?" he asked.

She paused and looked at him. "I thought it would be appropriate."

He sighed. *She really doesn't like me. And who can blame her?*

"To be honest, I would like to have someone to talk to. It gets lonely here after awhile." It wasn't easy for him to admit that to her but he figured he couldn't make her hate him anymore than she already did, so what did he have to lose by opening up to her?

She nodded. "It does get lonely."

He moved over to the other side of the couch and offered her a seat on the opposite end of it. When she sat down, he breathed a sigh of relief.

She stared ahead at the television.

His mind drew a blank. What would she be interested in talking about? He tapped the letters against his right leg and glanced around the room.

"Are those more lists?" she asked.

He turned to her. "No. They're letters to Ben and Zack. I'm calling them on their lies."

Her eyes grew wide. "You didn't mention me, did you?"

"Of course, I did. I'm really pissed off at them about all the things they said you told them that didn't actually happen."

"I would rather you didn't say anything about me."

"Why?"

"Because I worked hard to act like what they say doesn't bother me, and if they find out that they can get to me, then they'll make my life worse than it was in high school and college. At least now they don't think their words have any effect on me and I'm able to preserve my ego."

He understood her point. "Then what I am supposed to do with my anger? If I can't tell them off, then what can I do? I don't want them to think that when I get back to Omaha, I'm going to put up with it anymore. I don't even plan on talking to them after all of this."

"You're looking to put closure on the past."

He wasn't sure what she meant but figured it was something she learned about in her psychology courses.

"You can tell them off if you want," she said. "All I ask is that you leave me out of it."

"But they're bound to think you had something to do with my attitude change since you're the only person up here with me."

"Just don't tell them anything I said. I don't want them to know how much they hurt me. It was a painful time in my life, and I really don't want to go through that again."

"I can't let them manipulate me anymore."

"Then don't. Just follow your heart and do what you want to do regardless of what they think. It's your life. You're the one who has to live with the consequences of your decisions."

He knew she was right, but years of following others weren't that easy to dismiss. However, he was beginning to find the strength to do that, wasn't he? He did send his father a letter letting him know what he thought of this joke of a marriage. Then he included his ideas for the commercials he had spent his first two weeks working on. He wondered if his father would consider those ideas after he read the letter.

She spoke up, interrupting his thoughts. "Personally, I'm relieved to find out things happened the way they did."

"Why?"

"Now I know that all the teasing and ridicule I endured wasn't my fault. I spent years wondering what was wrong with me because people didn't like me. I tried changing my personality to be who others wanted me to be. I knew I couldn't do much about the way I looked, so I went through a lot of diets to look like the popular girls. But no matter what I did, I was still unpopular."

"You had friends who backed you up when you weren't around."

"That's nice to know. Deep down, I feared that they were laughing at me behind my back."

He sighed. "Some of them did, but there were a few that

didn't."

"A few is better than none."

"But you aren't afraid to be yourself now."

"No, I'm not. In my third year of college, I decided that if people didn't like who I was, then I was better off having no friends instead of trying to be someone I wasn't."

"Did you compromise your beliefs to win people's approval?"

She nodded. "I did their papers, their homework, and bought them things they wanted."

"Did you have sex in order to get a date?"

"No." She looked shocked that he would even suggest such a thing.

He shrugged. "Sorry. Some girls did. Some probably still do."

"I thought everyone knew I was a virgin. Ben and Zack broadcasted it enough."

"Who knows if anything they say is true or not?"

"I should probably thank them because if it weren't for them, I wouldn't have applied myself at school. When I lived in Georgia, my best grade was a B, and I got that in music class. When I moved to Omaha, I didn't have much else to do besides school work, so I began to study and my grades improved. If I was busy having fun with friends, I wouldn't have taken school seriously and I might not be where I am today."

"I'm glad you didn't let us ruin your life," he softly stated.

"It was either let you bring me down or rise above my circumstances and do the best I could."

"Well, you succeeded. I heard you graduated from undergraduate school with a 3.97 grade point average, and you got a 4.0 with your master's degree. You scare Ben and Zack now."

"I guess turnabout is fair play. Maybe they were insecure the entire time and I just didn't realize it."

He didn't know about Ben or Zack, but he knew that her analysis applied to him.

"Anyway," she continued, "now that you know what they're about, you can make your decisions with your facts in place."

"I haven't had much in common with them since I got my bachelor's degree."

"So why do you continue to associate with them?"

"I've been asking myself the same question."

"And?"

"I don't know."

"You've been asking yourself the same question for five years and you don't know the answer?"

He didn't like the way that sounded. Though she seemed to be sincere in her desire to help him, her words bothered him. Did she honestly think he was a moron?

"Maybe if you reversed the question," she began, "you would have an easier time answering it. Why do they associate with you?"

She struck a nerve without realizing it, and it disturbed him. He wanted to forget about talking to her, but he knew she wasn't trying to hurt his feelings so he stayed seated. He reluctantly answered, "All of my life, I've gone along with people like Ben and Zack because I was afraid if I didn't, they would criticize me. It's hard not to be liked."

"It is hard."

She knew this from experience and since he had a part in that, it was even more difficult to hear.

"But it's still easier than not liking yourself for going against your values," she said.

He nodded. "Yes. I know. That's why I'm putting a stop to it. That's what these letters are all about. I'll rewrite them and leave you out of it."

"Thank you."

"You do a great job of hiding the fact that they can get to you." He sighed. "If I didn't like my job at Jackson Advertising so much, I would have refused to go on this crazy trip."

"My job is the only reason I went along with it too."

"Are you mad at your parents for doing this?"

"No. I know they think they're doing something good for me, but I'm not going to let them choose my husband for me. I'm not even sure I want to get married."

"I know I want to get married."

"Well, we aren't going to let them make the decision on who to marry. We'll go back, get the annulment and make it clear that they won't be putting us in a similar situation with someone else in the future."

"I couldn't agree more."

"We have three more months. Maybe those will go quicker than last month. You know, Kenneth is coming back soon with goodies for you to eat and drink. So that should make part of this ordeal easier."

He smiled. "I can't wait for that."

"I'm going to make lunch. Is there anything you want to eat?"

"Anything that doesn't have peanut butter in it."

She smiled back. "You got it."

"Thank you, Elizabeth. I guess you're not so bad after all."

"Maybe you aren't either."

He grinned.

"You can call me Beth if you want. It's easier to say than the whole name."

He watched her as she went into the kitchen. Beth. He liked that name.

# Chapter Thirteen



The next day when Kenneth arrived, Ryan gave him the letters he rewrote to Ben and Zack letting them know he discovered that they had lied to him in the past and that he wouldn't tolerate being manipulated anymore. He wasn't even sure he wanted to see them again but refrained from ending their friendship altogether though deep down, he felt it was inevitable as long as they stayed on their course and he continued along his. He knew one thing for sure, he was tired of going from one date to another. He wanted to settle down with a good woman and have children. He decided when he got back to Omaha, he was going to get serious about looking for that woman. He certainly wasn't going to let Ben or Zack or his father make that decision for him. In fact, he wasn't going to ask for their input on anything. Jacob might be a good judge of character though. Jacob had good sense and never

tried to dictate how he did anything. *Jacob's a good friend. If there's someone I need to listen to, it's him.*

After he handed Kenneth the letters, Kenneth told him, "Your father got your letters and said this trip up here has already been good for you. He said it's about time you stood up for yourself."

That wasn't quite the response he was expecting, so he didn't know what to think. "Okay," he slowly said.

"He likes your ideas on the potato chip account but says you need more work on the jewelry and camping accounts. For jewelry, he said to ask for Elizabeth's advice since you could use a woman's opinion on what is romantic. For camping, he recommended you think of family time. You know, imagine what it would be like if you had a wife and children out here in the wilderness."

He shook his head in disgust.

"You will note that he didn't say that the wife was Elizabeth," Kenneth reassured him. "I think he got your message loud and clear."

That made him feel better.

"I did explain your reaction to the package he and your mother sent," Kenneth added. "I figured your action spoke volumes as to what you think of this arrangement."

"Did it do any good? Is he going to let go of this ridiculous charade?"

"No. He thinks that you are showing individual growth which will make you an excellent vice president. Anyway, he is looking forward to your ideas on the jewelry and camping accounts next month."

"This isn't funny, Kenneth," he grumbled, noting the older man's amusement.

"For you, I'm sure it's not." He turned back to the seaplane and said, "I have several boxes of fattening and delicious

foods and drinks. Would you like to help me carry them in?"

His mood brightened. "I sure would!"

Once the four boxes were in the kitchen and Kenneth left, he quickly opened them and almost jumped up and down when he saw bags of potato chips, pretzels, beef jerky, pepperoni and sausage with cheese, chocolate bars and soda. He eagerly filled a large bowl with candy bars and potato chips. Then he took a six pack of soda and ran over to the couch where he turned the television on.

Elizabeth came back from her walk along the river ten minutes later. "I didn't mean to miss Kenneth," she said when she walked over to the couch.

"He brought good stuff this time," he grinned, his mouth full of food. He took a gulp of soda to help swallow the food and patted the cushion next to him. "Sit down and share this with me. I'm even watching Max Newell."

She glanced at the TV. "Don't you think it's ironic that he's talking about losing weight?"

He shrugged. "We haven't had anything this good to eat since we got here. A few days of pigging out isn't going to do any damage."

"I don't think so." She turned to her bedroom.

"Oh come on! It's Max Newell. You never miss his show."

She stopped and turned around. "Yes, but I can't watch him with all that junk food in front of me."

"Why not? This stuff is great." He shoved a handful of potato chips in his mouth.

"It took me a long time to get over my cravings for those kinds of foods. If I start eating that again, I'll gain the weight back."

"So?"

She groaned as if she couldn't believe he would even say

that. "You really want to know why I need to keep the weight off?"

He was about to eat a candy bar when he saw her walk over to him and put her hands on her hips. *She's getting ready to tell me off, isn't she?* This seemed to be one of those moments where he wouldn't get the answer right no matter what his response was. He had a couple of similar arguments with Carmen so he knew that this wasn't going to go well. Except with Carmen, it had been related to her animal rights group or her five stray cats that she occasionally took in his car when he took her to the park.

She glanced at the television and pointed to it. "Would you date her?"

He looked at the brunette on the screen. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because she's married."

She huffed and then pointed to a redhead on the screen. "How about her?"

He cringed. "No, I wouldn't date her either."

Looking satisfied, she asked, "Why not?"

"Because she's twice my age."

She grunted.

"I wouldn't date the other woman either because she's too young. What is she? Sixteen or something?" He didn't understand what her problem was. *Once again, she's making a big deal out of nothing.*

"Okay," she began, uncrossing her arms. "Take away the fact that one woman is married, the other is too old and the other is too young. Let's say they are all single and your age. Would you date them then?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"The married one lives in Akron, Ohio. The old one lives in Seattle, Washington, and the young one lives in Jackson,

Mississippi. I have no desire to go to any of those places."

"You are impossible!"

*Why is she getting upset?* "Okay. Fine. I'd go out with them. Happy?"

"Why would you go out with them?"

"Because it's pissing you off that I won't go out with them."

She gritted her teeth and sat next to him.

"Great. Have a candy bar." He offered her the candy bar he had been holding. "The soda is warm but I have more in the refrigerator."

"No." She shoved his hand away.

"Aren't you interested in eating this?"

"Of course, I am."

"There are boxes of this stuff in the kitchen. We can have a whole bunch and still eat more for the rest of the month. So you don't have to worry about eating so much that there won't be any left over."

"Putting candy and chips in front of a person who's struggled to lose weight is insensitive."

His eyes widened. He wasn't expecting this. "Are you on that weight thing again?"

"Did you not notice that those women are overweight?"

"Yeah. I did get the point of the show when I saw the words 'wanting to lose weight' across the screen."

"Why haven't I ever seen you date anyone who wore a size bigger than a six?"

He sighed and set the bowl on the table. He picked up the soda and drank some of it before answering her. "I don't know what size six means."

"It's the pant size. I consider a size six to be thin."

"What size are you?"

She gasped. "That's none of your business."

"If I know what size you are, then I can make an accurate comparison of what a size six means."

"Fine. I'm a size twelve. Carmen was a size six."

"Okay. Now I have an idea of what you're talking about."

"Yes and all the women you date are thinner than her."

"They are also models. They have to be that way or they won't get photo shoots. Ben and Zack are really big into swimsuit models."

"Why did you go out with those models?"

"Most of the time, I had no idea who I was going to date until I met her. I was fixed up on a lot of blind dates. I don't exactly have an easy time meeting women."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Well, it's true. But I'm going to force myself to get over my shyness around women when I get back to Omaha. I'll have to take more risks."

"So you have been fixed up with everyone you ever went out with?"

"Pretty much. Carmen was the only one who could manage to have a real conversation with me. She obsessed a little too much over animals and her acting career, but she could get her mind on other things."

"So the fact that she was a gorgeous blond had nothing to do with you wanting to marry her?"

"I see what you're getting at. Alright, I'll tell you the truth. Yes, I like attractive women. What man doesn't? Don't you check out good looking men? How many overweight men have you gone out with?"

"None have asked me."

"Hmm..." He looked back at the TV. "Would you date him?" He pointed to the overweight middle-aged man on the screen.

"No."

"Why not?" He imitated her voice.

"Because he has a mustache."

"That's lame. Why don't you just admit that you are just as shallow as I am?"

"I really don't like mustaches."

"Uh huh." He didn't believe her for a second.

"It's true. They look suspicious to me. It's as if the men who are wearing them are ready to commit a crime or something. I couldn't trust a man who wore one."

He laughed. "You are a hypocrite. You can't even admit that you like attractive men. Look, if I met an overweight woman who was good looking and had a great personality, I would date her. My mom is overweight, in case you didn't notice, and I happen to think she's a terrific woman."

She cooled down. "You win."

"I didn't realize we were having a contest." He picked the bowl back up and handed her an unopened soda can. "Go for it. You could stand to gain some weight."

"Excuse me?"

"When you lost weight, you lost weight in some areas you should have more weight. I like a woman with curves, and I'm sure there are other men out there who do too."

She looked disgusted.

"Are you terrified of being sexually appealing? Is that why you wear baggy clothes and try to look like the stereotypical librarian by pulling your hair back and wearing glasses?"

"I only wear glasses when I watch TV or read. I wear these clothes to remind myself of how I don't want to go back to the way I was. I pull my hair back to keep it out of my face."

"Since you can't fit into those clothes properly, go ahead and eat some junk food. There was nothing wrong with the way you looked before." He raised an eyebrow. "Do you know what happens when the librarian lets her hair down? She turns into a

sexy goddess."

She rolled her eyes.

He set the bowl between them on the couch and changed the channel to a comedy. "You need to lighten up. Life doesn't have to be serious all the time. You don't have to eat or drink any of these wonderful and delicious foods, but if you want to, help yourself. There's more in the kitchen too."

She settled into the couch and relaxed. He was pleased to note she finally drank one can of soda and had one candy bar before she went to her bedroom to read.

# Chapter Fourteen



Elizabeth found that she was beginning to enjoy talking to Ryan now that they had moved from hating each other to being friends. The next two weeks passed and she gradually came out of her bedroom more often and sat on the couch with him to watch TV or talk. It was also more fun to cook for someone who appreciated her meals. He was easy to please, and he was easy to influence, which explained why Ben and Zack were able to get by with so much in the past. He was eager to please people and went out of his way to help her if she needed something. *I guess men want to be accepted as much as women do.*

When she went out for her walks and listened to her ipod, he would sit on his large rock and draw something on his drawing pad. He said he was working on several ideas for some possible commercials. He was serious when he worked. He examined his

surroundings with intense scrutiny for awhile, draw and look around again. She wondered what he was working on but he seemed unusually protective of his work. "I don't like to share my ideas until I've settled on the right one." She accepted his reasoning and left him alone with his drawing pad and his thoughts. When he wasn't working, he seemed to be a pretty laid back and easy going person. She had no clue he had that serious side to him.

The weather was getting up in the 30s and 40s, and since she had adjusted to the colder climate, she felt more comfortable staying outside in her coat. She didn't mind turning off her ipod once in awhile to dwell on her thoughts. Her past no longer haunted her. It felt strange to be grateful for the way things had turned out. She liked the independent and hard working person she had become. She still wouldn't choose to associate with Ben or Zack but realized that they lost their ability to intimidate her.

After watching television with Ryan for a week, she began to realize that he talked about the commercials they saw, and it dawned on her that he was looking for her viewpoint since she was a woman. One afternoon, a commercial for a diamond necklace came on the screen.

"What do you think of this commercial?" he asked her.

"I think it's okay," she replied. "It's the same as any other jewelry commercial."

"It doesn't grab your interest?"

"Not really. I mean, a diamond necklace is nice but all of these commercials show the man or a child giving the woman the gift. I realize that the advertisers are looking for a way to portray romance, and it is romantic, but it's also predictable."

"What would make it more appealing to you?"

She paused to think about it. "It would be nice to see some humor in it. It would certainly catch my attention if I could link it with something funny or unexpected."

He grinned. "You are so serious. I didn't even think you enjoyed comedies."

"I see your point. I don't take time to laugh like I did when I was a kid. I guess I let high school and college push that part of me down." She looked over at him. He seemed sad whenever she mentioned the past. "You need to forgive yourself. There's no sense in mulling over something you can't do anything about."

"You're right."

It was nice to know that he did care about the fact that he had hurt her, though she didn't want to tell him that. She turned his attention back to the television. "You see that commercial?" She motioned to the ad for a seafood restaurant. "The mother is chasing her children around all day and cleaning up after them. It's funny to watch because it happens in real life to all mothers. I especially like the part where her seven year old son dumps a bottle of baby powder all over his little brother's head. When her husband comes home from work, he takes her out on a date to the restaurant so she can unwind. The reason why this is romantic is because he sees the stress she's been under during the day and attempts to make her life easier, even if it's for one night. Romance isn't just jewelry and holding hands or kissing. It is in the little details of every day life. Women want to be cared for and loved. Simple actions like helping with a chore means that her man loves her. I can't tell you how many women I've talked to whose husbands come home from work and expect her to take care of everything. It's disgusting. What woman is going to be honestly happy with a man who gives her a diamond necklace one day out of the entire year but doesn't lift a finger to help her with the daily housework?"

"So if you were to find a necklace in a load of laundry your husband just folded, that would be romantic?"

She shrugged. "That would be okay. But I was thinking

along the lines of something with humor too. It doesn't have to involve housework. I was just giving an example of what I think is romantic. There are other things that are romantic too. Animals are cute."

"You like animals?"

"I don't have a pet but I think they're cute to watch on commercials."

"Carmen said you had no compassion for animals."

She rolled her eyes. "She wanted me to donate money to her animal rescue fund so a certain bird could be protected in the environment."

"I remember that."

"Well, I didn't have a lot of money at the time and decided to give it to the abused women's shelter instead. I thought taking care of people was more important than an endangered bird. She didn't care much for me after that, but I'm still glad I made the choice I did."

"She never did tell me the details of that event and I didn't care to ask. Why do you think she and Preston tried to get us to be friends?"

She considered his question. "I think that was an excuse they used to see each other. I suspect that they wanted to be with each other as soon as they met."

"They met in October and she said they didn't develop an attachment until Christmas."

"That's probably when they realized they shared romantic feelings for each other. In a way, I think they did care about us."

"They should have had the decency to break things off as soon as they realized they liked each other that way."

"I suspect that they got a thrill out of sleeping with each other behind our backs."

"You think they were having sex?"

She nodded. "It didn't cross your mind?"

"No, it didn't. I didn't think she was interested in sex until marriage."

"Well, I caught him with a package of condoms in his car. He said it was for a friend but I didn't believe him. I thought he was waiting for me to be ready for sex but he never even approached me about it. When I found out about him and Carmen, it made sense."

"But she told me she was waiting until her wedding night."

"She was lying. I saw her picking up condoms at the pharmacy. I assumed you two were doing it."

He looked upset. "No. Not that I would do it until I married her anyway. I took that abstinence program in high school. I've heard enough horror stories of unwed pregnancies and pictures of sexually transmitted diseases to scare me for a lifetime. Condoms aren't 100% effective."

"I'm surprised. From the way you and Ben and Zack acted, no one would suspect you were still a virgin."

"That's because I didn't want them to make fun of me. It was hard enough going through their ridicule in high school and my first year of college. Finally, I lied about having sex just to get them to stop."

"Were you facing sexual harassment at work?"

"I don't want you telling this to anyone. I would rather be sexually harassed than have them find out the truth. It's hard to be a thirty year old male virgin. People would assume that I'm either weird or impotent."

She sighed. "I understand how you feel. I think it's human nature to worry about what other people think of us. Your secret is safe with me, though it's hard to watch the harassment continue."

He seemed to be relieved.

"Ryan, part of romance is waiting. I think it's wonderful that you're committed to your values. At least, you know that is

one area of your life that no one else has been able to control. You might think that Ben and Zack are secure but they aren't. I wouldn't worry about their opinion. Besides, no decent woman would be with them. She'd rather have someone like you."

"I hope she thinks that when she meets me."

She smiled. "Just be yourself. You don't need anyone else to show her that you're a good guy. I know that this arrangement has been difficult for both of us, but I am glad I got to know you. That wouldn't have been possible in Omaha."

"I'd like to keep in touch after we get back. I don't care what Ben or Zack think about it. I'm not going to let them dictate who I talk to anymore."

"Do you even see them much?"

"Not really. We hang out in different circles now."

"So they probably won't be able to mess with you too much."

"If they even keep their jobs. My dad hinted that he was going to fire them because they aren't doing their work."

"That would only be fair. Who knows? Maybe that's the motivation they need to shape up."

He nodded. "Maybe."

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One morning after breakfast, he asked, "Can you cook a fish if I catch it?"

"My mom caught some fish when we were up here, and she and I cooked those," she replied.

"Ever since we talked about seafood, I've been wanting some fish."

"I would like to eat some too," she admitted as she collected their plates and put them in the sink. "The fish in this river taste better than the ones in restaurants. Do you know how

to fish?"

"No but I watched your dad's video on how to do it. It doesn't look that hard."

"His fishing clothes are in the bedroom closet." She rinsed off the dishes and put them in the dishwasher while he wiped up the table. After she finished, she dried her hands on the dishtowel and turned to him. "Would you like to fish now?"

"I thought I'd go for a walk with you first. I'm getting tired of the songs on my ipod."

"Do you want to switch ipods for awhile? I'd like to listen to some new music too."

"Can we still take a walk together?"

She laughed. "Sure. We can try to find a good fishing spot for you while we're out."

After they took their walk and returned, they exchanged ipods and she showed him where the fishing outfit was in the closet. When he came out of the bathroom, she grinned at the sight of him.

"Do I look ridiculous?"

"You look cute," she replied. "You're taller than my dad."

"I know it doesn't fit very well."

"It'll work. All you have to do is catch some fish. At least the weather is warm enough to sit down and be comfortable outside."

There was about two inches of snow left on the ground and the river was no longer icy. The sky was cloudy but there wasn't supposed to be any new snow for the day so it was a good time to fish. While he went to the river to fish, she decided to clean up the cabin. She was relieved that he was getting better about putting his clean clothes in the night stand. He was laying them on top of it for awhile. Cleaning didn't take too long now that she got a routine down with it. She noticed that it was early afternoon and went out to see how he was getting along with the

fishing. He was in the boat and staring blankly ahead. He was too far out for her to call out to so she went back inside. She sat down on the couch and watched some television.

Two hours later, she decided to lie down on the bed and listen to some of his music. He didn't have any audio books. He had a wide variety of playlists. Among his playlists were "Foods," "Travel," "Historical," "Body Fragrances," "Jewelry," and "Automobiles." She clicked on the "Foods" playlist and saw a variety of songs that had themes involving either eating or drinking something. She chuckled. *These must be the songs he listens to when he works on his advertising ideas.* Obviously, the technique was working for him.

After an hour, she got tired of listening to his music, so she watched TV. Halfway through the movie, Ryan came into the cabin with a cooler. She winced when he kept his muddy boots on and put the cooler in kitchen. She hopped off the couch and ran over to him, carefully avoiding the muddy footprints.

"Take your boots off!"

He set the cooler on the counter and looked at her. "I will. I just want to put this down first. It's heavy. I caught three fish today and two were pretty big." He bent down and pulled one of his boots off. She cringed as he put his muddy hand on the counter to steady himself as he took off his other boot.

"I just cleaned the cabin today," she told him. "And you come in here and dirty everything up."

He shook his head. "Are you on that cleaning kick again?"

"If you had just cleaned everything and I came in getting mud all over the place, you would get upset too."

"Fine. I'll clean it up once I take a shower."

"What?"

"I got river water all over my pants from when I took the boat out to the river and brought it back to the shore. I feel

gross."

He walked past her, carrying the boots. She sighed. "If you don't clean the mud up right away, it'll dry and be more difficult to get up."

He started to set the boots on the rug she just washed. "Don't! Please put those outside the door until I have a chance to wash them. I need to wash your clothes first."

"I can throw them all in together."

"No way. You can't put boots in with your clothes."

"Why not?" He rolled his eyes and stared at her in disbelief.

"Because they're completely different items. It's like trying to wash reds with whites. It doesn't work."

"Is that why my underwear is pink?"

She hid her disgust at his lack of knowledge. Who didn't know to do something that simple this day in age?

"Okay. Just to humor you, I'll put the boots outside." He reached out to touch the doorknob with his muddy hand.

"Stop! You're going to get that dirty. Here, let me open the door."

"I'm starting to get annoyed."

She opened the door for him. "I'm sorry, but I'm trying to minimize how much cleaning I have to do. I wish I had known you were going to be so messy. Then I would have waited to clean the cabin."

"Is there anywhere in particular you want me to put these boots?"

"Over by the welcome mat."

He put them down and entered the house. "Is there anything else I need to do or not do before I take off my clothes, put them in the washer and take a shower?"

"No. I'll take care of everything. Just don't touch anything with your left hand until you wash it."

"Okay," he grumbled.

She quickly cleaned up after him and got the fish ready to cook.

When he came back, he was clean. He chuckled.

"What's so funny?" she asked as she put the fish into the oven.

"You need to relax. A little dirt isn't going to hurt anything."

"It's hard work to keep a place clean."

"And it's hard work to catch fish."

"All you did was sit in a boat and reel in three fish. I had to clean the cabin, skin the fish, remove the bones and cook them. That's a lot more work."

"I didn't just sit in a boat and catch the fish. I had to drag the boat out of the shed and over to the river. Then I had to row out to a spot deep enough to fish. It was hard to put the anchor in while trying to stay in my spot. It's not as easy to reel a fish in as it looks. Then I had to fight the fish and put them in the cooler, drag the boat back into the shed and bring the cooler in. I'm exhausted."

"I'm exhausted too. I cleaned the kitchen and entryway twice today before I took care of the fish."

"How hard can it be to run a wet rag over things and clean some fish off?"

"Care to find out?" She crossed her arms and waited for him to respond.

"You mean, you'll actually go out there and catch fish?" He laughed. "You couldn't handle it. You can't even fill up the generator with gas because the gas container is too heavy."

"I could if I wanted to. I just don't want to."

"Because it's heavy. That boat isn't easy to push either."

"Well, I don't see you in a hurry to clean anything around here."

"I bet I could clean this cabin and make you lunch before you can catch a single fish and put everything back to where it belongs."

"You want to make this a bet?"

"Sure. It'll make things interesting."

"Okay. If I win, you have to mop the floors one time a week for a month." She hated mopping more than any of the other tasks.

"And if I win, I get to give you a shower when you come in all dirty. I wouldn't want you to sit on the couch unless you're all clean."

She shot him a "get serious" look.

"What? You'll need a shower after being out there."

"Is sex all you men think about?"

He seemed to consider her question. "Pretty much."

"But since we're not in a real marriage, you'll have to make do with something else."

He grinned. "I was teasing anyway. All right. If I win, you have to do my laundry for a month."

"I accept the challenge. When do you want to do this?"

"Next week. Same time, same place."

"Like we have anywhere else to go." She turned her attention to the oven and opened the door. "The fish are coming along nicely."

"I can't wait to eat them. Do you want me to help make a salad?"

"You've given up on having junk food for a side dish?"

"I've eaten my fill of bad food and need something healthy again. I notice you're eating more candy and chips." He took some vegetables and lettuce out of the refrigerator. "I'm going to make a salad for the side of the lunch next week. I don't suppose you'll accept peanut butter sandwiches for the main course?"

"No. It has to involve actual cooking. You have to use the stove or oven. You should make steak and mashed potatoes. I mean real mashed potatoes. Not the instant kind."

"You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?"

"I wouldn't ask you to make anything I wouldn't make."

He seemed hesitant.

"Do you want to forfeit and start mopping floors now?"

"No. I'll do it. But I need instructions."

"That's fair." Smiling, she rinsed off the vegetables. He was turning out to be more fun to hang out with than she imagined he would be.

# Chapter Fifteen



Three days later, Elizabeth sat in front of the television while Ryan was burning the trash. She found a movie that was interesting enough to grab her attention. She flipped through a magazine while the commercials played on the screen. She heard a familiar song and looked at the TV. She watched the commercial and grinned when she recognized that it was the Intensity account that Ryan and Jacob recently completed. He played the song used in that commercial a lot. It made the Top 25 Most Played Playlist in his ipod. She had to admit that it was a good commercial. The one following it was of a woman wearing a tight t-shirt and a pair of shorts that were too short. She was, of course, a gorgeous tall blond, and she sung a happy tune and held a can of soda.

Elizabeth snorted in disgust. "I bet all the men are

running out to the store to buy that soda now that they saw her."

Ryan chuckled. "Have a problem with the commercial?"

She gasped and turned around.

He was smiling while he put his coat and boots away.

She frowned. "You men are so typical. As soon as you see a scantily clad beautiful woman, you will do anything she wants."

He sat next to her. "That's not true. We can see such a woman and resist the product."

"Oh really?"

"Really."

An idea came to her. "Can I have a piece of paper and a pencil?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Are you going to write a list of things that you hate about men?"

"No. I'm going to conduct an informal experiment."

"Am I the test subject?"

"You're the only one here."

"What are you going to write?"

"I'm not saying until after I'm done. I don't want to influence the results."

He laughed. "Okay. This sounds like it might be fun." He went over to the night stand and pulled out his drawing pad. He flipped through the pad until he came to an unused page.

"When am I going to see what you're working on?" she asked.

"When I'm ready for you to." He handed the pad and pencil to her. "What do you want me to do?"

"All you have to do is watch the commercials I tell you to watch." She muted the TV. She wrote: *Thesis: Men are more influenced by commercials featuring scantily clad women than commercials featuring fully dressed women.* "You have to close your eyes. When I see a commercial I want you to watch, I'll tell you to open them.

When the commercial is over, you have to close them. The volume on the TV is muted so that the sound won't affect this experiment."

"Is this what you did in college?"

"Kind of. I did things similar to this but the topic was different." She glanced at him. "Are you ready?"

"Anytime you are."

She nodded. "Now you can't peek."

"I won't." He closed his eyes.

She waved her hand in front of him to make sure he wasn't cheating. Satisfied, she flipped through some channels until she came across a commercial that suited her study. She labeled it "FD" for 'fully dressed' woman. "Okay. You can look."

The commercial showed an attractive mother who was cooking her family a chicken dinner. She wrote "chicken" so she would remember what the commercial was about. When the commercial was over, she told him to close his eyes. She smiled when she realized he was enjoying the experiment. *It's right up his alley. He does commercial advertisements for a living.*

The second commercial she let him watch fit in under the "SC" category for 'scantily clad' woman. The woman was selling soda, so she wrote "soda" next to it. The third and fourth commercials fit under the "FD" category. One was for clean drinking water so she wrote "water" and the other one was for "coffee."

"Let me guess," he said after the fourth commercial was over. "You want me to get thirsty and hungry?"

"You'll see," she replied.

The fifth and sixth commercials went under the "SC" column. The first one was for pizza so she wrote "pizza" and the second one was for beer so she wrote "beer."

To throw him off track, she let him watch a commercial

with a couple of men playing sports.

"What does this have to do with food?" he asked.

"I'm not saying yet. Stop asking questions."

"I love it when you take charge."

She rolled her eyes but had to admit he was a good sport about playing along.

The seventh commercial was of a fully dressed woman buying orange juice. The eighth and ninth commercials were of scantily dressed women. One was of an energy drink and the other one was for a healthy cereal. Then she had him watch a commercial of children using hand soap. The tenth commercial was of a fully dressed woman eating tacos.

She turned the TV off. "Okay. Now we'll go for a walk."

He opened his eyes. "What? Is that it?"

"I'm not done yet but I can't explain what I'm doing or why until we come back. Okay?"

He shrugged. "You're the one with the Psychology degree." He followed her outside. "What are we supposed to talk about? I'm guessing discussing those commercials is out of the question."

"We can discuss the Intensity commercial I saw right before you came back."

He groaned. "I missed it? I haven't seen it yet."

"It was very well done."

"What did you like best about it?"

"I liked the fact that the women were fully dressed."

"So the product itself or the music had no affect on you?"

"It was a catchy beat. I recognized it from one of your playlists, so it caught my attention when I heard it. I was looking through a magazine when it came on. If I hadn't heard the song, I wouldn't have stopped to look at the TV."

"At least I know the song did its job."

"Did you come up with the dance number or was that

Jacob's idea?"

"I did the dance number. That was actually my favorite part of the commercial."

She noted the light cool afternoon breeze that tugged at her ponytail as they walked along the river bank. "I heard you're a good dancer."

"I'd rather come up with the choreography than dance. That was a fun number to work with."

"The men and women worked well together in it. There's something appealing about men wearing tuxedos and dancing."

"I knew it! You're just as interested in how a man looks as I am in how a woman looks."

She shrugged. "Well, that's true to a point, but men and women view love differently. I can look at a good looking man and not think about sex. Considering that men think of sex most of the time, I think it's important for a woman to watch what she's wearing. That's why I had to mention it at the sexual harassment seminar. I don't think men have any excuse to harass a woman but the woman has to do her part too. I try to be fair to both sides."

"Well, Darlene isn't wearing anything seductive anymore."

"Good. Maybe she'll find a decent man now." She stopped and glanced at her watch. "I think it's time to head back."

They turned around and continued walking.

"I notice it's staying lighter out later," he commented.

"Pretty soon it will be light all the time."

"So it's true that there are days in the summer that never end?"

"Well, in Barrow, Alaska, there are a couple of months where it's daylight all the time in the summer, but we're farther south, so June is the month where it won't get dark. There will be some twilight around two in the morning, but the sun will quickly

rise again."

"That's hard to imagine."

"Once you see it for yourself, you'll understand. It is more difficult to sleep but you don't feel so tired because your mind is stuck in daytime mode. It helps if you have something to cover your eyes at night."

"I didn't think to bring anything like that. I better ask Kenneth for it when he comes on May 1st."

"That's only a week and a half away. This month has gone by faster than last month. Before we know it, we can get back to Omaha and put this whole thing behind us. All right. We're back. Are you ready to conclude the experiment?"

"Sure."

After they sat back down, she picked up the drawing pad and reviewed the commercials and said, "I was thinking of making dinner. Is there anything in particular that you would like to eat and drink?"

"I knew you were trying to get me hungry and thirsty."

"Well, what are you in the mood for?'

"We don't have pizza, do we? I miss pizza."

She grinned. "And to drink?"

He shrugged. "We have some more soda in the kitchen. I'll have that. But since we don't have pizza, I'll settle for some more fish."

"You just proved my point." She handed him the piece of paper.

"I thought you were trying to get me interested in food. I didn't realize this was really an experiment about sex appeal in advertising."

"I told you that men are easy to figure out. If a woman shows a little leg or cleavage, he's going to be more interested in her product because men are visual."

"I already knew that, but it's interesting to see how I can

be pulled into the subtleties of advertising even though I do this for a living."

"That's just one aspect of selling a commercial. There are other factors that can sell a product. This was a simple experiment geared directly at men."

"What best attracts a woman to a product? I'm guessing it's not a scantily clad man selling something."

"Women are emotion based. If you can gear the commercial towards humor, love, family or friendship, then they're more likely to remember it. That is one thing the Intensity commercial has going for it. Obviously, it attracts men but women like formal dances because they're romantic. A man dressing up and dancing with her speaks of love."

"Jacob was right about that then. It was his idea."

"Don't be so modest. You designed the dance. The men are respectful in the way they touch the women."

He smiled. "Thanks."

"Since I got you all bothered over pizza, I'll go ahead and make it. I do have the ingredients to make a homemade pizza."

"Really?"

She nodded. "It seemed more humane to show you things we had. Well, minus the gorgeous, scantily clad women."

"They're not that great. You're better looking than them."

She shook her head as she stood up and walked to the kitchen.

"You're real. They aren't," he called after her.

She grinned, finding his statement pleasing.

# Chapter Sixteen



The next day, the sun was shining brightly outside and the temperature was in the 50s, so Ryan decided to go outside and spend half the day listening to Elizabeth's ipod and drawing on his drawing pad. He had worked on several ideas for the jewelry and camping accounts, but nothing seemed to click just right. He started drawing his surroundings. Sometimes that simple act inspired his best work. He drew the trees at the base of the mountains across the river. Then he expanded the picture to include the mountains.

*What better place is there to camp than in an environment like this?* He sighed. Something was missing. He wasn't sure what he needed to add to it. He thought about the cabin, turned around and started another drawing. Unfortunately, the cabin didn't seem to qualify as roughing it in the wilderness, which was what the

advertisement was for. He was trying to sell tents and camping gear. What would it be like to sleep in a tent outdoors? He had no desire to try it but wondered if it would spark an idea he could use.

When Elizabeth came out with a blanket and a book, he called out to her. She glanced over at him and walked towards him. "What is it?"

"Did your parents bring a tent up here?"

She looked at him curiously. "Why?"

"I'm having trouble coming up with an idea for selling camping gear. I thought if I went camping, then I would get inspired."

"I'll check the shed and see if there's something there." She set her blanket and book on the ground beside him and went to the shed. When she came back, she nodded. "Believe it or not, there is a tent in there. It's still in its original box. I think it's never been used."

"Great! Tonight, I'm going to go camping. Do you want to join me?"

"What?"

"We could have a campfire and roast marshmallows and hot dogs. Then we could tell ghost stories and get all spooked. It'll be fun."

"I don't know. I like the comforts in the cabin."

"We'll camp right by the cabin. We can still use the bathroom. Even I don't want to pee outdoors."

She thought about it.

"Have you ever been camping?"

"No, and I don't have the desire to," she replied.

"Me neither. But there's a first time for everything, right? If it turns out we don't like it, we can go back into the cabin."

She shrugged. "Okay. I'll do it. We'll be using separate sleeping bags though. There are a couple of new sleeping bags in

the cabin. Those sleeping bags are made especially for cold Alaskan nights."

"We'll have a good time. I'll even bring a gun in case a moose or bear comes near the tent. I wouldn't want to go camping out here without protection."

"Who's going to protect me from you?" she joked.

"Ha, ha."

She chuckled, picked up her blanket and book and went to a dry spot on the grass where she neatly spread out the blanket. She laid on her stomach and opened her book.

He considered the scene before him. He turned to a clean page in his drawing pad and drew her on the blanket with the trees in the background. He was surprised that he enjoyed drawing her as much as he did. She was pretty with her wavy hair resting softly against her face. She looked natural. *That's because everything about her is real.* She was completely different from the women he was used to dating. He smiled. She looked content to lie there, reading a book.

A thought came to him out of nowhere but he quickly developed it before it slipped his mind. What if there was a friendly, cuddly dog in front of her and that dog was carrying a small box around his collar? In that box could be an engagement ring with a proposal. Women had a hard time resisting cute animals. Perhaps the man who intended to propose had thought up a million ways to pop the question. Too nervous to go to her in person to ask it, he got his dog to do it for him. She could be wearing a white dress. It would be symbolic of a wedding. Women found weddings romantic since it was the joining of two people who loved each other and the dog would be cute and funny. He wrote his thoughts down on the paper before he lost his creative edge. When he was finished, he went back to the cabin and put the paper with his idea on it in an envelope that he addressed to his father. He considered showing it to Elizabeth

but didn't want her to find out that she was the one who inspired the thought.

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That evening, he set up the tent which was easy since it automatically popped out. Then he and Elizabeth set up their sleeping bags. Afterwards, he got a small campfire started while she found some small tree branches to use for roasting the marshmallows and hot dogs.

"I haven't had hot dogs in a long time," she admitted as she sat a couple of feet away from him.

"They taste great, especially over a campfire."

"I thought you didn't go camping."

"I didn't but I did join my friends at some campfires, especially on Halloween night."

Though it wasn't completely dark out, he could see that the stars were beginning to come out. The sunset filled the sky with shades of pinks and yellows. He had to admit, the scenery was spectacular.

"So, do you know any good scary stories?" she asked as she finished setting up the hot dog buns and napkins between them. She neatly set out the condiments, a box of hand wipes and a plastic bag which would be their trash bag.

"I wondered if you could go camping without bringing something to clean the stuff up," he teased.

"I don't want to litter. Besides, what's wrong with napkins and sanitary hand wipes?"

"Nothing." He tried not to laugh but lost the battle.

She sighed and put a hot dog on her stick.

"I think it's adorable," he finally admitted.

"Well, it's nice that I can be entertaining." By the tone in her voice, he knew she wasn't offended. "Like I asked earlier, do

you know any good scary stories?"

"I know a few. How scared do you want to get?"

"Do your worst."

"That sounds like a challenge." If there was something he enjoyed, it was a good challenge. "All right. Here's one I made up when I was a sophomore in college. It's called 'Running on Empty.'"

The story took a total of ten minutes to tell, and he varied the voices of the characters to make it more interesting. She seemed captivated by it and even jumped a little, so he knew he was succeeding in spooking her.

After Ryan finished the story, he examined her. "Now, will you be able to sleep tonight or will you hear and see things that aren't really there?"

"Of course, I'll be able to sleep. I'm twenty-seven. It takes more than a scary story to frighten me." She grinned. "That was pretty good, by the way."

He put some mustard and sweet relish on his hot dog. "I made it up. We'll see how you do as the night progresses. In the meantime, do you know any good stories?"

"Just ones I've read. I haven't created one."

"Go ahead. Even if I've heard it before, I'll enjoy hearing it again."

After they spent the next hour and a half telling scary stories, they cleaned up the campsite and took the trash into the cabin. Once they settled into their sleeping bags around midnight, he turned his attention to the camping account. He considered everything that he had done that evening. That was the whole camping experience. People hung around a campfire to eat and talk. Then they settled into their tents to sleep. The next morning, they would get up to enjoy a variety of outdoor adventures like canoeing or fishing. So camping meant adventure.

Next to him, he grinned when he realized Elizabeth had

the sleeping bag completely wrapped around her. Even her head was covered. She was definitely spooked. He knew it was wrong but couldn't resist the temptation to mess with her. He lightly tapped the side of the tent with his finger. He forced aside his laughter as she stiffened. He waited until she relaxed before he slowly sat up and tugged on the zipper of the tent. When she remained safely under her sleeping bag, he quietly unzipped the zipper enough so he could grab a few pebbles from outside the tent. Then he softly zipped the tent back up. He flung the pebbles against the wall of the tent. He suppressed another wave of laughter when he noticed her shiver inside the sleeping bag.

*She's too proud to ask for any comfort from me.* Her determination to face her fears on her own made the situation that much more hilarious. How much would it take to make her crack?

He pressed his hand against the side of the tent and shook it.

His eyes widened when she suddenly bolted up and looked out of her safe cocoon. She grunted when she realized he had caused the noises. "You just wait, Ryan. I'm going to find a way to get even with you for this!"

He allowed himself to laugh aloud. "For what?"

"Telling me all those horrible stories and then making all these scary sounds."

"I'm just having fun with you." He knew he wouldn't get away with anything else, so he went back into his sleeping bag and laid down. "You are pretty when you're scared."

"I don't see what's so great about terrifying people." She settled down and looked over at him.

"You try so hard to be tough but, deep down, you're really not."

She groaned.

"It's okay to need someone to hold you." He moved

closer to her.

"Is that why you brought me out here?"

"No. I wanted to get the full camping experience so I can do a good job on the camping commercial I'm trying to create."

"Oh, I get it. You were too afraid to spend the night out here by yourself so you wanted me to join you."

"You're the one shaking with fear inside the sleeping bag." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to him.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Ridding you of your fears. I'll protect you from all the creepy sounds out there in the mysterious forest."

She sighed but didn't pull away from him.

He shook his head in amusement. She was delightful in her own way. Though she could manage well on her own, she had a soft heart. Her feminine qualities intrigued him and made him feel protective of her.

"Okay," he continued. "So just imagine that we have a couple of kids." When she began to protest, he quickly said, "This is for the commercial." She relaxed, so he said, "People typically take their kids camping, right?"

"I guess that's a fair statement."

"It's also fair to say that a family might spend the day fishing or boating. In the evening, they sit around the campfire and enjoy eating and telling stories. Then they settle down in their Outdoor Adventure camping gear."

"That would work. I think the emphasis needs to be on the fact that the family spent time together."

"Right. With the busy pace we live in, it's hard to find time to spend with loved ones. So camping is really about spending time with those we care about and creating good memories. That will work. I'll have to write it down tomorrow."

"I feel so used."

"Don't. You make a great camping partner."

He felt her shrug inside the sleeping bag. It wasn't too much longer before she drifted off to sleep. He stayed awake for another hour as he mulled over the details for the camping commercial.

# Chapter Seventeen



On the day of the bet, Ryan was shocked when Elizabeth gave him a sheet of instructions on how to clean the cabin.

"I want you to do a thorough job if you are going to appreciate all the work I do here," she explained. "Think you can still handle it?"

He wasn't going to enjoy all the work it entailed but decided a bet was a bet, and he didn't want to say he lost to a woman. "How hard can it be? You do it."

"You sound pretty sure of yourself."

"That's because I am. Let the games begin!"

While she went out to fish in her mother's fishing clothes, he dragged out a pile of cleaners and did more scrubbing than he thought necessary. She already kept the cabin in immaculate condition. Did she honestly think one more spray of the bleach in

the tub was going to make a difference? But he was determined not to cheat. He wanted to win this bet fair and square. It would be worth it if she would take over the laundry detail for him. *Why didn't I ever appreciate my maid before? She did all the boring and hard work for me.* Suddenly, his job at the office seemed like an amusement park. He had a newfound appreciation for his job. He enjoyed it before, but now it was twice as fun.

While he was cleaning the living room, he had the TV on so he could listen to something other than the ipod. Unfortunately, the only shows on during this time of day were talk shows. He reluctantly picked one at random. Picking up the dust rag, he sprayed the furniture polish on the coffee table.

The talk show host was a petite redhead who spoke to a panel of women and their husbands. The host spoke into her microphone, "These women here today are afraid the sizzle has gone out of their marriage. They say their husbands aren't romantic anymore."

He shuddered. He would hate it if his wife dragged him to one of those shows. *How embarrassing that must be for those guys.*

"Gayle, why don't you tell us what your husband got you for your birthday," the host instructed.

The first woman on stage was a slightly overweight blond with a nice pink sweater on. "First of all, he didn't even remember it was my birthday."

The audience gasped.

Ryan rolled his eyes. "Then you should have reminded him a couple of days beforehand." Really, did men have to remember such minute details when they had clients to deal with?

Gayle nodded. "And when our son reminded him, he ran out to the store and got me a cookbook and some new pots and pans."

The brunette woman sitting next to them on stage shook her head. "What is she, your maid?" she asked the woman's

husband.

Gayle's husband looked flustered. "I thought she would like those things. She was saying she needed them."

Gayle started tearing up. "But those aren't the kind of gifts you give on a special day like my birthday."

Ryan couldn't understand why it was horrible enough to make her cry. *At least he got her something.*

"You know what would have been romantic?" Gayle dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "It would have been nice if you had used that cookbook and pots and pans to make me a candlelight dinner."

The audience applauded.

"I'm sorry," the man replied. "In the future, I'll know."

"But it won't be the same, Stan," the host told him. "You see, she had to tell you what to do. Part of romance is being surprised."

The women on stage nodded.

Ryan shook his head. *I am glad I work during this time of day so I don't have to watch this all the time.*

The brunette, Wilma, who sat next to Gayle and Stan, turned to the host. "My husband, Walter, said he was going to let me have a night out with my friends so I could relax while he took care of the kids. Well, when I got home, the house was in complete chaos. The baby's diaper hadn't been changed, the five year old had food in his hair and on his clothes, and the rooms looked like a tornado blew through them. My night of relaxation turned into a night of cleaning up after everyone, including my husband. Walter's idea of watching the kids was to watch TV and hope the kids took care of themselves."

"Wow," Gayle replied in sympathy. "This makes what Stan did look small in comparison."

"Oh, it gets worse," Wilma continued. "After I was done cleaning and put the kids to bed, Walter asked me if I was in the

mood to have sex."

"What a pig!" a woman in the audience yelled out.

The host ran over to the woman and asked her to stand up. "You have a comment."

"I sure do," the African American woman nodded. "She spends all day taking care of the house and kids, and when she gets one night off in a year, she comes home to more work and then is expected to take care of him? Please! Women need help around the house. Then they have the energy to satisfy their men."

The women agreed. One woman slapped her husband on the arm and said something to him.

*Oh my gosh. They're going to form an angry mob!* Ryan put the rag down and watched the show with interest.

The skinny brunette, Paula, who was sitting next to Wilma and Walter, said, "You think that's bad? Mike didn't want to miss Super Bowl Sunday, so he asked me if I could schedule a c-section for the Friday before Sunday so he wouldn't have to be at the hospital if I went into labor during the game."

"But I had tickets that I bought months in advance so I could go to it," Mike argued.

The women in the audience murmured their disapproval.

"We are talking about the birth of your child," Gayle reminded him. "That's more important than a stupid football game."

"It's not a stupid game," one man in the audience shouted out. "It's *the* game of the year!"

"After him!" A little old lady in the audience pointed at him. The women followed her to the back of the audience where they picked him up and threw him out the door.

"Please, everyone, please sit down," the host anxiously pleaded. Turning to the camera, she said, "We'll back after these commercials."

Ryan glanced at his watch and realized he spent more time watching TV than he planned, so he turned it off and finished cleaning. When it came time to cook the lunch, he was tired. *I can't let her see me be weak.* He had no idea what her progress was so he was glad to see that he a perfect view of her in the boat from the kitchen. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that she hadn't caught any fish yet. He marveled that she had succeeded in getting the boat into the river. *She sure does have a lot of willpower to do things by herself.*

He pulled the recipes from a recipe box so he could make mashed potatoes and steak. He placed the pan and pot on the stove. He cut up potatoes and watched Elizabeth while she sat in the boat. She still hadn't caught the fish yet. *Good. I might win this bet!* He put the potatoes in the pot of water and turned the heat up to high. Then he threw the steaks in the pan. Afterwards, he got the salad ready.

While he was cutting carrots, he looked up and saw that she had caught a fish. She was struggling to maintain her balance in the boat while she tried to reel it in. To his surprise, the fish swam off with the fishing pole and she fell into the river. He burst out laughing. Since she had a life jacket on, he knew she would be okay. He shook his head, still chuckling. She was always a little clumsy.

He glanced over at the stove and saw that the pot of potatoes was boiling over. The boiling water ran down into the burner. *Oh my gosh!* He ran over to the stove with the pot holder and grabbed the handle. He didn't know what to do with the pot so he dumped it in the sink. He glanced back at the stove and groaned. He didn't feel like cleaning the stove again. He turned off the burner and opened the window to get rid of the smoky smell that filled the kitchen.

He saw Elizabeth pull the boat back to the river's shore. He felt sorry for her since she was obviously having a tough time.

He sighed and turned down the heat on the other burner so the steaks wouldn't burn. He went outside to help her with the boat.

"I can do this by myself," she insisted.

He shook his head in disbelief. "Why won't you let me help you?"

She stared at him for a moment. "I'm not used to receiving help."

"I want to help you."

She thought about it.

He couldn't believe she had to debate whether or not to let him help her put the boat into the shed for her.

She nodded. "It would be nice to have some help for a change."

"I like to be useful. It's the least I can do for the tasty meals you make for me."

Once he put the boat and fishing gear away for her, she thanked him. She seemed to have a difficult time even saying a simple thank you.

*She really isn't used to men being nice to her,* he realized. "I have to confess that cleaning and cooking are a lot of work. I'm glad you take care of those chores around here."

She smiled. "It's nice to be appreciated."

"I do appreciate you." He gave her a good, long look. Though she was dripping wet from head to toe, she was still attractive. Pushing the unusual thought aside, he said, "Well, there's no way I'm letting you walk through the cabin. You'll mess up my clean floors. So I'm going to carry you to the shower." He took off his wet shoes and left them by the front door.

"I can take my shoes and socks off. Really, you don't need to go through all that trouble."

"Your pants are wet and they reach past your ankles. Do you plan to take those off too?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You'd like me to do that, wouldn't you?"

He grinned. "It would be nice to see more of you." *Really nice.*

She rolled her eyes and chuckled. "Okay. You can carry me to the shower. I can understand your desire to keep things clean." She took off her socks and shoes.

He picked her up and raised an eyebrow at her. "Hey, what do you know? I'm carrying you over the threshold." Then he took her inside.

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Since she lost the bet, she started doing his laundry. She didn't mind losing the bet since he became more helpful around the cabin. The day before Kenneth was due to arrive with more supplies, he asked her what women liked to get for their birthdays.

She shrugged as she finished wiping the kitchen counters. "It depends on the woman. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I was watching a program on television and there was a woman who complained because her husband gave her a cookbook and pots and pans for her birthday."

She cringed. "I can understand why she got upset."

"Why? She told him she needed new pots and pans."

"He might as well have told her to get into the kitchen and make him something to eat."

"Oh. Do women find it demeaning to do things for their husbands?"

"You don't ask easy questions." She put her towel aside and went to the living room so they could continue their conversation sitting down. After they sat on the couch, she replied, "I don't think that the woman should do all the work. I understand that's how our grandparents did things, but times have

changed. Women are in the workplace and they're just as tired as men are when they come home. It's not fair to expect them to do all the work. If he gets to sit around while she takes care of everything, then I do think he's demeaning her."

"So what do women want to get for their birthdays?"

"Are you working on another commercial idea?"

"No. I just want to know what it is that women want."

"It depends on the woman. What are her interests? What kinds of things does she usually buy?"

"It would be easier if the woman would just come out and tell him what she wants."

"But then it wouldn't be his idea. His gift shows her that he is thinking about her."

"You know, this is setting things up for a huge problem. Men don't mind telling women what they want. In fact, if we do, then at least we know we're getting something we want."

"You asked me a couple of weeks ago what romance is. Well, part of romance is being surprised. Women like to be surprised with gifts that their husbands take the time to think about. It's not so much the gift but the fact that he took the time and effort to come up with the gift. She feels appreciated and loved. That's what women want."

"And if he thinks buying her pots and pans is the best he can do, what then?"

"I think he forgot her birthday until the last minute and ran out to buy something without giving it serious thought."

"Which means she doesn't feel important since he can remember other important dates except her birthday. I got it."

She chuckled. "Well, I'm glad I could help you figure out a piece of the mysterious puzzle that is womankind."

# Chapter Eighteen



The next day, Kenneth showed up. "I made sure to include junk food," he told Ryan. "I don't want to upset you by not bringing it."

"Great!" Ryan exclaimed. "Here are my proposals for the jewelry and camping accounts. I think my dad will like these."

Kenneth took the two envelopes from him.

Elizabeth wondered why he didn't share his proposals with her. She wanted to see what he came up with and he had told her she could see them but she hadn't. She forced aside her hurt feelings and focused on helping Kenneth with the boxes.

Kenneth turned to Ryan. "Before I forget, you have letters from Ben and Zack."

Ryan opened the envelopes.

Elizabeth and Kenneth took two boxes of groceries to the

kitchen.

"Things seemed to have improved," he noted as he set his box on the counter.

"Yes. We decided talking to each other was better than dying of boredom. There's only so much alone time people can take before they go crazy."

He smiled at her. "Perhaps your parents' plan will work after all."

"Kenneth," she warned him.

He shrugged. "You two look pretty happy."

"We're friends. We're not going to let our parents dictate our love lives. We have agreed that we're not right for each other."

"All right."

As they walked back to the seaplane to gather more boxes, she was shocked to see Ryan looking angry as he read the letters. "Do you have a pen on you?" he asked Kenneth as soon as they reached the plane.

"Yes, I do. Here you go." He handed him the pen.

Ryan stomped over to his rock and sat down. He wrote on the back of the letters.

"Do you have any idea what he's upset about?" she whispered to Kenneth as he handed her another box.

"No. And I don't want to know," he quietly replied. "Ben and Zack were laughing when they gave me the letters. I assumed it was going to be good news for Ryan but obviously I was wrong."

She wondered what they wrote but decided she didn't want to know. She didn't care for their opinion on any matter. She finished helping Kenneth with the remaining boxes. While Kenneth went back to the seaplane, she opened the boxes in the kitchen and sorted through the items. She glanced up at the kitchen window and saw Ryan give the letters back to Kenneth.

From there, Ryan went back to the rock and sat on it, crossed his arms and stared at the mountains. After Kenneth left, Ryan stood up, found a tree branch and used it as a bat to strike rocks into the river.

*Wow. I can't remember ever seeing him that mad.* She didn't know what to do, so she stayed inside and let him burn off his anger. She chose to make him one of his favorite meals. *If he even feels like eating.* When she was upset, she ate, but not everyone handled their emotions that way. He, apparently, was one of those people who didn't eat when he got upset, for he stayed out there past dinner. She was ready to ask him if he wanted her to put his food in the refrigerator, but he had taken off running down the riverbank. *What can possibly be going through his mind?*

She finally saved his food in a container and left a note to let him know she put it in the refrigerator. She watched some television before going to her bedroom to read. She fell asleep after she read two chapters in one of the new books Kenneth had brought for her.

When she woke up the next morning, she rolled over in her bed, still fully clothed and saw that it was around seven. She rubbed her eyes and sat up. She gathered her clothes to get ready for the day. On her way to the bathroom, she noticed that Ryan was fast asleep on the couch. He hadn't even bothered to take out the sleeper bed. He was snoring, and when he snored like that, he could sleep through anything.

After she took a shower and got dressed, she went to the kitchen and noted that he hadn't eaten his dinner. She ate some cereal and headed outside to go for a nice, long walk. She listened to her ipod and studied the fish in the river as they swam around. When she bent down to touch the cold water, she smiled as she recalled falling out of the boat. It hadn't been funny at the time but she had to admit that it must have been a hilarious sight, though she didn't wish to repeat it. She stood up and took in her

surroundings. The snow had melted off the trees, leaving a row of evergreens displaying a rich shade of green around the river and behind the cabin. May was a good time of year. The air was still cool but the bright sun warmed things up so that she could wear a jacket.

When she returned to the cabin, Ryan had already showered and dressed. He sat in front of the television but he was drawing on his drawing pad.

"Aren't you going to have breakfast?" she asked as she hung up her jacket and took off her shoes.

"No. I'm not hungry," he replied, not looking up from his work.

She walked over to him. "Do you want something to drink?"

"No thanks."

She sat on the other side of the couch and watched him. He was concentrating so hard on his work that he didn't even seem to notice anything else in his environment. She decided not to interrupt him. She turned her attention to the news program on the television.

The news anchor reported, "The two bank robbers who stole $760,000 in Fairbanks are still at large. Here are the most recent pictures we have of the two men. One, Rick Jenkins is forty-two years old. He has light blond hair and brown eyes. He is 5'9" and weighs 300 pounds. The second man, Seth Powers, is thirty-nine years old. He has black hair and brown eyes. He is 6'3" and weighs 220 pounds. A $10,000 reward is available to anyone who has information leading to their capture."

"They need to add the mustaches," she commented to herself.

"What is that?"

Startled, she glanced at Ryan who had looked up from his drawing pad to look at her. She didn't think he would listen to

her. "Well, I think that mustaches make men look creepy, so it fits that criminals would have mustaches."

He chuckled. "What if I grew a mustache?"

She cringed. "You wouldn't really do that, would you?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Maybe."

"Well, if you did, I would find you so repulsive that I wouldn't even go near you."

"Oh, that wouldn't be good. I'll keep shaving then."

She chose to change the subject. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine."

Was he? "You were pretty upset yesterday when Kenneth gave you those letters."

"Oh those. Well, I figure that you're right. I mean, what's the point of stressing over things I can't do anything about?"

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. I'd rather move on with my life. By dwelling on Ben and Zack, I'm only letting them control me. I'm taking over my own life for now on."

"Good for you."

"It feels good not to worry about other people's opinions."

She was glad for him. Whatever he went through, it was worth it. She hadn't seen him so confident before. "Am I ever going to get a chance to look at your work before it makes it to the television?"

He seemed hesitant.

"Is it something bad that I wouldn't want to see? Do you have scantily clad women in them?"

He smiled. "No. But I'd rather not share what I'm doing. It's hard to explain."

She sighed and turned back to the television.

"Beth, you really are pretty," he whispered.

She glanced over at him, surprised.

"I hope you don't let anyone else tell you otherwise." He went back to his drawing pad and continued his work.

*That's odd. Why would he just say that out of the blue like that?* She suspected that he had a reason for doing so but knew he wouldn't share that reason with her, so she turned her attention back to the TV.

# Chapter Nineteen



During the next week, he was back to his normal happy self. She couldn't image what disturbed him but was glad it was over. She found that she looked forward to doing things with him. She could understand why he was popular in school. He had a good sense of humor and seemed to seek out the well-being of others. He was extremely loyal to people he cared about, so she came to understand why he insisted on hanging around Ben and Zack for as long as he did. It took something drastic for him to end any relationship once he developed an attachment to the person.

She had no doubt that when he did marry the woman he wanted to be with, he would be faithful to her. The woman would have to do something like cheat on him in order for him ever leave her. Elizabeth didn't even realize men like that existed anymore. Perhaps all marriages weren't doomed to end in a

divorce. She knew the culture they lived in made it more difficult for people to stay married when things got rough, but it could still work out.

Now that the temperature hovered in the 60s, she spent a lot of time reading on a blanket by the river so she could enjoy the outdoor environment. Being cooped up due to the cold weather made her eager for the warmth of the sun. She noticed that Ryan sat on his favorite rock and spent a lot of time drawing. She wondered what he drew but knew he wouldn't share that information with her.

One day, he came out with a picnic basket. "Look what I found in the kitchen: a picnic basket. I made lunch. Do you mind if I join you on the blanket?"

She looked up from her book and smiled at him. "Did you make peanut butter sandwiches?"

He grimaced. "I still can't eat those. I made pepperoni, salami and bologna sandwiches with tomatoes, lettuce, cheddar cheese, miracle whip and mustard. For the side dishes, I brought potato chips and even made a salad. The soda is nice and chilled too. What do you say? Do you want to have lunch with me?"

She laughed. "It would be a shame to waste good food. Okay." She sat up and smoothed out the blanket so he could sit across from her.

"I even included the sanitary hand wipes, napkins and a trash bag. I didn't want you to have to run back into the cabin to grab those things. I want you to sit back and relax. I'll take care of everything."

"Why are you going through all this work?"

He shrugged. "After all the meals you made for me, I figured it was the least I could do to say thank you."

"Oh. Well, I appreciate it." She watched as he set the plates and food out. "You really thought of everything."

"I like to be prepared."

"Are you doing this for commercial research?"

"No. I don't have anything to work on for commercials except for the Henderson account."

"I forgot about Barry Henderson and the hotels. Am I allowed to ask what you are thinking of doing for that commercial?"

"I know I've been unusually secretive about what I've been doing." He handed her the portion of her meal before taking his own food out of the basket. "I've been thinking of what would appeal to the female audience. That's my weakness at work. I have a hard time discerning what women want."

"Hence all your questions to me about women and advertising methods."

He nodded. "You're the only one I have to go on until I get back to Omaha."

"And I thought you wanted to talk to me because you liked me." She grinned to show him she was joking. She took a bite of her sandwich. "You did a good job, Ryan."

"Thanks. I figure it's hard to mess up a sandwich."

"So, what did you come up with for the Henderson account?"

"Are you really interested in my work?" He seemed pleased.

"Of course, I am."

"Well, I'm going to have the commercial set in sepia color, to denote the old-fashioned theme of the hotels. The background music will feature a popular tune from the 19th century. Naturally, the video will include pictures of one of the rooms and the hotel staff wearing 19th century clothes so the audience will get a feel for the atmosphere of the hotel. But a hotel is more than a place to sleep. Anything from conferences to birthday parties can occur there as well, so I want to include shots of those events but with the guests wearing clothes from that time period. It would be

more fun if the guests had the option of dressing up to fit in with the hotel. Guests can have their business meetings or weddings there too. The restaurant in the hotels will feature menus and dishes from that time period, so I will add a shot of a family eating there. The more authentic the feel, the greater the experience."

"You mixed in a lot of elements for men and women."

"The hard part will be condensing it into a commercial."

"Have you seen the Intensity cologne commercial on TV yet?"

"I finally did last night. I was beginning to think I wouldn't ever see it."

"And I see it all the time. I've had that song you picked for it in my head for a couple days now."

"Then my ploy worked. Never underestimate the power of song in a commercial." After a few minutes, he said, "I have to admit that camping was fun."

"Speak for yourself. Those awful stories you told me that night made it hard for me to sleep for the next three nights. I kept thinking I heard noises and seeing things that weren't there."

"Why didn't you ask me come to bed with you? I would have protected you."

"Oh, I'm sure." She rolled her eyes. "You would have kept me up by telling me more spooky tales."

"I might have kept you up but it wouldn't have been to scare you." He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"Keep your mind out of the gutter." She good-naturedly threw a tomato at him.

He caught the tomato before it landed on his shirt. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Do you know that the only reason you would even consider it is because we're stuck here. I call it the 'Stranded Love Syndrome.'"

"You made that up."

"Yes, I did. Anytime you get a man and a woman stuck somewhere for a period of time, they end up falling in love. It's what our parents were thinking when they forced us here. But they underestimate us. We know better than to let them win."

"So this is a contest of wills?"

"We have a little less than two months and then we can show them that we aren't so easily manipulated. I fully intend to prove them wrong."

"Am I that bad to be around?"

"No. You're a good friend. This last month flew by. I'm sure the next two will pass just as quickly."

"You're a good friend too. I know it sounds weird, but it's nice being here. Alaska is a beautiful place. It's a great place to get inspired. So some good did come out of being up here. But for someone who's stuck on being clean, I'm shocked you would fling food carelessly around." He threw the tomato into the trash bag. "I can honestly say that you're the first person I'd pick to be stranded somewhere with."

She secretly felt the same way but chose not to say it.

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A week later, she went for her usual morning walk. Sometimes Ryan would join her but sometimes he would stay in the cabin. On this particular morning, it started to rain so she quickly returned to the cabin. She softly opened the door so he didn't hear her come in. She closed the door and turned around to say hi when she realized he was watching a talk show. She hid her laughter. Since when did he watch a man-bashing program? She quietly took off her jacket and shoes and tiptoed closer to him so she could watch him without being seen. He seemed to be unusually involved in the program.

"So," the redheaded female host said into her microphone,

"why do you think you and your wife argue all the time?"

The middle-aged man with a balding head shook his head. "How do I know? She doesn't tell me."

His wife, a middle-aged skinny Asian woman, sighed. "Do you see what I am getting at? Larry isn't listening to me. I keep saying that I want more quality time with him but he doesn't listen. He goes grocery shopping with me and calls that 'quality time.'"

"I hate going to the store and she's always nagging me to go. I figure I'd kill two birds with one stone. I'd get her to stop whining about me not picking out what I want to eat and I'd spend time with her while doing it. So there you go. It's quality time."

"Quality time isn't about doing chores together," his wife angrily replied.

"When was the last time you listened to her talk about her feelings?" the woman next to him asked him.

"I'm listening now," he said. "She's angry all the time. I'm aware that I upset her."

"Shut up before they kick you off the stage," Ryan commented.

"What do you do when your wife is angry?" the host asked Larry.

He shrugged. "I give her space so she can vent."

The audience booed at him.

"Hey, it's what I would want her to do for me," Larry remarked. "Except when I'm angry, she follows me all over the house and wants me to start crying about my feelings. I'm not holding onto any past hurts. All I want is some peace and quiet when I come home."

"Do you consider your wife to be an inconvenience?" a woman in the audience yelled.

"When she drags me to shows like this, I do."

Three women from the audience ran up to him and started hitting him with their purses.

The host turned to the camera. "We'll be back after these commercials."

Ryan was shaking his head as he wrote something on his drawing pad. "There was no way that was going to end well. He just couldn't stop talking."

Elizabeth quietly walked up to the couch and glanced over his shoulder. Her eyes widened when she realized he was writing a list on things to do when dealing with women. He was currently writing, *Quality time is about listening to her feelings, not doing chores like grocery shopping with her.* She carefully leaned over and whispered in his ear, "Don't forget to add that quality time is also about telling her your feelings."

He yelled and jumped off the couch.

She giggled. "Sorry. It was too good to resist."

He laughed. "You got me good."

"What are you working on?"

He sat back down and patted the spot next to him. "Come over and find out."

She did and was surprised when he moved close enough so that their arms were touching.

"I'm working on a 'How to Understand Women' list so that it will help me make better commercials. The women on this show are very blunt about what men do to piss them off, so I take that and apply it to how men should do things."

"Is having a picnic on the list?"

"Would you be mad if it was?"

"No. You still had to put forth the effort into getting it together." She read through the list. "You got all of these ideas off of that man-bashing talk show?"

"For the most part. Once we get back to Omaha, I won't be stuck in front of the TV during the day, so I have to take

advantage of my unique research skills while I can. What do you think? Are these pretty much what women want?"

"It sounds good," she admitted. "But what is this one about never missing the birth of the child for a sporting event?"

"There was a man who chose to go to the Super Bowl instead of the delivery room with his wife."

"And he's still married?"

"The women in the show threw him out of the studio after they threw out a man who stood up to defend him. Those women can get vicious. I would never go on that show."

"Is there any reason a man should miss the birth of his child?"

"Well, I've come to the conclusion that being deployed overseas, being in a car accident and being dead are reasonable excuses."

"At least you have your priorities in order. Just make sure your dad doesn't decide when you're going to have kids. It's bad enough he's done this crazy marriage idea."

"Oh, I sent my dad a pretty strongly worded letter. I guess I could always head back next month and quit and find a job somewhere else. The thought of venturing out into the unknown used to frighten me but it doesn't anymore. I've discovered that I don't have the job I do because of who my father is. I have it because I earned it."

"Do you think your dad considered the possibility you might actually do that?"

"No, I don't think he did."

"Well, whatever you decide, I'll support your decision." She handed him the drawing pad. "I'll leave you to your research."

As she stood up, he asked, "Do you want kids?"

"I guess. But not with a man who would rather be at a sporting event. The women on that show had the right idea to

toss him out."

He chuckled as she went to the kitchen to make lunch.

# Chapter Twenty



Two days later, she went into the kitchen and saw that he was attempting to make cake from scratch. He had a recipe book out in front of him and was carefully reading it. She cringed at the sight of flour covering the counters and the egg white that dripped from the side of the large bowl. He was holding a measuring cup in one hand and a package of sugar in another.

"You're making a mess," she said as she dared to walk into the room.

He finished reading the instructions and poured some sugar into the measuring cup before he poured the sugar into the bowl.

She tried not to scream at him as some sugar spilled on the counter next to the bowl. She just cleaned the kitchen the day before and she already knew she would be cleaning it again when

he was finished.

"Don't worry your pretty little head about it. I'll clean up when I'm done," he assured her. "I've been craving some cake since I saw the birthday episode on that talk show."

"I think you're addicted to that show." She frowned as he added a stick of butter to the mixture. "Are you sure all that fat is a good idea?"

"I know the recipe calls for less butter and sugar but I'm in the mood for a fattening dessert."

She rolled her eyes. "How do you manage to keep all the weight off?"

He shrugged. "I must have a high metabolism."

She envied his ability to eat anything he wanted without gaining weight. She was still careful to watch what she ate.

"Want to help me?" he asked.

"What do you need?" She didn't want to get too close to the mess.

"Will you turn the oven to 350?"

She nodded and did so.

He reached up to get a cake pan from the cabinet and sprayed the pan with cooking spray.

She felt her skin crawl as he sprayed half the kitchen sink in the process. How could an adult be so reckless in the kitchen? "I'll take over. I can't take this anymore."

He glanced at her. "What are you talking about? I have everything under control."

"I'd feel better if I did it."

He stopped mixing the ingredients in the bowl and looked at her in wonder. "Is this bothering you?"

"A little."

He grinned at her. "This bothers you a lot."

"It's not funny."

"It's hilarious. You can't stand to have anything even

slightly messy in your world. You should experience getting dirty for a change. You might find that it's not as bad as you fear."

"I was dirty when I fell into the river, and that wasn't any fun."

"Oh, that was a riot. I saw you from here. You were so cute."

"You saw me?" She didn't like the idea that someone had watched her fall off the boat. It made her feel self-conscious.

"Why do you think I ran out to help you?"

"I thought you were going to tell me lunch was ready." *Great. So he knows I'm clumsy.* She realized he probably knew that already. It wasn't like she didn't have her share of bumping into walls or end tables.

He poured the mixture into the pan.

She rolled up her sleeves and picked up the sugar package to make sure it was clean on the outside so she could put it back in the cabinet. If sugar wasn't properly contained, she would have to deal a swarm of ants later on.

"It's okay. I can clean everything up and put it away myself," he said.

"No. I'd feel better if I was in charge of this part." Actually, she would have preferred to be in charge of all of it but hadn't had a choice in the matter. She could at least be sure that things were put away correctly.

"That's it. You need to have some fun with food." He handed her the large spoon that was covered with the chocolate sugary mixture. "Have you ever sampled a cake before it's been cooked?"

"When I was a kid."

"So you know it tastes good. Go ahead and relive some of those carefree childhood moments."

"No thanks." She pushed the spoon away.

He shoved it in her face. "It'll be good for the librarian to

take down her hair and have some fun for a change. You're way too serious all the time."

"I don't need to have fun. I am doing fine."

"But you could be doing better."

She pushed the spoon away but used too much force and it flew out of his hand and bounced off the kitchen window and into the sink.

"You're strong for a woman," he commented, his eyes wide.

She grimaced at the sticky chocolate mess on her hand. She turned on the water in the sink and started to wash her hands.

He dabbed his fingers in the flour and flung it at her.

She blinked away the flour from her eyelashes. "I can't believe you did that."

"What are you going to do about it?"

She couldn't believe he was laughing. She picked up the big spoon and used it to smear the remaining chocolate in his hair. Then she quickly grabbed the sprayer and aimed it at him. "If you throw one more item of food at me, I'll hose you down."

"Really? Okay." He picked up the flour container and threw the flour at her.

She gasped. *I can't believe he actually did it!* She angrily picked up an egg and threw it at him.

He dodged it and the egg landed on the wall behind him. "Is that the best you got?"

*Why is he enjoying this?* She picked up another egg and made sure it landed on his shirt. "Ha! I got you." Then she sprayed him with the water before he could retaliate.

He held up his hands to protect his face as he walked towards her.

She threw two more eggs at him, but they flew by him and landed on the floor. "Stay back!"

"You're having fun."

"I am not!" she fibbed.

"I see a smile forming on your lips. You like getting messy."

"Are you crazy? I have to clean myself and the kitchen up."

"I told you I have the kitchen covered. And I'll be happy to take care of you too."

She knew she couldn't hold onto the sprayer once he grabbed it. He was too strong for her. She shrieked as he sprayed water all over her.

He stopped and stared at her. "Aren't you going to run out of the kitchen?"

She hesitated. If she did that, she would get the living room messy.

As if he could read her mind, he asked, "Can I do anything I want to you in this kitchen because you refuse to get the rest of the cabin dirty?"

She struggled to make her wet feet move but her mind refused to go. She was covered in wet flour. It felt like paste. How could she leave a trail of this awful stuff on the floor so she could get to the shower?

"I'm getting closer," he warned her, stepping towards her.

She anxiously looked at the doorway. She turned to the eggs and threw one at his chest. Before she could throw another one at him, he took her in his arms and kissed her. She was so surprised that she couldn't respond right away but as he deepened the kiss, she melted in his arms and kissed him back. Her body tingled in excitement. He had to be the most exciting man she'd ever known, and he was an incredible kisser.

"So, when are we going to have sex?" he asked when he pulled away from her.

Her eyes widened in shock. "What?"

"Well, we are married and I was enjoying the kiss. I

figured we could keep going after we take a shower. I wouldn't want to get the bed sheets all messy." He grinned mischievously at her.

"It's working," she said. She had to put a stop to their parents' madness before it got out of control. "Our parents put us here for this specific reason."

"Okay," he slowly acknowledged.

"Don't you see? Under ordinary circumstances, we would never do this. We couldn't even stand each other two months ago. It's the Stranded Love Syndrome. They planned all of this and if we're not careful, they'll win."

He laughed. "Oh come on."

"I am not joking. Any two people cooped up in a cabin for a couple of months will naturally be attracted to each other because there isn't anyone else around. But as soon as we return home, we'll end up regretting this because we'll remember why we didn't get along. Then it will be too late to get an annulment."

He hesitated. Finally, he shrugged and moved closer to her. "I'm willing to take the risk."

"Seriously, Ryan." She put her hand up to stop him. "You would not find me appealing if we were in Omaha. You never dated anyone like me. You always went out with gorgeous models."

"Well, you look pretty good, even if you are covered in flour."

"No, I don't. I'm wearing a baggy t-shirt."

He grinned. "Which is wet."

She ignored him. "I'm wearing a ponytail."

"You don't have your glasses on. Part of your librarian facade is gone. And you have great legs. You really need to be careful about what you wear. You know how visual men are."

She looked down. "There's nothing indecent about what I'm wearing." Her shorts went down to the top of her knees and

her shirt was a regular t-shirt.

"You amuse me. You think that men only get turned on when they see a scantily clad woman, but you're wrong. Part of attraction is physical but there are emotional and intellectual components to it as well. I think we go well together."

She sighed. He was crazy.

"You are incredibly stubborn. Do you really have your mind set on us getting that annulment?" he seriously asked.

"I'm trying to protect you from yourself. You're a man. You have no control over yourself."

"I don't?"

"No. You don't realize what you're saying or doing. Isolation from the rest of the world has warped your thinking."

He looked at her as if she were nuts.

She rested a hand on his arm. "You'll have to trust me. When we get back to Omaha, you'll thank me."

"How lucky I am to be in good hands."

"This is for your own good." She decided she would have to brave getting the floor in the living room and bathroom dirty. She could clean it up after her shower.

# Chapter Twenty-One



Ryan couldn't believe Elizabeth was so determined to never get married, or stay married, that she resisted him as much as she did. But he suspected that she was interested in him. There was no way she could fake kissing him the way she did. She possessed a lot of passion under her cool exterior. Deciding to act like nothing happened after she came out of the shower, he cleaned the kitchen so that it sparkled as if she had just cleaned it.

"I'm a grown man. I can handle a little mess," he told her when she stood in the kitchen with a bewildered look on her face. The timer went off. "Oh good. The cake is ready. Do you want some?" He took it out of the oven and set it on the stove.

"No. I'm going for a walk."

"Suit yourself."

Since there wasn't any cake mix in the cabin, he had to

make it from scratch, which wasn't as intimidating as he originally thought it would be. He was relieved to see that it turned out well because he didn't want to go through the process of measuring everything out again. He had made the icing earlier and set it aside before he made the cake. His mouth watered in anticipation. He was going to enjoy this special treat. It was too bad she wouldn't be enjoying it with him. He liked sharing things with her.

He watched her as she walked along the river. Her auburn hair hung loosely around her shoulders. Whether she wore it in a ponytail or not didn't matter. He found both styles appealing. She was a lot more attractive than any woman he had gone out with. She had curves where a woman was supposed to have curves. It was a nice change to hold a woman and feel a soft feminine form against him. The models were too thin to adequately enjoy. He meant what he told her. Attraction was more than how a woman looked, though he thought she was good looking. But even with Carmen, he didn't feel the connection that he did with Elizabeth. He could talk to Elizabeth about anything, and even if she didn't agree with him, she didn't try to change his thinking, except in the case of how he felt about her.

Once he finished eating, he went outside with his drawing pad and pencil. There was no way he was going to tell her that he often went out there to draw her. He enjoyed examining her with close scrutiny. He had drawn her in the ad for jewelry and discovered that it was more fun to draw someone in front of him than to draw someone he had to imagine in his mind. From there, he drew her for the camping ad and continued to draw her on a regular basis. He wasn't sure if he wanted her to know what he was doing or not. Considering her reaction to his kiss, he decided it was better to hold off on that information until a later date.

Even if he did succeed in winning her over, he would never tell her what Ben and Zack wrote in their letters. They

thought they were funny but they disgusted him. Now that he understood the kind of friends they had been all along, it was easy to discern their intention. They accused Elizabeth of putting ideas in his head, saying that she was trying to turn him against them. The final straw came when they wrote, "What's next? Are you going to have a litter of puppies with her?" He quickly wrote his reply: "Until you apologize for that comment, I have nothing to say to you." He spent the night fuming. He was mad at them and himself. He hadn't realized how bad he must have seemed to her until that moment. He marveled that she could even forgive him for his past behavior. *Even if I didn't like her, she didn't deserve to be talked about that way.*

*Do I even deserve Beth?* He wasn't sure if Elizabeth would want to stay married after the four months were up, but he was going to do his best to show her that he really did love her. And how could he resist such a tempting challenge as Elizabeth Jackson?

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Two days after their kiss, he decided to pick out a chick flick. He had written on his 'what women want' list that women liked to watch those types of movies with their boyfriends and husbands. On the talk show, the women seemed to be upset that their significant others only wanted to watch action and suspense movies.

"We want more romance," one wife told her husband. "Would it kill you to watch a drama about two people finding out they're soul mates?"

The husband, of course, had said, "Yes, it actually would."

This resulted in the usual chaos from women telling him off.

So Ryan decided he would watch a boring, sentimental

movie with Elizabeth to show her that he could be sensitive. It was something the women said they wanted their men to be. It was either that or reveal his feelings about some traumatic childhood event. His childhood had been great, so there was no reason to complain. That left the movie.

After scanning the DVDs, he picked out the movie he knew would be a sappy tear jerker. He took the kettle corn and vegetables and dip to the coffee table in the living room. Then he set aside some soda and bottled water. He wasn't sure if she would be in the mood to eat and drink the good stuff or the health stuff, so he wanted to be prepared. He brought out some napkins for her sake and waited for her to come back to the cabin.

"Did you have a nice walk?" he asked her as she walked through the front door.

"Yes. I always do. Even though it's eight, it feels like it's four in the afternoon. The long daylight hours throw me off my regular schedule."

He noticed that she wore pants instead of shorts. With the temperatures steadily climbing so that the highs were reaching the 70s during the day, she had begun wearing shorts, but since her mission was to turn him off, she had taken to wearing pants again. He wished he hadn't made the comment about her legs because he did enjoy looking at them, and now he couldn't.

"Would you like to watch a movie tonight?" he wondered, turning his attention back to his plan.

She smiled when she saw the food and drinks on the coffee table. "Do I have a choice?"

"Of course, you do. I could watch this movie alone while you run off to do whatever it is you would rather do. I'll be all by myself. I might get lonely but I'll make do."

She laughed. "I don't mind watching a movie with you."

"Oh good. Sit down next to me and I'll put in the movie I selected."

She sat on the cushion next to him. He noted that she sat closer than she used to.

"Would you like popcorn or veggies?" he inquired.

"Both."

"Good for you, Beth. You used to only pick the boring vegetables."

"Well, I decided you were right. I need to enjoy life a little more."

He started the movie. He was glad he had some food out so he was distracted enough to not fall asleep. He gave up trying to follow the long drawn out plot and thought of what the Henderson commercial would look like.

Elizabeth cleared her throat and crossed her arms. She stared at the screen.

*Does she know I'm not paying attention?* He forced his thoughts back to the movie.

The mother in the movie was counseling her two daughters who were at odds with each other.

"Can I help it if I've always been prettier than Molly?" daughter #1 angrily asked.

"I'm prettier than you," daughter #2 cried, sobbing loudly into her tissue.

"Girls, girls," the mother anxiously began. "You're both very pretty. You two are just so competitive. I thought you would grow out of this but here you are in your thirties, and you're still trying to outdo each other. Where did I go wrong?" She started crying.

*Oh brother.* Ryan tried not to roll his eyes. Carmen used to get upset whenever he showed any disinterest in these kinds of movies.

"Mom is right. We are both pretty. I guess I just don't understand why we can't get along," daughter #2 wept.

Daughter #1's lower lip quivered. "Ever since Bruce

picked you over me, my insecurities have been overwhelming. I wasn't even aware of how inferior I felt until you announced your wedding date. I am sorry, Molly. Can we put aside our differences and get along?"

"I would like that very much."

"You're the prettier one."

"No, you are."

"You are."

The sisters hugged each other, crying the entire time.

"You know who the prettiest one is," daughter #1 told daughter #2.

They looked at their mother. "Mom!"

"My girls are finally friends again!" The mother joined them in a big hug.

Ryan glanced at his watch. There was still another forty minutes left in the movie. How much more sappiness could he endure?

Elizabeth sighed. Finally, she turned to him. "Why did you pick this movie?"

He blinked. "I thought you might enjoy it."

"So you didn't want to see this?"

"I wanted to do something for you." He knew if he said 'This movie is boring me too death,' she would take offense to it.

"This is my mom's movie. She loves this stuff but I have a hard time watching it. Do you mind if I pick out something else?"

How bad could another chick flick get? "No. Go for it."

To his surprise, she picked out a suspense movie. "This is one of my favorites."

"Don't you like romantic movies?"

"Yes but if it's a romance, I prefer it to be a romantic comedy or a romance with some mystery or suspense involved in it. I don't really care for sad romantic movies. My favorite

movies, however, are psychological thrillers."

*Wonders will never cease.* He was relieved that she picked the movie she did. At least now he wouldn't have to feign interest in it. "We should go camping again," he said. "Then I can tell you a couple more of those scary stories." *And I can hold you when you get scared.*

"I have to admit that it was fun. Okay. Do you want to do it tomorrow night?"

"You got yourself a date."

# Chapter Twenty-Two



The next day, Elizabeth didn't hide her surprise when she saw Ryan packing in the kitchen.

"I thought it would be fun to take the boat to the other side of the river. We can hike and camp over there," he explained. He had a stack of food items lying on the table.

"Why do you want to be that far from the cabin?" She slowly entered the kitchen, watching all the junk food he was stuffing into his backpack.

He shrugged. "I thought it might be adventurous to rough it for a night. Besides, aren't you curious to see what's over on that side?"

She shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "But there aren't any bathrooms."

He grinned. "I'll bring toilet paper, and we can wash our

hands in the river."

That thought didn't appeal to her at all.

As if he picked up on her thoughts, he stopped what he was doing and approached her. Resting his hands on her shoulders, he smiled. "Think of this as the chance to experience what our forefathers did. You know, before we had electricity and plumbing."

"I never had any desire to go back to that time period." Though she protested, she felt her resolve weaken beneath his warm hands. He was too charming for his own good. Or maybe he was too charming for *her* own good.

"Take a risk. Do something new. I'll be with you." Putting his arm around her shoulders, he drew her against his side and led her to the window. "Just look at how beautiful it is over there. Don't you want to check it out? See what it's like up close?"

His enthusiasm was infectious. She went to her bedroom and added her clothes to the items he packed.

Once he was ready, she wanted to help him with the boat, but he insisted on taking it out of the shed himself. "I know it sounds archaic, but men do like to be the ones to do the more demanding tasks. It makes us feel strong."

"Anyone can tell by looking at you that you're strong."

He glanced at her as he raised the side of the aluminum boat. "Really?"

"Your shirt isn't that loose."

He glanced at his light blue t-shirt which strained against his muscles as he worked to get the boat out of the shed. His smile grew wider. "You like the way I look?"

Realizing the course his thoughts had taken, her cheeks flushed. Determined not to further embarrass herself, she grabbed the gun from the middle shelf. "We should take this in case we run into a wild animal."

"I like the way you look."

Choosing to ignore him, she exited the shed and waited for him to drag the boat to the river's bank. To her relief, he didn't ask if she liked the way he looked. Yes, she found him good looking. Actually, the term 'good looking' was tame. He was gorgeous. Every fiber of her being wanted to reach out and touch him, or have him touch her. Shaking her head to clear her inappropriate thoughts, she hopped in the boat when he held it still for her.

The river's calm current made their journey easy, and once he docked it, he took her hand to help her out.

"I can get out myself," she told him, even as she almost tripped on her way out of it. Heat filled her face. She knew she was clumsy, but being this close to him and nearly falling into his arms wasn't a situation she relished. It made her feel like a damsel in distress.

He sighed. "Besides wanting to be strong, men do like to take care of women. Call it our protective instinct."

"Is that why you dated Carmen?" If there was anyone who needed a man to step in and save the day, it was his ex-girlfriend.

"This has nothing to do with her. I'm just saying that it's all right for you to be vulnerable. I won't laugh at you."

Being vulnerable was something she didn't like. She yanked her hand out of his and grabbed the gun from the seat of the boat. "Where do you want to hike?" she asked him.

"Did I upset you?" He refused to budge from his spot. Instead, he stared at her and repeated the question.

Aggravated because she didn't want to think about Preston, she spun around. "No. I'm remembering someone else. I don't care to think of him either. Can we go on this hike now?"

Picking up the backpack, he nodded and swung it over his shoulder. "We'll come back later and set up the tent." He examined his options and finally pointed to the narrow path on

their left. "Let's go that way. I think it leads to a waterfall. At least, that's what it looks like from the cabin."

"How can you see that far away?"

"Your parents left a pair of binoculars in the shed."

Apparently, he took the time to explore the shed more than she did. She followed him as he made a path through the thick evergreens which provided ample shade from the bright sun. She had to admit that the hike exhilarated her. The smell of fresh spring air filled her lungs. Birds twittered above them, and she chuckled at the sight of two squirrels playing peek-a-boo around one of the trees. To her surprise, a waterfall did lay ahead of them. How he managed to find it among all the trees, she didn't know, but he impressed her.

They had lunch by the waterfall.

"I'm sorry I was testy earlier," she said as she ate the strawberries he packed for her. "I don't think you'll laugh at me. It's just that the last time I was vulnerable, it was to Preston. And we know how that turned out. It's just safer to help myself."

His eyes twinkled. "We'll see how brave you are tonight after I tell you some more scary stories. I didn't even tell you the worst of them last time."

Relieved that he hadn't criticized her, she relaxed. "Oh yeah? Well, I heard a pretty good one on the TV the other day, so you better watch out."

He laughed. "I look forward to the challenge."

The mood brightened between them, so they were able to enjoy the rest of the day, joking and laughing. When it was time to set up the tent, she realized that she had fun discovering something new. She hadn't ever taken the time to hike through unfamiliar territory with the possibility of running into a bear or moose. There was an element of danger but they had the gun for protection. She mused that he would insist on using the gun if necessary since he was determined to be her knight in shining

armor.

However, when he told her tales more ghastly than the ones he offered during their last camping trip, she began to question whether he really was a knight in shining armor after all. He struck her as a villain who toyed with his captives since he took an unusual delight in spooking her. She gave up on trying to be brave after she screamed from a sound behind her. Jerking up from the campfire, she spun around to see a squirrel race up a tree.

"What's wrong?" Though Ryan appeared concerned, she recognized the mirth in his eyes.

"You are a horrible, horrible man," she spat before she retired to the tent.

She wiggled into her sleeping bag and zipped it over her head. Headless horsemen, telltale hearts, haunted houses and vacant graveyards...Really, did he need to go into detail with all of those creepy stories? She heard him enter the tent but refused to acknowledge him, even when she heard his chuckles.

A hand gently touched her shoulder. She stiffened.

"It's just me," he replied.

"I won't be able to sleep for a week now. Thanks a lot."

"Sure you will. I'll keep you safe." He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to him. "I won't let any of the undead feed on your flesh."

"Oh, you are gross. I'm shocked that you find these stories..." The correct word evaded her.

"They're just stories. Sometimes it's fun to tell a good spooky story. You didn't seem to mind it when I began telling them."

"Okay. You got me. I'm a big coward."

"You're not a coward. You're a woman. Women typically freak out and need comforting after a dose of scary stuff. Fortunately for you, I'm here."

"It's because of you that I'm in this predicament."

He started to unzip her sleeping bag.

She gasped and sat up. Peeking out of it, she demanded, "What are you doing?"

His eyes were wide. "I can comfort you better if I get in that sleeping bag with you."

She glared at him. "You're a scrupulous, scheming man, Ryan Jackson. You brought me out here to have your way with me."

"Can't a man comfort his wife without a sleeping bag coming between them?"

"I'm not stupid. I know exactly what's on your mind." Despite the thrill that coursed through her, she determined to stand her ground. After all, who knew if he would regret going all the way with her once they returned to Omaha? It was easy to get carried away in the moment, but actions had consequences. She turned her attention back to his charming smile and said, "I thought you were a virgin."

"I am."

"You're not acting like one."

"Well, I'm tired of being one. Wouldn't you like to lose your virginity too?"

She loudly sighed. "Ryan, you need to remember who I am and why we don't make a good match."

He groaned. "Yes, we are. I like being with you. Don't you like being with me?"

"We're friends. Of course, I like being with you. Let's not ruin it."

"You honestly believe that I'm going to drop you as soon as another woman walks by, don't you? Well, I'm not."

She decided not to answer. He spent half his life dating the best looking women on the planet, and he wondered why she might suspect that he'd forget all about her once they returned

home? Preston hadn't been able to keep his word. Why should she expect Ryan to keep his? Men were weak, and beauty was their undoing. She didn't wish to dwell on any romantic feelings she might be harboring for Ryan. It was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

"I didn't scare you at all," she noted, hoping to change the topic.

The corners of his mouth curved up. "No, you didn't."

"Does anything scare you?"

He puffed his chest out. "I am a formidable wall made of steel. That's why you need me to protect you."

She smiled. "Men like to be fearless then?"

"Yes." Turning to her, he grinned, "Men also like to be useful. Now, since I scared you witless, can I at least hold you in my arms tonight? You wouldn't want the one eyed fiend to steal you away in the middle of the night, would you?"

She shivered as she recalled the horrible tale of the body snatcher who assumed the identity of his victims. "Did I mention that you're a horrible man?"

He laughed under his breath. "You might have said something to that effect." He eased her closer to him. "Now, I'll keep you safe and redeem myself."

She did feel better about closing her eyes with him right next to her, so she snuggled against him and listened to the soothing flow of the river as she gradually fell asleep.

# Chapter Twenty-Three



Two days later, Ryan decided he would give 'romancing Elizabeth' another chance. He checked his list and decided that it was time to spend some quality time outdoors with her. One woman on the show said she always wanted her boyfriend to lie down on a blanket with her so they could tell each other what shapes they saw in the clouds. So when he saw Elizabeth outside, reading another book on a blanket, he decided to leave his drawing pad and join her. She had her hair pulled back into the cute ponytail again.

"Why are you still wearing pants?" he asked as he came up to her.

She looked up at him. Her glasses slid down her nose. "You know why."

"Oh right. You're trying to make sure I don't find you

attractive." How long was she going to go through her crazy idea? "Mind if I join you?"

"No. Did you want to read a romance book?"

"Sure." It would be a good excuse to be close to her.

She chuckled. "I didn't expect you to say yes. I know guys find these boring."

"Can we act out the romantic scenes?"

"Ryan," she warned.

He knew that meant it was time to back off. "You can't blame a man for trying." He shook his head as he sat next to her. "Why do you like to read those books when you don't want to watch the romantic dramas?"

"The dramas usually get sad. I don't want to feel depressed when I watch a movie or read a book. I like a happily ever after ending."

"So you are a romantic."

She shrugged. "I have my moments." She set the book down. "What brings you out here without your drawing pad?"

"I thought we could lie down on the blanket and tell each other what shapes we see in the clouds."

"Why?"

He thought of a good response. He knew he couldn't say, *Because I want you to fall in love with me. Then you'll want to stay married and we can finally do what married couples do.* Instead, he said, "It'll take me back to my childhood days when I used to watch Charlie Brown movies and the Peanut characters would see shapes in the clouds. Don't you ever miss the freedom and adventure of being a kid? You didn't have to worry about what anyone thought. You just did whatever you wanted and if someone didn't like it, that was their problem. It was a stress free time."

She rolled onto her back and stared at the sky as he settled next to her. "What I miss most about childhood is that I didn't have to pay any bills. I didn't have to worry about paying rent,

buying food or clothes. All of that was provided for me and I even got some great toys for doing nothing."

He laughed. "Those were the days."

"Okay. I'll play this game with you. I see a bell in the cloud right over there." She pointed to it.

"I see a sports car. It's sleek and red. It goes from zero to sixty in six seconds. Look, it even drives fast as a cloud."

She grinned. Then she studied the sky. "Hmm...I see a bunny eating a carrot."

"I see a sharp black speed boat. It's on the ocean and it's cruising around the Caribbean islands."

She looked over at him. "Okay. I see a chair."

"I see a midnight blue motorcycle speeding down the California ocean coast. It's at sunset and the weather is just right and the wind feels great against my skin."

She sat up and turned to him. "You have fast vehicles and boats on your mind today."

He glanced at her. "You were with me in each cloud I saw." When he saw her shake her head, he asked, "Will you let me see you with your hair down?"

She touched her ponytail. "I didn't realize I wore ponytails so often."

"Let your hair down and enjoy the sun."

"Okay."

He was surprised she agreed to it. He thought for sure she would say no in her pursuit to keep him from falling in love with her. She removed her rubber band and let her shoulder-length hair fall around her shoulders in gentle waves. He never saw a more lovely sight, but he was afraid to tell her that in case she immediately put her hair back up. "You look nice. You're pretty no matter how you wear your hair."

She smiled. "Thank you."

He decided to press his luck. "Do you remember the

Henderson party?"

"Of course, I do. It wasn't that long ago."

"You don't know this but when I was getting soda for my date, I saw you standing by yourself on the patio and thought you were the best looking woman in the place."

"Weren't you with a model?"

He cringed. "She had no substance. I was glad to see that date end." He hesitated before saying, "My dad said that Barry Henderson was impressed with you. Apparently, he thought you were one of the best people he got a chance to meet that night."

"I only talked to him for five minutes."

"Those must have been a good five minutes. Didn't he say he'd ask you out if he wasn't already engaged?"

"Yes but he was just being polite. I'm sure he told several other women that."

"No, he didn't. You were the only one. My dad made sure to tell me about it."

"Well, he also got the idea for this arranged marriage from my conversation with Barry because Barry told me that he is engaged to a woman that his parents picked for him."

"It's too bad that we didn't get over our differences in Omaha because then you would know that my feelings for you are sincere instead of blaming it on the Stranded Love Syndrome."

"I doubt we would have worked things out unless we were forced to spend time alone in the middle of nowhere. I hate to admit it but our parents knew what they were doing in that regard."

"Do you think we'll still talk to each other when we return to civilization?"

"I'm sure we will. We're bound to run into each other while our companies are working on the Henderson account."

He didn't like the sound of this. She really assumed that there was no possibility of them staying together. Deciding it was

time to turn things up a notch, he grabbed her book and flipped to the place she had been reading.

"Is this a good book?" he asked.

"Ryan, give that back," she protested, reaching for it.

He turned on his side, sheltering the book so she couldn't take it away from him. "Is this the kind of stuff you find romantic?"

"This isn't a guy book." She struggled to grab it from him but he was too strong.

"I already understand men. I need to understand women." Specifically, her. Maybe he could figure her out better if he read something she was interested in.

"I thought you were getting that information from the man-bashing talk show."

"The man on this cover looks like a male version of the models I used to date. Is this what your dream man looks like?"

"It's just a drawing."

"And a good one too." He opened the book to the page she had been reading. "Let's see what tall, dark and handsome is like." He read, *"Devon gazed longingly into Brianna's light green eyes, his heart flowing with the love he felt for her. 'I've looked for someone like you all of my life,' he whispered, his voice a warm caress against her cool fair skin. 'You are the sun that shines by day and the moon that glows by night. You are my north star that guides me safely to the welcoming home of your arms.'"* Unable to stop himself, he burst out laughing. "This is ridiculous!"

She groaned, mortified. "Fine. So I like mushy, ridiculous books. Can I have it back before I suffer further humiliation?"

"What guy says stuff like this?"

"Just ones in those books. I know men aren't romantic by nature. Why do you think a woman wrote the story?"

"Is this what women want to hear?" He fought her off of him as she grabbed for the book. "If I told you this, would you

fall in love with me?"

"Get real, Ryan."

He raised an eyebrow as he glanced back at her. "I could think up cheesy stuff like this to tell you."

She shot him a look of disgust. "No thanks."

"What's the difference between having this guy say it or me say it? Is it because he's better looking?"

"There's nothing wrong with the way you look."

He grinned at her. "So you find me to your liking?"

She didn't answer him.

"Come on. Why won't you answer the question? I find you to my liking. In fact, I often daydream about you. Do you want to know what we're doing in those daydreams?" He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

She grimaced. "No, not really."

"It's pretty good stuff. In one fantasy, we finished what we started in the kitchen."

"I've heard enough. Please, stop."

He reluctantly did so. He turned his attention back to the book. "I don't see how this is different from the dramas you claim to hate."

"He's saying he loves her. It's a happy moment."

"Oh. Got it." Though he really didn't, he decided to humor her. "Okay. Let's see what happens next." He resumed his reading. *"Eyes glistening with tears, Brianna softly confessed, 'For many nights I hoped for those words to fall from your lips. Now that I have heard them, I can believe in love again.'"* He gagged. "This is almost sickening. I'm going to need a barf bag."

"Which is exactly why you should give it back!"

"But you love these books, so there must be some redeeming quality in them. Obviously, you wouldn't waste your time if all of this sentimental mumbo jumbo filled all the pages."

"I happen to like that sentimental mumbo jumbo."

"Really?"

"You've done commercials for greeting cards. Why do you think they sell?"

He thought over her comment for a moment. "You're right. Jacob had to come up with a lot of crap to sell those campaigns."

"Crap?"

He started to nod and then stopped himself. "I'm as bad as those guys on that talk show, aren't I?"

She shrugged. "Romance doesn't come naturally to men."

"Which is why your books can show me the error of my ways. I bet if I read some of these, I'd know what to say to sweep you off your feet." *And into bed.* He didn't dare say the last part. Instead, he continued reading, *"'You no longer detest your wife?' Brianna asked. 'No, I do not, and I am sorry I ever did,' he replied, his words a soothing balm on her heart."* He looked at Elizabeth. "Why did he hate her?"

"Because she killed his brother, but she killed him in self-defense. He didn't realize it when he was forced to marry her, so their marriage starts out rocky."

"Hmm... Misunderstandings, forced marriages, falling in love... Doesn't that remind you of another couple?" he pointed out.

She sighed. "This has nothing to do with us. The people in this book don't exist."

"All right. So what happens next?" He picked up the book to begin reading again.

"You don't need to read anymore. You've already seen how boring it can be."

"Not to you. You love this stuff." He held her at bay while he read, *"Wrapping his strong, sweaty arms around her luscious, slender body..."* He paused. "Why is he sweaty?"

She shook her head, staring at the clouds. "Because he

just returned from battle. Can we please do something else?"

What didn't she want him to read? Now he had to know what caused her embarrassment. He read, *"Wrapping his strong, sweaty arms around her luscious, slender body, he brought his lips to her full ones and kissed her. He kissed her with all the passion that built up in him since their last coming together as husband and wife. Desire flooding through him, his mouth descended to her..."* He sat up. "Whoa!"

Glancing at her, he realized that she intentionally ignored him.

His interest peaked, he read the rest of the chapter in silence while Elizabeth plucked blades of grass. When he was done, he said, "I had no idea romance books include sex scenes."

By the way she muttered, "Some do, some don't," he knew she was mortified.

He set the book down and gave her a good look. "Are you ashamed to have a sex drive?"

"No. I'm ashamed you know what I'm reading."

"Why? This is good stuff."

She hid her face in her hands.

"Come on, Beth. I mean, if you can't read this with your husband, who can you read it with? Hey, I got a great idea! Let's act it out."

Her head shot up and she shot him a 'you can't be serious' look.

"What?" He shrugged. "It would be more fun than watching clouds or reading about it. Besides, we're married. Aren't you curious to know if it's like what the author wrote? I, for one, would like to know if page 267 is possible." He motioned to the book as he handed it back to her.

She reluctantly took it.

"Don't be embarrassed. You have great taste in literature." Who knew what kind of inspiration she would bring to the bedroom with the material she read? The possibilities

excited him.

She rolled her eyes but didn't say anything.

He decided to back off from saying anything else about it. "Come on. Lie back down and look at the clouds with me."

Setting the book aside, she did as he asked.

Hoping to ease her discomfort, he laid next to her and pointed to another cloud. "I see a butterfly."

"You didn't see another mode of transportation?" Humor returned to her voice.

"No. I see rebirth. Just because something was a certain way in the past, it doesn't mean it has to be that way forever. Sometimes, when a situation seems bad, it can turn out good."

"That's nice. I like it." She smiled. Pointing to the sky, she said, "I see a jet ski passing the sharp black speed boat."

*Don't lose heart,* he told himself. *There's still a month and a half left.*

# Chapter Twenty-Four



Four days later during breakfast, he was shocked to discover a dark patch of hair over her upper lip.

"Are you one of those women who have mustaches?" he asked as they were eating breakfast.

She nodded. "I usually wax it off, but I thought I should let it grow out so that you can be properly disgusted by me."

He almost burst out laughing. Instead, he coughed. Shaking his head, he asked, "Why are you so intent on fighting what's going on between us?"

She sighed, as if she couldn't believe he was even asking the question. "I already explained it to you. The only reason we find each other remotely interesting is because our parents dumped us here."

"'We'?" Now that sounded promising.

"I meant 'you'."

He didn't believe her for a minute. Rather than press the issue, he wondered, "Since you have a mustache now, will you turn to a life of crime?"

"That theory only applies to men with mustaches."

"What other gross things do you plan to do to push me away from you?" He took a bite of his ham and cheese omelet.

"I'm not shaving my legs. I thought since you mentioned them, I should do what I can to take your focus off of them."

"I'll tell you what. Since you're being so thoughtful in trying to protect me from making the worst decision of my life, I'll return the favor. I'll grow a mustache and refuse to bathe. I can even stop helping you around the cabin if it'll support the cause."

"But I'm not the one who's having trouble keeping a clear head."

"And you shouldn't have to, so I'm preventing that from happening. You'll thank me when you're back in Omaha and single again." He finished his omelet and stood up to the leave the room. "I'd love to help you clean up, but I wouldn't want you to find me attractive. I know how much it turns a woman on when her husband pitches in around the house."

"Don't you think you're taking this a little too far?"

He shrugged. "Nope." Then he left the room, grinning. *Two can play this game.* Trying to romance her wasn't working as well as he hoped, so he had to try something different.

***

He spent the rest of the week trying to be as unattractive as possible. It wasn't easy since he was used to bathing and shaving every day. Whenever Elizabeth complained that he wasn't picking up after himself or putting the toilet seat down anymore, he claimed it was to fight off the Stranded Love Syndrome.

One morning before breakfast, he decided to leave a trail of dirty clothes from the couch to the laundry room. He shaved enough hair off of his face to leave the mustache that was starting to grow in. Then he wiped his face with a towel and threw it on the bathroom floor. He made sure to leave his shaving cream and razor on the counter by the sink for good measure. He hated to admit he was having fun watching her squirm as she struggled to not mess with his things. She had sworn she wouldn't pick up after him or clean up the place. She was having difficulty keeping her word on that since he would catch her trying to clean something or throw a couple of his shirts in with her laundry when she thought he wasn't looking. *She's such a nice woman beneath her hard exterior.* It made him love her even more.

He heard her emerge from her bedroom. He shut the door enough so he could watch her. She inspected his clothes that were thrown carelessly on the floor. To his surprise, she was wearing a tank top and a pair of shorts. *She meant it when she said she wasn't going to shave anymore.* If she thought that was going to deter him, she was wrong. He held in his laughter as she cringed. She took a couple of steps, stopped, looked at the floor, loudly sighed, took another step and stopped again. He could tell she was having an internal dialogue on the consequences of picking up the clothes. She glanced at the bathroom door. He quickly ducked out of sight. Did she see him? He cautiously peered around the slightly opened door and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized she hadn't seen him.

"He is taking this whole thing way too far," she muttered as she kicked his clothes under the couch.

As soon as she was safely out of sight, he left the bathroom and grabbed his clothes from under the couch and threw it in the washer. If he didn't do it now, he would forget where they were. He walked into the kitchen and smiled at her. "Good morning, sexy."

She looked at him like he was crazy as she scrambled the eggs in the pan.

"I haven't seen you in a tank top before," he said as he grabbed two cans of juice and put them on the kitchen table.

"Well, I thought wearing it would help make a point."

"I think you're making two excellent points." He chuckled as she scowled at him. "It's nice to see that you gained some of that weight back, especially in the tank top area."

"You are relentless, Ryan. Does nothing disgust you?"

"I'm sick. It's the Stranded Love Syndrome. I can't be held accountable for anything I say or do."

"Maybe I should put on a regular t-shirt."

"No! There's no need to hide that horrible body odor." He didn't want to sacrifice the nice view he had of her chest.

"We both stink."

"I know." He sniffed his arm pit and coughed. "That's bad."

She grimaced before walking to the refrigerator. "Do you want ham, bacon or sausage?"

"Bacon."

She nodded and grabbed it. As she went back to the stove, he lightly tapped her on the behind. She gasped and turned to stare at him.

His eyes grew wide. "Sorry. I have no control over myself."

She put the bacon in another skillet and started cooking it.

"Uh oh. I'm losing control again." He pretended to try to reach for the plates but wrapped his arms around her waist and started kissing her ear instead.

"Stop it." She laughed. "Your mustache tickles."

"Why don't you kiss my ear and I'll tell you whether your mustache tickles or not."

"I don't understand you at all. You should be completely

repulsed by me. I don't even want to be near me."

"It takes more than a foul smelling and hairy woman to turn me off. You need to be a brainless model whose favorite topic of conversation is herself."

"Is that what they're like?"

"The ones I went out with were. It was rough. I couldn't wait for the date to end. I have a lot more fun being with you."

"Breakfast is ready." She gently pushed him away so she could grab the plates and put the food on them.

"So am I," he suggestively stated.

After she put the plates on the table, she put her foot on the chair. "Take a good look at my hairy leg. This ought to have you running away from me."

"Maybe if I touch it, I'll be adequately mortified." Before she had time to think of a proper response, he slowly ran his hand from her ankle to her thigh, enjoying the curves in her leg, even if it was prickly. "If the hair bothers you, I could shave your legs for you." His hand stopped at her shorts, his fingers massaging her skin.

She stood still.

He took her hesitation as his chance and kissed her, this kiss longer and more demanding than the one they shared before. She, in turn, surprised him when she slid her arms around him and kissed him back. Her response greatly encouraged him. He parted his lips so he could trace his tongue along her lower lip. He groaned in appreciation when she opened her mouth to invite him in. His desire for her slowly spread through him, heating his body.

He continued to kiss her as he gently lifted her up on the table, pushing aside the plates to give them room. She didn't resist the movement of his hands as they slid in her shorts and slowly worked their way up her thighs, taking his time to enjoy the warm skin beneath his fingers. Having her intimately against him was

even better than he imagined it would be after reading her romance books.

She brought her hands to his head and ran her fingers through his unkempt hair. She moaned. Her passion for him had become as urgent as his passion was for her. His hands slid behind her bottom and he leaned forward so she had to lie down on the table. He wrapped her legs around his waist and bent over to kiss her neck. The suggestion in the position he chose was enough to set him on fire. He pressed his erection firmly between her legs, making him eager for more. He left a trail of kisses from her neck to her cleavage. In the position she was in, he had a generous amount of access to her. He heard another moan and wasn't sure if it came from him or her but it didn't matter. She had the most amazing body in the world. He was hungry for her. He desperately wanted to make love to her, to be one with her.

Lifting his head so he could look at her, he asked in a husky voice, "Do you believe me now?"

The moment she gasped, he realized his mistake. He shouldn't have said anything, since in doing so, he broke the spell that had fallen between them.

She cleared her throat, gently pushed him away from her and stood up, her hands trembling. "We have to stop before we go too far." She straightened her clothes.

"Come on. Let's just do it. I don't want an annulment."

"You will once we're back in Omaha."

He grumbled, letting his agitation show. "No, I won't. I'll still want you."

"We've been alone for too long. Neither one of us is thinking straight. We need to clear our heads." She took a deep breath, an action that only served to excite him even more since it pronounced the roundness of her breasts. She moved their plates in front of their chairs. "Eat before your meal gets cold."

Realizing that arguing with her would be pointless, he

obeyed her, though he was tempted to ring her neck for being downright stubborn. Why was she tormenting him? After a couple of bites, he asked, "Is it my mustache?"

She glanced at him, her eyes wide. "What?"

"Does my mustache turn you off?"

Twirling the fork with her thumb and index finger, she softly admitted, "I forgot you had it. I guess I got used to seeing it."

"So, are men with mustaches still criminals?"

"I concede. Not all of them are."

He leaned forward and replied, "And not all women have to be models to be beautiful." He chose to let the subject drop for the time being and silently ate the rest of his meal.

He couldn't be sure, but he thought she was pleased that he was still attracted to her.

# Chapter Twenty-Five



The next day when she left her bedroom, she gasped when she saw him reading one of her romance novels.

"What are you doing with my book?" she demanded, her voice sounding incredulous.

He glanced up at her. "I'm reading it."

She looked like she was trying not to laugh. She was wearing a t-shirt and pants again, he sadly noted.

"These books aren't too bad," he admitted. "Some even have a plot." *And great sex scenes.* He was getting some great ideas on what to do with her once she came to her senses. If the previous day's activity in the kitchen was an indicator of what was to come, he couldn't wait to try out some of the scenes in her books.

"You are strange. I can't imagine any other man enjoying

romances, even if the plot is doable."

"I think more men would be interested if they knew there was more to these books than sappy sentiment, which I have to skip over. Sometimes the author goes overboard in the way the characters express their love for one another."

"I happen to think it can be sweet."

"Of course, you would. You're a woman."

"My point exactly. No man in his right mind would read those books."

"Good. Then you won't unwittingly fall in love with me."

She huffed. "That is not a problem for me."

*Apparently not.* And that was starting to upset him to no end. How could she resist the bond they developed over their time in Alaska? The attraction seemed to grow each day. Here he was, alone with his wife, and unable to do anything about satisfying his desire for her. The last thing he wanted to do was end their marriage.

Considering her remarkable willpower, he was going to end up bathing, shaving and helping her around the cabin sooner than it would take for her to break and admit that she did care for him after all. He could hardly tolerate his nasty, sticky, stinky self.

Determined not to let her see how her words bothered him, he opted for another course of action. Pointing to the commercial with a woman in a bikini waxing a car, he said, "Hey, do you remember that red sports car I saw in the cloud that day? That woman is waxing the same exact car."

"Is that where you got the idea for that particular car?"

"Maybe. I probably recalled it but was unaware of where the thought came from. You know how us men are. We are so visual that any woman showing off her body will overwhelm us until we have absolutely no control of ourselves and have to do whatever she wants."

She frowned. "If this happened at work, it would be

sexual harassment."

"Can't you see that men are the real victims here? I can't help what I do. I have no control over my thoughts or actions."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't. There's no possible way I could want to stay married to you. I'm being victimized by our parents. The only reason I want you is because there's no one else here. If we were in Omaha, I'd drop you and pursue the first model that walked up to me."

"You are making fun of the Stranded Love Syndrome."

"I've just come to the conclusion that you're right. I originally thought that I chose to be in love with you, but you've shown me the error of my ways. The truth is, I'm being manipulated to want you, and I need you to protect me from myself."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Doesn't it? It's what you've been telling me."

Her eyebrows furrowed and she stood quietly as she processed what he was saying.

"Boy, I hope July 1st gets here fast because I don't know how much longer I can hold off my desire to make love to you."

"What?" She clearly hadn't expected this.

"Your plan is seriously flawed. You're still considerate. You need to be rude. Stop making me something to eat. Don't clean up after me. Stop talking to me unless it's to nag me about something. And you're going to have to do something about the way you look. Though you have the awkward mustache and hairy armpits and legs, you're still attractive. You haven't done nearly enough to repulse me. It takes more than the extra hair to be ugly."

"You're impossible."

"You're probably right. Thank goodness you have no inclination to be my wife. I have to hand it to you. You're really

good at this 'not falling in love' thing. You have much better control over your emotions than I do."

She started to say something but stopped herself. She looked confused.

He hoped that was a good sign.

Finally, she sighed. "It's okay, Ryan. We only have a little over four weeks left. I don't want to jeopardize your future with a woman you'll choose instead of having your parents choose her for you."

Was she serious? He watched her as she left the cabin to go on another walk. He thought he was getting through to her. *Why is she that determined to fight this?* He rubbed his eyes. He wanted to bang the book on the coffee table and run after her. *And say what?* This method clearly wasn't working. He smelled his shirt and shuddered. Before he could come up with another plan, he was going to clean up.

While he took a shower, he contemplated the situation he was trapped in. There had to be a way to get through Elizabeth's thick skull. He couldn't recall a time when she frustrated him as much as she did at that moment. Working the shampoo into his grimy hair, he thought over everything he learned about her since coming to Alaska. She prided herself on being independent, and he admitted that it was a quality he had always admired about her. But she read romance books for a reason. One thing he did get out of those books, besides ideas on what to do in bed, was that the heroine wanted to be appreciated for who she was. Deep down, even the most self-reliant woman wanted to be cared for.

Rinsing his hair with the hot, soothing water, he decided that he didn't have it in him to speak corny love lines like comparing Elizabeth to the sun and moon. Whether it was because he was a man or because of his personality, he lacked the suave vocabulary to sway her with words. Besides, if he tried to quote one of those heroes, he'd probably start laughing and that

would only ruin the moment. After all, he did botch things up during breakfast in the kitchen the other day. If he had kept his trap shut, they'd probably be in bed enjoying each other rather than going in circles with their relationship.

He washed the layers of sweat and dirt off his body, relieved to be clean. He doubted he would ever take showers for granted again. Turning his attention back to the matter at hand, he realized that he would have to do something other than whisper poetic words in her ear. One thing he was good at was action. He was a doer, and since that was his strength, he would show her that he cared for her. He recalled the talk show. Several women on there expressed their wish for the man to make them a candlelight dinner. Well, he learned how to make some edible foods since watching Elizabeth cook.

He smiled as he thought of how surprised she would be to find that he made her dinner. She did say that a man helping around the house was romantic. He turned off the water and grabbed a blue towel so he could dry off. Encouraged by the image of her happy expression when she saw that he cared enough to cook a real meal, he quickly picked up his razor and shaved the mustache off his face. He was glad to be rid of it. Though he wouldn't admit it to her, it had been driving him crazy ever since it grew in.

*I still have a month left. In three months, we've gone from hating each other to being friends to falling in love. Certainly, the fourth month will be the one where she realizes it too.*

# Chapter Twenty-Six



Elizabeth wanted to believe Ryan, that he did want to stay married to her. She didn't imagine she could feel anything but animosity for him when they first came to Alaska, but she discovered that he wasn't the same person he was back in high school and college. She didn't know what motivated the change, but he was a better person for it. She forced aside her turbulent emotions as she walked along the river for the next half hour.

The sound of footsteps interrupted her thoughts. She thought it was Ryan so she turned from the river to greet him. Instead of Ryan, however, she saw two men she recognized from the local and national news channels. They were Rick Jenkins and Seth Powers, the two bank robbers who escaped the police in Fairbanks. They had successfully managed to hide out in the Alaskan wilderness. And now they were there. Rick, who had

blond hair and brown eyes was overweight. She marveled that he had the energy for such a long trek to her parents' cabin, but the aluminum motor boat at the river bank almost a mile downstream told her how they got as far as they did. The police expected them to be driving a car, not a boat. The other man, Seth, had black hair and was a skinny tall man. Both men were either forty or close to being that age. She took a deep breath to calm her anxiety when she saw their guns.

"Is this your cabin?" Rick asked her.

She slowly nodded, unable to speak. Were they going to shoot her?

"We're hungry. Do you have any food?"

Again, she nodded.

"Good. Take us into the cabin and make us something to eat."

She hesitated. What if eating wasn't the only thing they had in mind? She contemplated swimming down the river but remembered that Ryan was in the cabin and would deter the men from any thoughts they might have regarding her. Besides, they would probably swim after her, and though it didn't look like Rick could catch up with her, Seth probably could. She realized her safest choice was to go to the cabin, so she quietly led them to it. When she opened the front door, she almost gasped when she saw that Ryan had shaved his face and showered. He had made steak and mashed potatoes and was lighting two candles at the kitchen table.

When he saw them, his eyes grew wide. "Oh, hi honey. I see you brought company."

*How can he act so nonchalant about this?* She had never been so terrified in her entire life. *Am I going to survive this ordeal?* She never imagined that the robbers would show up on her doorstep.

"Is there enough for us?" Rick asked.

"If we divide everything in half and add junk food, there

is," Ryan cautiously replied.

"Good. We're starving. Since you two planned this nice meal, we'll take our stuff out to the living room. And if anyone tries to pull something funny, we got guns."

Ryan simply nodded and took out two extra plates to put food on. Elizabeth felt like she was going to start screaming at any moment, but fear held her in place. Being so close to criminals made her muscles tense up so that it was hard to walk.

"Come on, Beth," Ryan softly said as he took her hand and led her to one of the kitchen chairs.

After he handed them their plates and sodas, they went to the living room.

Returning to her, he whispered, "How did they get here?"

"By boat." She put her face in her hands. She was trembling. What were they going to do after they ate? "I didn't know what to do so I brought them in here."

"It's okay. At least I'm here to protect you." He put his arms around her. "So much for my romantic dinner."

"You gave up on grossing me out?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't take being around myself so I had to clean up. Besides, I like helping you around the cabin. There's no sense in fighting the inevitable, though they did a good job of killing the mood." He paused. "Did you notice something about them?"

"They're the bank robbers from Fairbanks."

"Yes but I was talking about their mustaches. You called it. They're crooks and they have mustaches." He laughed.

"How can you laugh at a time like this?"

"If I didn't laugh, I'd panic."

She envied him for his ability to do that.

"We might as well eat. I would hate for my meal to go to waste."

Considering the amount of stress they were under, she had

an increased appetite. Once they finished eating, he helped her clean up while Rick and Seth watched the television.

When there was nothing else to do, Rick told them to come out to the living room and join them. She cringed. She hated the thought of doing that.

"I'll be with you," Ryan reassured her.

She reluctantly followed him out to the room where she and Ryan sat on the empty couch.

"We're on the news," Seth said.

Seth sat on the chair to their left and Rick sat in the chair on their right. They had put their guns on the arms of the chairs.

"Will you turn it up?" Rick asked Ryan.

Ryan nodded and did as requested. He settled close to her and put his arm around her shoulders.

"The bank robbers who stole $760,000, Rick Jenkins and Seth Powers are still at large," the female anchor reported. "The police are searching diligently for them. They suspect that the robbers have found their way on a plane and are on their way to the lower forty-eight."

"Get a load of that, Rick," Seth said. "They think we're out of Alaska. We might get away with this after all."

"We outsmarted them all right," Rick replied.

She closed her eyes and willed for them to hop back on their boat and leave now that they had been fed. To her dismay, Rick put his muddy shoes on the edge of the coffee table and wiped his dirty hands on the chair. *He didn't even wash his hands.* She didn't know what was worse: being stuck with two bank robbers or watching them soil the cabin.

"So," Seth began, "are you two married?"

"Uh yes," Ryan replied, glancing from Rick to Seth.

"How long?"

"Since March 1st."

"Aw, isn't that sweet? Newlyweds," Rick commented. "I

remember when I had just married Tiffany. She was such a doll. She had the funniest laugh but I didn't care. She had such a good heart."

"Tiffany's my sister," Seth added.

"Enjoy your honeymoon stage. There's nothing quite like it."

"Well, we're bored. Have you got any games to play?"

She couldn't believe they were talking about playing games at a time like this. *Why don't you just leave? Play a game called swim down the river.*

"What do we have in this cabin for games, sweetheart?" Ryan asked her.

"Do you have Monopoly? I haven't played that one in years," Rick said.

"You got to be careful with that game or you'll get sent to jail," Seth joked.

He and Rick laughed.

*I wish I could eat something else.* The stress was beginning to feel unbearable.

"So, do you have Monopoly?" Rick asked her.

She nervously cleared her throat. "Yes. It's in the bedroom closet."

"Go ahead and get it. Then we'll all sit around the coffee table and play."

Was he serious? She had no desire to play the game, especially with them.

"Do you want me to get it?" Ryan offered.

"No. I'll get it." She didn't want to be alone with either of the two men. She stood up on her wobbly legs and walked to the bedroom door. Unfortunately, she took a moment to glance back to make sure no one was following her and ran into the doorframe just as she reached the doorway.

"She's a graceful little bird, isn't she?" Rick chuckled.

Seth didn't hide his laughter. She gritted her teeth with newfound determination. She went to the closet and opened the door. *This is ridiculous. Here I am, practically a hostage, and I'm getting a game for the criminals to play with.* What was going to happen next? They'd start playing charades? She wished the men would get back on their boat and leave.

She sighed when she realized the game was on the top shelf. She didn't know how she was going to reach it. She looked at the night stand by the bed. If she moved it over to the closet, she could step up on it and get the game. She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized the night stand was easy to move to the closet. She got on the edge of the night stand and leaned against the open closet door so she could get the game. As she grabbed it, the door swung in and she fell off the night stand and onto the pile of blankets on the closet floor. Monopoly and three other board games fell on top of her.

Ryan and Seth ran into the room.

"It's all right, Rick. She didn't try to run away," Seth called out. "She just fell in the closet."

Rick burst out laughing.

Ryan pushed the night stand away and helped her collect the game pieces and put them back into the right boxes.

"Hey! You have Pictionary. I love that game. Bring it out when you're done," Seth told them before he went back to the living room.

"I take it they intend to stay for awhile," Ryan whispered.

She didn't know whether to be annoyed, scared or embarrassed by everything that was going on. She quickly wiped the tears that formed in her eyes.

"I don't think they're going to hurt us," he assured her. "I think they're taking a break from their running."

She prayed he was right. She moved over to him and hugged him. It was the first time she could remember asking for

someone besides her parents to hold her. She longed to feel safe again.

He sighed and held her tightly to him. "It's okay, Beth. We'll get out of this. I just need time to make a plan."

She was struck by the fact that he seemed to genuinely care for her.

"Can you go along with what they want to do?" he asked. "If not, I could make up some excuse and tell them you're not feeling well. If I say you have cramps, they'll leave you alone. No man wants to hear about that."

She grinned despite herself. "I'll be fine. Just..."

"Just what?"

She hesitated. This wasn't easy for her. She wasn't used to asking for help. "Please don't leave me alone with either one of them. I'm not sure what they'll do."

He nodded. "I promise I won't let them alone with you."

She knew he meant it. She gathered enough strength from this knowledge so she could stop crying. She turned her attention back to the games and finished helping him put the pieces back where they belonged. He put two of the games back on the top shelf and carried Monopoly and Pictionary out to the living room. She followed close behind, taking comfort in his presence.

"You know what would go great with these games?" Rick asked Seth.

"Some good old-fashioned root beer floats," Seth answered. "Do you two have ice cream and root beer?"

"We do," Ryan replied as he set the games on the coffee table.

"I'll make them," she softly said as she walked to the kitchen.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Rick asked. "You're not going to drop some glasses are you? Maybe you should help her, Seth."

"I'll do that," Ryan interrupted. "Get the game set up and

we'll be back soon."

She breathed a sigh of relief. She was so tense she probably would drop the glasses, which was why she opted for plastic cups. When they were finished, they returned to the living room.

"Those look delicious," Rick complimented. "It's nice to see that you're safe to leave in the kitchen."

She sat next to Ryan on the floor in front of the coffee table. The Monopoly game was neatly laid out. *This is crazy that I'm playing a game with criminals.* Rick and Seth cheered whenever they avoided the jail as they made their way around the board. She had a hard time concentrating on the game but Ryan helped her keep up with the rest of the players.

Once in awhile, Rick or Seth would stop the game so they could watch anything the local or national news reporters said about them. The police were looking anywhere from Fairbanks to Anchorage to Seattle in hopes of finding the wanted men. She couldn't tell for sure, but she suspected they were flattered to catch so much national attention.

After the game, Ryan said he had to pour gas into the generator. "I need Beth to come with me to help me know when to stop pouring gas."

That was a lie but she realized he was saying it so that she wouldn't have to be left alone with them and she appreciated it.

"How do we know you're not going to make a phone call?" Rick wondered. "We're worth $20,000 if you turn us in."

"Come with us," Ryan replied. "If I don't add more gas, we'll be out of power by early morning."

"It would be nice to get some fresh air," Seth reasoned.

"All right. But no one pulls anything funny or we shoot," Rick said, pointing his gun at him.

Seth pointed his gun at them as well.

"We'll just fill up the generator," Ryan emphasized.

They went outside. While Ryan grabbed the container of gasoline from the shed, Elizabeth stood a few feet away from Rick and Seth. She took comfort in the serenity of the Alaskan wilderness. The sun was still bright though it was already nine in the evening. The air was a little cool but warm enough to go outside without a jacket.

"How often do you come up here?" Rick asked them.

"Not often," Ryan vaguely replied. "It's not even our cabin. It belongs to someone we know. They let us stay here as a wedding gift to us."

She realized what he was doing. Since they were obviously motivated by money, they might want to steal their money as well. The last thing they needed was to be robbed. She silently thanked him for his quick thinking.

"Just how long are they letting you stay here for?" Rick wondered.

"Well, a group of people will be by in a seaplane to take us out of here in two days. One of them is a cop. He won't be on duty, but he's a friend of the family and wants to congratulate us since he couldn't be at the wedding."

He was telling more lies, and she hoped they would motivate the robbers to leave.

"Oh. That does put a perspective on things," Rick said.

"We'll have to discuss this later," Seth told Rick. "But for now, let's play Pictionary."

# Chapter Twenty-Seven



When Rick announced it was time for them to sleep, Ryan went to the bedroom with Elizabeth. It wasn't quite the way he imagined joining her in the room, but he felt better knowing he would be with her so Rick and Seth wouldn't harm her, though he didn't honestly think they would. They didn't seem to be mean, but he couldn't afford to take his chances. He was glad to lock the bedroom door. It was nice to have a barrier between them.

He went to the bed, laid down on it and patted the spot next to him. "We might as well try to sleep. It won't do any good to stress out all night."

She eyed him.

He rolled his eyes. "Sex has been the furthest thing from my mind since our unwelcome guests walked through the door." Really, was the idea that repulsive to her?

She nodded and settled next to him. "At least they aren't in this room. I don't even know how I'm expected to sleep."

"If you can't sleep, at least get some rest." He stared at the ceiling. "Doesn't lying side by side remind you of the day we pointed out shapes in the clouds?"

She smiled. "That was fun."

"You see? I'm not so bad to be with after all."

"No, you're not."

"Do you think you might find me remotely interesting when we get back to Omaha?"

"Yes, unless you change your personality."

"No, I won't change that, but there is one thing I'm changing."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to be more assertive. I won't let my dad tell me what to do anymore, except if it's in relation to my job. However, if he threatens to fire me if I don't do something, then I'll let him do it. I don't regret being here with you, but there's no way he's going to make any other personal decisions for me. I made that clear in my letter to him and he'd better remember it."

"You are different. You seem to be more confident."

"So, when are you going to get rid of your mustache? I got rid of mine."

"I'll get rid of it when Rick and Seth leave. I'm hoping it's a motivator to get their focus off of me."

"I don't know, Beth. I find you sexy whether you have it or not." He looked at her and grinned. He reached for her and nuzzled her neck.

She giggled. "I thought sex was the furthest thing from your mind."

He shrugged. "I can probably be convinced to think about it." His hands traced the curves of her body.

She shook her head. "We could possibly say the wrong

thing to those crooks out there and they'd shoot us."

He stopped what he was doing and looked at her. "That brings me to a very important point. Do you really want to die a virgin?"

She threw her pillow at him. "You are so full of crap." She laughed. "I don't understand how you can joke at a time like this. I can hardly think straight."

"It's how I cope." Sadly, he wasn't joking. He hadn't been thinking of sex until they were in bed together.

Turning serious, she said, "I'm glad you told them that we have a cop coming when Kenneth gets here. That was good thinking on your part."

Realizing the possibility of sex was nil, he put his hands under his head and stared at the ceiling. "I'm hoping it will make them want to leave soon."

"You'll do well at your vice president position. You can accept a lot of responsibility under a good deal of pressure."

She didn't realize how much her confession meant to him. He had been unsure of himself in that role but was starting to feel like he could do it, and her words added to his newfound confidence. "Can I hold you?"

"I stink."

"So?"

"Well, you took a shower today."

"And?"

"You smell and look nice."

He raised an eyebrow. "You like the way I look?"

"Yes, I do," she softly replied.

"Then cuddle up with me." He learned that women liked lots of nonsexual touching, and cuddling qualified as such an activity.

She snuggled against him and he wrapped his arms around her. He smiled. He liked the way she felt next to him. It felt

natural. While she drifted off to sleep, he tried to think of a way to get the men to leave.

Around four, he went to the bathroom. Upon returning, he saw that she was still asleep. The stress must have worn her out. He glanced out the open window as the sun rose for the day. A thought occurred to him. Of course! There were guns in the shed. Why didn't he think of it when he was in there earlier to get gasoline for the generator? He excitedly went over to the window and quietly lifted the screen. He frowned. He was too big to fit through it. He looked over at Elizabeth. She could fit through it. Since he knew that neither one of them were in any immediate danger, he walked by the bed to go to his side. His foot hit something. He knelt down and lifted the blanket to see what it was. He blinked when he saw a white rectangular box. He had wondered what Elizabeth had done with the "gift" from her parents after he had destroyed his.

Out of curiosity, he pulled it out and took off the lid. He saw an expensive dress, shoes, perfume, make-up, and birth control pills. He shook his head. He should have known she got something similar to what he had gotten. In the future, this kind of thing would never happen again. As he was ready to put the lid back on the box, it occurred to him that there were supposed to be three packs of pills but one was empty and she had just started the second one. A smile spread across his face and he put the box back under the bed. *Why you sneaky, sneaky woman. You do love me after all.*

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Ryan laid on his side, watching his wife and smiling, so when she opened her eyes at seven, she was startled.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said. "You are so adorable first thing in the morning."

"How long have you been watching me?"

He shrugged. "Probably for hours."

She blinked as she struggled to wake up. "Why didn't you wake me up? I would have kept you company."

"No. It was much more fun to watch you drool on your pillow and snore."

"Thanks for noticing," she huffed as she sat up.

"Hey, it's no big deal. I like seeing the real you."

By the look she gave him, she obviously didn't believe him.

He reached for her and pulled her back down so she was cuddling with him. "I think you want to be married to me as much as I want to be married to you."

She remained silent. Since she didn't argue, he took that as a yes.

"So," he continued, "pack your bags because we're leaving with Kenneth tomorrow."

"Why?" She tried to sit up but he stopped her.

"Because I have a couple of points to make. One is to our parents. Another is to you. You seem to think that once we return to Omaha, I'll 'come to my senses' and abandon you. Well, you're wrong. And the only way I can prove you wrong is to go back there and show you."

"So where do Rick and Seth fit into all of this?"

She was as practical as he expected her to be. "That brings me to my plan. I know how to get rid of them. I need you go to the shed and get the gun on the bottom shelf by the door. It has bullets in it. Then when you come back with it, I want you to stay safely hidden in the shed while I let them know that we won't tolerate their staying here anymore."

"What if one of them goes outside and sees me?"

"I'll distract them while you're getting the gun. If I shut the bedroom door, you can climb back into the room and knock

on the door. That will let me know you're ready, and I'll slip back in here."

She nodded. "That's a good plan." She stood up and went to the window. As she opened the screen, he heard Rick say something to Seth.

"They're up. I better get out there. Can you get out by yourself?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm doing fine."

He stopped her by putting his hand on her back. "In case I don't make it, I want you to know I do love you."

"Don't talk like that. Keep a positive attitude. If you give yourself negative thoughts, it will hinder your ability to succeed."

"Okay. Okay. I'll think positive."

As she climbed out the window, he opened the bedroom door and quickly closed it. Rick and Seth were watching the television again. "Good morning," he called out.

They nodded in his direction and continued to watch the TV. When he didn't move, Rick looked over at him. "Do you need something?"

"No. Beth said she needs a maxi pad right away. She said something about her flow being heavy, so I came out to get one for her."

Rick and Seth cringed.

"Say no more," Seth said.

Ryan nodded and pretended to search for it so he could keep an eye on them.

"Vicky is a good woman," Rick told Seth. "Tiffany said that Vicky didn't want to break up with you. You should give your relationship another try."

Seth sighed. "You're right. I mean, how stupid is it to put a computer game before her?" He shook his head. "Being on the run has taught me what is and what is not important. You can't replace people. Of course, you know that better than anyone else,

what with Dallas and all."

Ryan turned his attention to their conversation, noting the sorrow in their voices.

"I do miss Tiffany and our boy Dallas," Rick said.

"Maybe we should get honest with the cops. It would be nice to stop running," Seth replied.

"Do you think Tiffany will forgive me?"

"My sister has a good heart. I think she will if you confess. I hope Vicky hasn't given up on me. She always said she didn't care how much money I made as long as we were together. I don't know how things will work out, but we might be teaching Dallas the wrong lesson."

"Let's go to the cops."

Ryan was shocked, but relieved, by this development. He also wondered what was taking Elizabeth so long. He ventured to open the bedroom door and saw that she hadn't returned yet. Since Rick and Seth didn't notice what he was doing, he walked into the room and looked out the window. As soon as he saw the moose, he understood why she hadn't left the shed. *All this time I haven't seen a moose up close, and now there's one right outside the cabin.* What were the chances?

He ran back to the living room where Rick and Seth were still talking.

"There's a moose right outside the cabin," he interrupted them. "Can I use one of your guns to shoot it if it attacks me on my way to get Beth out of the shed?"

"What's your wife doing there?" Rick wondered.

He sighed. "She was going to get a gun so we could get you two to leave."

"Oh. We didn't intend to scare you. We just didn't want you notifying the cops that we're here. But you don't have any way of doing that."

"Well, do you mind if I borrow your gun and get Beth out

of the shed?"

"That's the funny thing," Seth slowly replied. "Our guns aren't loaded."

"They aren't?"

"Nope. They never were. Shoot, we couldn't go around hurting people. We just wanted the money."

Ryan hid his aggravation. "How am I supposed to get her out of there?"

"Wait until the moose is gone."

"What if she's panicking in there?"

"As long as she doesn't bump into something and spook the moose, she should be okay," Rick said.

"Let's go see the moose," Seth finally suggested.

They went to the bedroom window and saw the moose sniffing around the shed door.

"Does anyone see a baby moose nearby?" Seth asked.

Ryan stuck his head out the window and examined the surroundings. "No. I don't see any other moose."

"Good. That means the moose won't be trying to protect its young. It should leave us alone if we are able to lure it away from the shed long enough to get her out."

"We could throw something in that direction." Ryan pointed to the forest behind the shed. What would be a good item to throw? He saw a round paperweight sitting on the dresser and grabbed it.

"I can throw far," Seth offered. "I used to be a pitcher for softball in high school."

Ryan handed him the paperweight and backed up so Seth could lean out of the window and throw it into the trees.

The moose glanced at the forest.

"Do you have anything else?" Seth asked.

Ryan found a couple of her books and handed them to him.

"I don't know how far these will go, but they're better than nothing." Seth chucked a book at the trees but it landed a few feet from the forest.

The moose stood still and waited for the next disturbance.

Seth threw another book.

The moose turned to them and started walking to the window.

Seth quickly slammed the window shut. "That didn't go as planned."

The moose stood right outside the window.

They slowly backed up.

"That is a little bit spooky," Rick admitted. "I can see why your wife would be scared in the shed with a moose hanging around the door."

Ryan shook his head. How were they supposed to get her? The moose was too close to the front door for him to make it to the shed without being noticed.

"Hands up!"

The three men held their hands up.

"Not you, Ryan," she said.

Ryan turned around and saw her with the rifle from the shed. He breathed a sigh of relief. "It's okay. It's just Beth." He went over to her and took the gun from her. "Their guns aren't loaded."

She looked disappointed and relieved. "Oh."

"It's a long story but they're going to confess to the police."

"We'll be heading to McGrath when the moose leaves," Rick added. "We've seen the error of our ways."

"How did you get in here?" Ryan asked her.

"I got the gun before the moose showed up but saw it on my way to the cabin. It started walking to me. I thought running to the window would make it mad, so I climbed the large tree a

couple of meters from the cabin, crawled along a tree branch and got on the roof. There's a ladder on the other side of the cabin. I used that to climb back down and entered through the door."

"For a clumsy girl, you sure did handle yourself well," Rick complimented.

"I have my moments," she replied.

"You really are self-reliant," Ryan marveled.

"You can thank the trust exercises I have to set up at my work for that. Part of my job description is to set up obstacles courses for co-workers to go through as a team, and there's climbing involved in a lot of those." She turned to Rick and Seth. "Well, since it doesn't look like you two are a threat anymore, I'll make you some sandwiches for your trip to McGrath."

"That's generous of you," Rick called out.

She stumbled on a pair of shoes on her way to the kitchen.

Ryan noticed how Rick struggled not to laugh. "At least she's graceful when it counts," he whispered to Seth who was quietly chuckling into his hand.

"She's not usually like this," Ryan softly said. "It must be the stress she's under from having you here."

"Shoot, we weren't trying to upset her," Rick replied. "We simply wanted something to eat and a place to sleep for the night. We'll be out of your hair as soon as that moose leaves."

Ryan was glad to see them fulfill that promise.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight



That afternoon after Rick and Seth left, Elizabeth took a long shower. It felt good to be clean again. She shaved her armpits and legs and waxed her mustache. She decided to wear her hair down, and she put on a white blouse and navy blue shorts. She didn't feel like trying to repel Ryan anymore. If he was sincere about his intention toward her, she would know soon enough. For the time being, she decided that she would at least enjoy her last night in the cabin. She was very happy to see Rick and Seth leave. Fortunately, they hadn't been a mean couple of criminals. She got lucky. *Wait until my parents and Lucinda hear that I actually met the Fairbanks robbers.*

When she left the bathroom, she saw that Ryan was packing his suitcases. She knew she should have expected it, but she was surprised to realize she was going miss being alone with

him.

He glanced over at her and smiled. "I knew the librarian would be sexy if she had her hair down and glasses off."

She decided to ignore how pleased she was by his words. "So, you really intend to go back to Omaha tomorrow?"

"Yes. Are you coming with me?"

She nodded. "There's no point in sticking around if you won't be here."

He grinned as she went to her bedroom to pack.

After packing, they cleaned up the cabin so it looked like it did when they arrived there. The laundry was the task that took the longest but it was nice to get it done. They walked along the river. He reached for her hand and smiled when she didn't pull away from him.

"Now when we get back, you'll see that your theory that I only love you because we're stuck here is wrong," he told her. "And I'm going to have a serious talk to our dads at the country club. Since going back was my idea, I'll handle them. I'm not going to let them dictate what we want to do with our lives. Because if they insisted we get married, what else will they try to tell us? When we can have kids? How many kids to have? Whether or not we get a pet? The list could go on."

"We need to take things one day at a time," she replied. Who knew how things would change when they returned home?

He sighed. "We can't get back there soon enough. I need to show you that I'm being sincere. I know you're probably going to assume the worst when I say this, but I want to do this right. Since women like romance, I want to give you a week where I can do the things for you that I have learned that women enjoy. I don't want to ruin the surprises because I know that women like those."

"Only if they're pleasant," she added.

"Of course. So, I think we should start out in our separate

apartments."

She hid her disappointment. This didn't sound very promising.

"You'll have to trust me. I have some phone calls to make and things to do before we actually live together."

"Okay." She was still on guard.

He stopped and turned to her. "I understand that I hurt you in the past. But I want to be with you more than anyone else. I know you will only believe what I actually do, so I'm going to let my actions speak for me. There's a time and a place for everything. You'll have to be patient with me. I want to give you some wonderful memories."

"I'll keep an open mind." That was all she could offer. She didn't feel like admitting her fears to him when she didn't even want to acknowledge them herself. She worked hard to be strong.

"Of course," he continued as he started walking again.

She followed him.

"As a married couple, we're bound to do things to annoy and hurt each other. It comes with the territory. No one is perfect."

"That's logical," she agreed.

"However, I'm not going to screw up so badly that you'll have to divorce me. I'm in this for keeps."

*If you are for real, I am too.* Instead of saying the words, she simply nodded.

***

The next day when Kenneth arrived and saw them with their luggage, he frowned. "I thought you two were getting along."

Ryan helped him with the suitcases while Elizabeth

watched. "We are. I just have a couple of things to settle before we make it official."

"So it isn't bad news?"

"No. We're staying married, but we're going to do this the right way. It will be our decision."

He smiled. "Good for you."

The ride back was awkward for her. She had her glasses on while she read a book. Ryan drew in his drawing pad. She had a hard time concentrating on the mystery in front of her. She frequently looked out the window as the scenery below them changed. She thought she would be thrilled to return to Omaha, but she missed the cabin in Alaska. It may have been far from the conveniences she was used to but it was warm and cozy. She sighed. She knew it was a memorable place because Ryan had been with her. *Don't fall in love. It's not worth it. Things will go back to normal once we're back.* Ryan was doing her a favor by returning a month sooner. She didn't know how much longer she could have resisted him. He was too charming and believable.

When they arrived in Omaha, Ryan told her that he would call her later that evening to set up a date with her. *We'll see,* she thought as she nodded. She returned to her apartment and set her suitcases down. She did miss her computer. It had been three months since she had touched it, so that was the first place she went to. She turned it on and checked her emails. Some of it was junk, which she quickly deleted. Most of it was work-related. She was glad to focus on work again. *Tomorrow is Monday. I can go back to work!* She did like her job.

The phone rang after she ate dinner. She shoved aside her disappointment when her caller ID told her the person on the other end was her mother. Determined to sound upbeat, she answered the phone.

"Hi, Mom," she greeted.

"So you really are home," her mother replied.

"Yes, I'm back."

"It didn't go as planned?"

"It was fine. We didn't get along at first but we do now."

"I suppose your father and I shouldn't have expected the plan to actually work. We should be glad that you can at least be in the same room without wanting to strangle each other."

Elizabeth forced herself to laugh as if nothing was bothering her. "Well, it's over now and it's time to get back to reality."

Her mother softly sighed. "Have you had dinner yet?"

"I did but it wasn't very filling. Did you want to meet up somewhere and have something good to eat?"

"I would. How about the seafood place we usually go to?"

"No. I'd rather have Mexican food tonight." Fish would only remind her of Alaska, and she wanted to put that far from her mind. She had a tough enough time keeping her thoughts on other things. Even her ipod and the television weren't good distractions since she used those items so much over the past three months.

By the time she parked at the restaurant, her stomach was growling. Her soup and cracker dinner hadn't been filling. She entered the place and waved to her mother as soon as she saw her waiting in a chair by the front door.

"I hope you didn't have to wait too long," she told her mother.

"No. I just got here." Her mother hugged her. "You look good. It's nice to see you wearing clothes that actually fit you, and your hair is down. You are such a pretty young woman."

"You say that no matter what I'm wearing."

They waited for the hostess to seat them before they continued their conversation.

"How has the company been since I've been gone?" she

asked her mother as they browsed through their menus.

"It's been fine. Barry Henderson approved all the ideas for remodeling his hotel chain. Lucinda is heading the work on that."

"That's great! She's worked hard to get to where she is today. I wonder how Nick is taking it."

"I'm not sure. You'll have to ask her when you return to work tomorrow."

"It will be good to get back to the office."

"May I ask what happened with you and Ryan?"

She was dreading this conversation with her mother but knew she would have to tell her sooner or later. *It's best to just get it over with.* "Not much. We didn't get along at first, which was to be expected, but since there was no one else around and we got tired of avoiding each other, we began to talk. We became friends and had some good times. Then he decided to come back a month early so he could talk to his dad and my dad. He said he's tired of being controlled and won't take it anymore."

"So you two will be going through with an annulment?"

"I don't know. He said he was going to call me when we got back to our apartments, but I haven't heard from him yet. I'm not holding my breath. I mean, now that we're back, it's easy to remember how things were before."

"You just got back a couple of hours ago. You need to give him time to wind down."

"Mom, you've seen the women he likes to go out with."

"From what his mother tells me, he was never serious about any of them because they bored him. Looks only carry a woman so far. A man wants a wife he can be friends with. Marriage is more than sex. There has to be companionship and love if it is to last."

Elizabeth was glad when the server showed up to take their order. She decided to change the subject. "Did you get the

kitchen remodeled?"

Her mother sighed. "I can take a hint. Just know I'm here if you want to talk."

She nodded, glad the awkward conversation was over.

When she returned to her apartment, she went to the kitchen to grab a glass of water. She noticed her answering machine light was blinking. *Don't get your hopes up. It could be Lucinda or Dad calling.* She drank her water as she listened to her messages.

The first one was from Lucinda. "Hi Beth. I heard you got back today and wanted to see how things went. If you want to talk, I'm at home. If not, then I'll see you tomorrow."

The second one was from Ryan. "Where are you? I've been calling and calling but you don't answer. I hate answering machines but I don't have a choice. I hope you don't mind that I made reservations tomorrow evening for seven at Casablanca. I was going to ask you about it first but since you're not there, I had to do it before they closed. I know you'll be at work so I will see you at the restaurant. I miss you. And yes, I still love you even though I'm surrounded by lots of other people. I hope you're still taking those birth control pills, but if not, I can always use condoms, unless you want to start a family right away. I'll let you make that call since you're the one who has to deal with the pregnancy."

She almost choked on the water she was drinking. How did find out she was taking birth control pills?

# Chapter Twenty-Nine



The next day, she showed up early to work. She decided to pull her hair back with a headband and wore a sensible pantsuit that wasn't baggy. She had to admit that it was nice to be in her office again. She settled in the chair behind her desk and checked her office email. It took her a good hour to sort through everything. She was relieved when it was over.

Someone knocked on her open door. She looked up from the computer and saw Lucinda. "Hi!" Elizabeth ran over to her friend and gave her a big hug. "I missed going to lunch with you."

"I missed you too," her friend replied.

"You look happier than before I left. I take it that you and Nick are doing better."

"We are. He has finally come to terms with the fact that I

make more money than he does. He said that we're a team and when one person does well, then the other person does well too. So both people are successful. He doesn't work as many hours as I do since I got promoted to head up the Henderson account, but he's been able to stay at home more with the children and they have gotten close to him. It's good to see them laughing and playing with him."

"That is wonderful. I thought Nick was a good guy."

"The second counselor we went to did wonders for him. I'm relieved that we went to her. Sometimes the right counselor can make all the difference."

She felt better knowing her friend's marriage was improving.

"I learned that marriage isn't stagnant," Lucinda continued. "It's constantly changing and it requires effort to maintain. I think it's because people are always changing. Anyway, it's important to keep working at it. Sometimes things look bad, but as long as you hang in there and give it your best effort, there's a good chance you'll make it. If both spouses are committed to making things work, then it will last."

"Are you trying to tell me something?" Elizabeth raised an eyebrow at her friend.

Lucinda shrugged. "You're back early. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not."

"Ryan has something planned. I don't know what it is but he said he wanted to romance me."

"That sounds good."

"While we were up there, he spent a lot of time watching the Lindsey Mulligan talk show, and he made a list of things women want based on what he saw."

"You're kidding?"

She shook her head. "He made an active study of it."

"Lindsey Mulligan hates men. All of her topics are aimed

at putting them down."

"I know. If I were a man, I wouldn't watch it. I don't even know why men go on it. Ryan used to predict when the women would start condemning the men based on what the men said. He said that the women were brutally honest and he learned more from them than he did in his fifteen years of dating."

"I doubt he would ever go on the show."

"I don't want to be on it and I'm a woman."

"You do realize that three months ago, you wouldn't have said that." Her friend smiled at her. "You've softened up. Men aren't quite as bad as you thought they were."

"Fine. So I've changed."

She turned to the sound of someone else knocking on her door. Her eyes grew wide with surprise at the delivery boy who was probably working during the summer before he had to go back to high school. He was carrying a stuffed moose with two red heart shaped balloons with her and Ryan's names on them.

"I have a delivery for Elizabeth Jackson," he said.

She hadn't heard her name connected with Ryan's last name since March 1st at the courthouse, so it was strange to hear it.

"You came to the right place," Lucinda spoke for her. She took the animal and balloons from him and tipped him. After he left, she put it on Elizabeth's desk and gave her a knowing grin. "Things in Alaska went better than you're letting on."

"This was somewhere on that list." She just couldn't remember where it was.

"Who cares where he got the idea? He's obviously crazy about you."

She blushed.

"It's good to see you in love after what happened with Preston."

"Preston was never this good to me."

"He never gave you a stuffed animal and balloons?"

"Well, it's more than this." She pointed to the gift. "When we finally got over our differences, Ryan was good about listening to me, helping me with the chores and being respectful to me."

"Then you'd better hang on to him." She checked her watch. "I better go see Claire Rosen about the different styles of wallpaper we'll use in the Henderson hotels. I'll see you at lunch."

Elizabeth waved to her as she left. She had been afraid of feeling the thrill of being in love, but she was slowly opening up to it. Halfway through the day, another delivery arrived. This time an older woman handed her a rectangular present in purple wrapping paper. Purple was her favorite color. She tipped the woman and opened it. She was surprised to see Ryan's drawing pad. She had wondered what he had been working on, and now he was allowing her to see his drawings. She put her glasses on and opened it. Her heart raced with excitement when she saw the contents. He had been drawing her. Was that why he didn't want her to see what he was working on all that time? Dates were written at the bottom of each page.

He started drawing her when he was working on the jewelry account in May. He had drawn a picture of her lying on her stomach. She was on a blanket and a dog had come up to her with a collar around his neck. She smiled at the fact that the dog wore a tuxedo. It was funny in a cute way. She looked at the next page and saw that the dog's collar held an engagement ring with a written proposal on it.

"So that's the jewelry commercial idea," she commented aloud.

She turned the page to a picture Ryan had drawn of her reading a book. There was another one of her face. Then she saw the camping advertisement. They were in front of a campfire roasting marshmallows and telling stories to their ten and seven year old kids. There were more pictures of her. The last picture

was of her on the plane heading back to Omaha. She was reading a book again but she looked sad. It was almost spooky that he could read her expression so well. He really noticed details. At the bottom of the page, he wrote, "You'll see how I feel about you."

From the care he took in etching in the details, she realized that he had cared for her longer than she imagined he did. *No wonder he didn't want to show me what he was doing. He was afraid I would reject him. And didn't I do that when he finally revealed his feelings for me? I said there was no way he could feel the way he did about me. But I was wrong.*

***

That evening, she put on her best violet dress since she knew that Casablanca was an expensive restaurant. She arrived a little before seven and smiled when she saw Ryan dressed in a nice dark blue suit and holding a pink rose.

"I wasn't sure if you were going to show up or not," he admitted when he saw her.

"I tried calling you at work but you weren't there," she replied.

"Since I called the trip to Alaska off a month early, I can only assume I don't have a job there anymore."

She didn't think he was serious when he told her that he would have to look for another job when they got back to Omaha. "Do you really think your dad is going to fire you?"

"I'm calling his bluff. I will deal with him tomorrow at the country club. I spent the day working on my résumé and getting ready for our date. You look beautiful."

She blushed. "Thank you."

"Would you like to eat?"

She nodded and followed him to the host who seated

them on the veranda overlooking the city. The air was warm and pleasant. The sun lit the sky but it was further down than it was in Alaska this time in the evening. She couldn't believe she actually felt nervous. It had been a long time since she had been on an actual date.

After they ordered, he turned his attention to her. "Did you get the gifts I sent you?"

"Yes." She grinned. "I got the moose, balloons and your drawing pad."

"Do you still doubt me?"

She took a deep breath. "No."

"It's about time." He smiled. "I tried so hard to get you to believe me. It's nice I finally got through to you. You can be stubborn when you want to be, but that can be a good thing too. You're the kind of woman who can be depended on to be a faithful wife." He leaned forward, his expression unusually serious. "Beth, if I do have to look for another job, I may not get hired in Omaha. I might have to relocate. Would you be willing to go with me?"

She thought through the implications of what he was asking. She enjoyed her job and liked being close to her parents and friends. She looked at Ryan. She loved him and he loved her. She knew if she chose to get an annulment, she would maintain control over her life. It would stay safe and predictable. If she stayed married to him, the future was unknown and as much as she feared the unknown, she hated the thought of being without him even more. Love was worth the risk.

"I'll go wherever you go," she replied.

"Well, that leads me to my next question." He took a small box out of his pocket and showed her a diamond ring.

"We're already married," she said.

"I know but that wasn't our decision. I thought this time, it would be what we wanted. I choose you to spend the rest of

my life with. I love you, Beth. Will you marry me?"

She nodded. "Yes." She wiped the tears from her eyes and laughed.

He gently took her hand and slipped the ring on her finger.

"How did you know my ring size?"

"I called your mom this morning and asked her what it was. I also swore her to secrecy about my plans. Tomorrow I'm going to have a talk with your dad and my dad at the country club. I have to let them know that they can't make any more decisions regarding how we do or don't do things. We're adults and need to be treated that way."

The server brought them their meals.

Ryan continued, "So, I thought it would be appropriate to renew our wedding vows. What do you think?"

"I think that's a wonderful idea."

They spent the rest of the dinner making plans for their wedding. When it came time for them to go, he walked her to her car.

"Will you be coming to my place or should I go to yours?" she asked.

"I think it will be better if we wait until our official wedding night. It will make our first time more romantic."

"You've spent a lot of time and energy in studying up on romance, but how did you conclude I was even considering sex?"

"I guessed. Was I right?"

She shrugged. He was but she wasn't going to admit it.

He chuckled. "I may be patient, but I'm not that patient. Why do you think I'm marrying you on Saturday? Any longer than that and I'll be climbing the walls. I'll stop by and see you tomorrow at work after I talk with our nutty dads."

"Okay. I'll miss you."

"Now, that is what I want to hear." He kissed her. "I'm

looking forward to spending my life with you."

"Me too."

# Chapter Thirty



As Ryan got ready for his meeting with his dad and Elizabeth's dad the next day, he rehearsed his speech for the millionth time. He wanted to be sure he was firm so they would take him seriously. By the time he got to the country club, they were already waiting for him in the meeting room he reserved. He thought it was only fitting that they sit in the same room they had been in three months ago. He ignored the slight unease he felt in his gut. He hadn't stood up to them in person before, so this required him to step out of his comfort zone. He sat across from them at the table, determined to appear brave.

"I came back a month early for a specific reason," he began. "Neither one of you have the right to tell me or Elizabeth how to run our lives. If we want to marry other people, then that is our decision. For the record, we didn't consummate the

marriage, so we are free to go through with the annulment." He noted the disappointment on their faces but they remained silent. "I understand that I no longer have a job at Jackson Advertising and I accept that. I have already written up my résumé and will apply for other jobs. I have a lot of talent and will be hired quickly somewhere else. I don't mind being without your money either. I can make my own. That is all I came here to say." He stood up to leave.

"Ryan, wait," his father said.

He stood still.

Both men stood up and smiled at him before they shook his hand.

"You have made me proud, son," his father replied. "I didn't imagine that the trip to Alaska would bring about such a drastic change in you. You left a boy and came back a man. It is my honor and privilege to have you as the vice president at Jackson Advertising."

"Really?" Ryan hadn't expected this.

"Of course. I find your take charge attitude refreshing. You are definitely ready to be vice president."

"I want to work with Jacob Hackman."

"That can be arranged."

"And I want a raise."

"You got it."

"And I want to go back to Alaska for one month. I proposed to Elizabeth last night and she said yes. We're getting married on Saturday at the Henderson hotel. Afterwards, we'll want to enjoy our honeymoon."

Her father laughed. "That can be arranged too. I must admit that you impress me. My girl is lucky to have you."

Ryan nodded, feeling confident for the first time in his life. "The invitations to the wedding will be informal but we're anxious to tie the knot so you'll have to deal with it."

"We'll help out, if you wish."

"Ask her what she wants. I want it to be her day."

"You got it."

"So will you be at work this week?" his father asked.

"I suppose I can stop by the office," Ryan responded.

Once he said good-bye to the two older men, he stopped by his work, relieved he was going to be able to stay there after all. The first place he went to was Jacob's office.

"I didn't expect you back until July," Jacob greeted him as Ryan walked into his office. "Are you here to collect your things?"

"No. My dad is letting me keep my job despite my rebellion. Even after I become vice president I want you to work with me on the projects."

"To be honest, I wasn't too crazy about working with Kyle. He's nice but boring. It was more fun with you. You come up with some pretty good jokes."

"How did the accounts for the potato chips, jewelry and camping commercials turn out? Did the clients accept the proposals?"

"They all did. I confess that I was surprised you came up with the jewelry and camping ideas. I don't recall you ever being so dead on with the female perspective before. The clients for those accounts were women and they loved the ideas. Kyle and I didn't do much to alter them."

"I got a chance to research what women want. I even made up a list so I can refer to it in the future. It turns out that they're not as complicated as I thought they were."

"I'm sorry things didn't work out with Elizabeth Valentine. I know you didn't care much for her to begin with, but I secretly hoped you two would make amends. She impressed me with the way she handled herself at the sexual harassment seminar."

"Oh, that reminds me. What will you and your family be doing this Saturday?"

He shrugged. "Most likely, we'll go to the playground at the park. Why?"

"Can you change those plans? I'm getting married to Elizabeth at ten, and I want you to be the best man."

His jaw dropped.

"We're renewing our wedding vows to let everyone know that we are choosing to get married."

He smiled. "I take it your dad won't be making decisions for you anymore."

"Nope. Your invitation should arrive tomorrow."

"Before you leave, did your dad tell you what happened with Ben and Zack?"

Ryan hadn't even thought of them. "No, he didn't. Are they still working here?"

"As janitors. Clyde Foxworth made a complaint that they left him with all the work on the cell phone account, so your dad told them to either clean toilets or find another place of employment. We'll see how long that arrangement lasts."

He decided not to tell Jacob about their letters. He knew that his childhood friends were still as immature as they had been in high school. "I can't say I'm surprised. I'm just glad I grew up."

"You don't need them anyway."

"You're right. Well, I told Beth I'd meet her for lunch. Then I'll get to work."

"Good because the videos for the commercials are due to come in at three. We get to preview the finished product before it goes to TV and the Internet."

"I did miss that when I was in Alaska. It took me a long time to see the Intensity commercial."

"Welcome back, Ryan."

Ryan said good-bye and left. He was in a good mood. He didn't think it was possible that standing up for what was important to him could have such a positive effect on how he felt about himself. It was nice to not feel like a wimp for a change.

***

The next day at ten in the morning, he went on the Internet at work to check his email and saw a news story regarding the confession of Rick Jenkins and Seth Powers. He immediately called Elizabeth at her work number.

"Have you seen the news?" he asked her.

"No. I've been working on improving the relationship between employees and their supervisors. Why? What's up?"

"Well, our criminal friends turned themselves into the local police at McGrath. They returned the money they stole. Since they voluntarily came forward, they'll only have to serve two years in prison."

"I'm glad they got honest."

"You'll never guess what the money was for."

"Are you going to tell me or am I going to have to stop tallying up the results on my employee questionnaire to hop online to find out?"

"I'll tell you. Rick's fourteen year old son, Dallas, needs a kidney transplant and he doesn't have the health insurance to cover it. Since Seth is Dallas' uncle, he is a suitable match for the operation. Anyway, the news of Dallas' situation is all over the Internet and is probably all over the TV too. People are starting to send in donations to help pay for the boy's surgery."

"We should probably donate some money too. They really weren't too bad, even if they did have mustaches."

He chuckled. "You see? Not all men with mustaches are creepy people."

"I guess not."

"I'm going to call Barry about having the wedding at his hotel in town. Is there anything you want me to pass onto him?"

"See if he'd be willing to go with a 19th century theme. It should be right up his alley."

"I'll be sure to mention it. I can't wait to see you for lunch."

"I miss you too."

He smiled. It was good to have someone he could finally connect with. "You know, none of the other women come close to you. You're still my first choice. I love you, Beth."

"I love you too, Ryan."

He hung up the phone and returned to work.

***

The next day before he signed off the computer so he could go home, Ben and Zack showed up in his office. He hadn't expected to see them, even though they still worked in the same building. He sighed. He should have realized he would have to confront them in person sooner or later.

"Are you here to apologize?" he stiffly asked them, still sitting at his desk.

"You know we only joke around," Ben easily replied as he sat in the chair across from him.

Zack sat in the chair next to Ben.

"If you're not here to apologize for what you said about Beth, I'm not interested in talking to you." To make his point, he turned back to his computer and started typing an email to Barry Henderson.

"Really, Ryan. You need to chill out." Zack shook his head in amazement. "I mean, you used to make fun of her too."

He stopped typing and turned back to them. "I know I

did. Words hurt, guys. I already apologized to her. It would be decent for you to do the same."

"Apologize for what? Pointing out the obvious?"

"I don't understand either one of you. What did she do to deserve the harassment we gave her in high school?"

Ben shrugged. "We just didn't like her. She wasn't cut out for our circle. Some girls fit in with the popular guys and some don't."

"So you gave her a doggie treat and told her it was from me?"

"Well, we couldn't have you embarrassing us by going out with her. She was a chubby freshman."

"She wasn't chubby. She just wasn't as skinny as a rail. And so what if she had been chubby? Is that really a crime?"

"Wow. She really messed with your head up there in Alaska. We warned you not to listen to her."

"Because as soon as I did, I would discover the truth about you. You've been lying to me for most of my life. You aren't my friends."

"You were popular because of us. If you had gone out with her, then you wouldn't have been able to hang around our crowd. We did care enough to prevent that from happening."

"If I would have been unpopular, then that was my choice to make, not yours. You can't screw with someone's life. You really did a lot of damage, and she wasn't the only one you hurt. A lot of people got hurt with the things you did and are still doing."

"Are you marrying her to make up for the past?" Zack wondered. "Is this a sympathy wedding?"

"No, it's not. I love her."

"You could have a gorgeous woman but you choose Miss Average."

"She's not average to me. You don't see her the way I do,

nor do I expect you to. I realize you'll continue to make fun of her and me, but I don't care what you think anymore. I'm not going to let your opinion affect my decisions."

"You can't just ditch us," Ben argued. "We've been friends since kindergarten."

Ryan shook his head. "Are you going to leave or do I need to call security?"

He paled. "You can't be serious."

He picked up his phone to dial security.

Ben and Zack stood up.

"Fine. Don't expect us to fix you up with any other women when your marriage with Lassie doesn't work out," Zack scoffed.

Ryan bolted out of his chair and glared at them. "Get out!" He angrily pointed to the door.

Their eyes widened in surprise.

"We're out," Ben said.

Ryan forced himself to relax as they finally left. He was glad it wasn't his decision to fire them because he would have, but he knew firing someone for personal reasons was wrong. *They're janitors now. I don't have to work with them again. They won't attend any of the business dinners or parties.* He took a deep breath and notified security not to allow Ben or Zack in his office when they made their rounds to clean the offices. He would arrange for his own janitor to clean his office at night. He didn't trust them around his stuff. At least he did know they wouldn't dare talk to him again. *With friends like those, who needs enemies?* He was more than glad to have them out of his life once and for all.

# Chapter Thirty-One



Saturday came and Ryan got a chance to congratulate Barry on his own marriage to Rachel Michael before the wedding. Rachel was a lovely African American woman with short curly hair and a perky smile. She was just as enthusiastic about life as Barry was. They made a good match and were obviously in love.

"I wish I had thought to do a 19th century wedding," Barry admitted. "It would have made sense considering my interest in that time period. I wish you and Elizabeth the best of luck."

"Thank you," Ryan replied.

"I think this will be perfect for the future commercial," Rachel said. "It was a good idea to tape parts of it."

Ryan had come up with the idea to take a couple seconds of video footage from his and Elizabeth's old-fashioned wedding to incorporate into the Henderson Hotel commercial that was due

to be completed in the next six months. He knew he was getting ahead of himself with filming early, but he wanted to hurry up and marry Elizabeth so that they could get to their honeymoon in Alaska.

During the course of the week, he was glad to see Elizabeth open her heart to him. She had been a challenge, but she was well worth the effort. She was definitely the one he wanted to be with. He glanced at his parents and her parents who were talking to each other. Lucinda was her matron of honor and Jacob was his best man. The wedding was simple because it was thrown together at the last minute, but everyone had been good sports about the timing of the event. He was self-conscious in front of the cameras but forced them out of his mind so he could concentrate on renewing his vows.

Lucinda walked into the large reception room and whispered to Elizabeth's father and told everyone that the bride was ready. Her father eagerly ran to the doors so he could escort her down the aisle. Lucinda took her place next to Jacob as people assembled in their proper places. Ryan stood by the preacher and waited to see his bride. As soon as Jacob and Lucinda walked down the aisle and took their positions in front of the room, the wedding march began. Ryan smiled proudly at Elizabeth as she and her father strolled toward him. The people commented on how pretty she looked.

When her father handed her over to him, she accepted his hand and smiled shyly at him. He smiled back at her. *Today is the first day of the rest of my life, and I'm glad you're going to be in it.* He squeezed her hand as they turned to the preacher.

***

As soon as Ryan and Elizabeth arrived in Alaska and got their things settled, he surprised her by leading her to the

bedroom.

"You sure are eager," she chuckled, her heart racing in anticipation.

"I've been waiting forever for this," he replied.

"It hasn't been forever."

"Well, it sure seems that way, and I'm not waiting a minute longer." He took her in his arms, the evening sun pouring through the window and across the foot of the bed where they stood.

He kissed her, his lips soft, undemanding, and she accepted the invasion of his tongue, relishing the chills that coursed through her, making her body tingle with awareness and longing for the consummation of their marriage. He groaned as his hands slid slowly down her back and caressed her bottom.

"How I've longed to touch you like this," he whispered in her hair.

"There's no reason to wait anymore." She led him onto the bed and joined him as he laid down, her arms wrapped around his shoulders as he settled on top of her, and though they were fully dressed, the action seemed wonderfully intimate. This felt right. She didn't have to wonder if he wanted her. She knew he did, and that made all the difference.

He continued to kiss her while his hands ran the curve of her body, gliding across her breasts, her waist and her hips. He slid one hand up to the back of her head, gently tilting it to grant his mouth access to the side of her neck. She moaned, enjoying the delightful thrill his lips and tongue created along her flesh. His other hand wound its way through her skirt and up her slip. He shifted from on top of her so he could push aside her panties and slide his fingers into her body which immediately clenched around him. She arched her back, her body trembling with excitement. Her flesh was eager for the stimulation he provided.

"Oh Ryan, don't stop." The request, barely audible, earned

her an appreciative groan as he brought his thumb to her sensitive region. She gasped at the unexpected shock of sensual gratification that he was giving her. "How did you learn to do this?" She barely whispered the words for he was making her feel amazing.

"From those romance books," he softly replied, his voice husky. "Have I been a good student?"

"Yes. Very good."

Her breathing came heavy and she felt helpless to do anything but close her eyes and allow him full access to her. The throb within her continued to mount as his thumb increased the rhythm of its circular motions. She cried out to him, gripping his shirt and pulling him closer to her. Though she wished for their clothes to be removed so she could feel his naked body on hers, she couldn't bear to stop, and when her orgasm came, her body tensed, her back arching and fingers clenching his arms.

He stilled his movements, allowing her to take her fill of pleasure before he pulled his fingers out of her. He shoved his pants and underwear to his ankles and removed her panties. Then his arousal filled her void, the thickness of him sending a wave of satisfaction inside of her. Her body was so relaxed and slick that she felt no discomfort at losing her virginity. Wrapping her legs around his waist, she lifted her hips to take him in more fully, his groans telling her he appreciated the action. Still highly aroused from her first wave of release, her body tightened around his hardness.

He kept his thrusting slow and purposeful in stride, prolonging the intensity of the sensations centering on the seat of her need until she felt herself climaxing again, this orgasm more gentle than the first but just as delightful. He let out a choking cry as his body reared up and she felt him throb within her as he spilled his seed into her. When he subsided wearily on top of her, she accepted him, also spent and satisfied.

They lay in each other's arms for a long time, him still inside her, making her feel complete as one unit.

"Do you think next time we'll manage to get our clothes off?" He raised himself with his elbows so his weight was no longer pressing on her and studied the pants wound around his ankles.

She laughed. "What? You didn't think this was interesting enough?"

He gave her a lingering kiss. "No. I just got impatient to lose my virginity."

"Was it worth the wait?"

"Yes, though you nearly drove me insane."

She chuckled. "Well, you won't have to wait ever again."

"Good." He caressed her breasts. "I want to see what you look like without your clothes on. The curiosity's been nagging at me from the moment we got married."

Her eyes grew wide. "You've been undressing me with your eyes for all those months?"

He offered a mischievous grin. "Oh, you have no idea what I've been doing with you in my mind."

She couldn't help but be intrigued and thrilled he spent so much time thinking of her in such intimate ways. "Are you going to reveal all the deep, dark secrets of what we did in your fantasies or do I have to guess?"

"Well, take your clothes off and I'll show you."

She didn't need further prompting as she sat up to do as he requested. Their lovemaking continued long into the night. He spent time looking for ways to please her and savored every square inch of her body. Having gotten over the immediate need for release, his actions were slow and deliberate. He whispered declarations of how she brought him joy and how glad he was that they were married.

"I'm going to love you forever, Beth," he whispered

afterwards, holding her in his arms.

She felt relaxed, her limbs and eyelids heavy. It was a most wonderful feeling, she decided. The sound of his steady breathing comforted her, and she marveled that she finally shared this experience with a man who loved her as much as she loved him.

She smiled. "And I'll love you.