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Hook, Line, & *Sinker*

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*Using the right lures
nets two sisters
love for life.*



Chapter 1

“Emily, God spoke to me.”

This was not surprising. Emily’s sister was a woman of deep faith, and heard from God often. But it was *what* Lacey claimed to hear that made Emily wonder.

“Are you sure, Lacey? It doesn’t sound very scriptural to me.” Emily eyed her sister skeptically.

“I know His voice, Em. I heard it as clear as I did the time He told me to pray for you, the night of the accident.”

But Emily wasn’t convinced. “He said, “Lacey go buy a bass boat? That was his exact words? Not Lacey go build a brass boat, or Lacey go fill a wheelbarrow...”

“He didn’t say thou shalt or anything like that, but yeah, that’s what I heard.”

“It would seem to me that God knows you well enough to know you have never even been on a boat in your life.” Emily put down the sweater she had been knitting for the past three years. Today she put the

finishing touches on it while her sister was saying her morning prayers, and spent the past few minutes admiring her handiwork.

“Not true. Once dad let me go on a ferry with him.”

“Do you even know what a bass boat looks like?”

Lacey shrugged. “I suppose, like a boat only you use it for bass.”

“It’s a fishing boat. I saw it on television at Raymond’s.” This of course, made Emily the authority. “I think it has big nets on the side to catch fish.”

Lacey searched the room for the remote. “It’s Saturday. I know there’s fishing shows on the country music channel.” She flipped channels until she found Fred Smith’s BassFishin’ World. Fred and a celebrity friend were aboard a boat on Dale Hollow Lake comparing lures.

“Hey, look Emily. No worms, just fake things. I could do that,” commented Lacey. “It looks simple enough.”

“You think God is calling you to fish?” Emily made a face.

“No, that’s not what I was praying about, but it looks like fun. Ooh, Em! They caught one and it only took about thirty seconds.”

“That’s fast,” agreed Emily. The men on the screen made it look simple. “Do you think we could do that?”

“Why not?” Asked Lacey. “Guys do it all the time. How hard can it be?”

“So, is that like a bass boat?” Emily asked, squinting her eyes to focus.

“It must be. He’s fishing for bass,” Lacey reasoned. She switched off the set. “So what do you say? Shall we go look?”

“Today?” Emily replied. “Shouldn’t you pray about this a little more before you jump?”

Lacey rolled her eyes and sighed. “God told me. Who am I to doubt His voice? Get your shoes on, little sister. We’re going to find us a bass boat.”

“Hold it a minute, big spender. Number one, these things cost money. Number two, where do we go? I mean, there’s not a boat mall, is there?”

“Oh. Right.” Lacey bit her lip as she thought. “I’m going to use my share of grandpa’s trust money. I’ve never really touched it.”

“But Lacey, he said it was for our future, when we got married.”

Lacey put her hands on her hips and shook her head. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. I’ve been praying for years, Emily that God would

help me find someone to share my life with. I'm twenty-seven and my chances are diminishing rapidly. Today I prayed God would tell me what I needed to do to attract a man."

"He couldn't tell you to dress nicely, be yourself or trust Him?"

"I am trusting Him. But I needed practical advice, that's what I prayed about." Lacey folded her Bible study notes and put them back in her Bible. "He answered me, and I'm going to do what He says."

Emily shook her head in confusion. "It sounds kind of...weird to me."

"Yes, like building an ark. But look what happened to Noah for obeying." Lacey opened the end table drawer and found the phone book. "Here, Emily, see? There's plenty of places to buy boats. Some of them are in town. Let's at least look."

Emily knew better than to argue with her sister once her mind was set. She put the sweater into the box and took it to her room. The study lesson she and her sister had been working on last evening lay on her desk. It was titled, "Fishers of Men."

The fish weren't biting this morning, but Stuart wasn't ready to give in. He cast his line one more time at the rocky cliff that jutted out to the clear, calm water of the lake, let the lure sink, then pulled it slowly along the bottom. It was quiet today, only the lapping of the waves against the shore and the plop of his lure as it hit the water disturbing the absolute silence. It was to these waters Stuart came when his soul was troubled, the only place he felt at peace, the only place he wanted to be when he felt overwhelmed by his grief.

It had been eighteen months since he lost his sister to cancer, a brief but terrifying battle, only a few short months from the diagnosis until her untimely death. But though she fought it valiantly, she was suffering, and the pain wore her down as quickly as the disease, making death a welcome respite from her torment. Stuart begged both God and Katherine—Kate to her friends—not to give in, or admit defeat, but she sank so rapidly that it was over before Stuart found out what was causing her illness. She tried to help him accept that she was leaving him, telling him she was not so much dying as stepping into eternity with the Savior she loved.

"We're all dying, Stuart," Kate told him in the early stages of her disease when they were both struggling to accept her fate. "What matters most is our destination when we do."

Though Stuart shared her faith in God, and her hope of eternity, it made it no easier to face life on this earth without Kate, who had sacrificed her own life and happiness to raise him when their parents died in a fire. He was thirteen, she was seventeen, and about to leave for college to study marine biology, her dream since childhood. With the loss of their parents, and then their grandfather only months later, Kate and Stuart were alone, left with the family business they had worked in all their lives. It was Kate who made Kingfisher Cove Marina profitable, Kate who added luxury houseboats, fishing charters, souvenirs, and Kate who was the business. When it was passed to them upon their grandfather's death, Kate took the small marina from a rag tag bait shop and boat dock to a summer vacation destination. It was she who ran the office and store, and Stuart who maintained the boats, cleaning, preparing and chartering fishing excursions when needed. They were partners as much as family, and they loved their work. The houseboats were always rented before the summer even began, and in the fall, they were filled with fishermen for a reduced rate. The expanded dock held boats all year round, and the store was a gathering place for locals and tourists alike.

Now it was silent. Kate's laughter no longer floated through the windows as she sold penny candy to the children, or teased a fisherman about his catch. Though Stuart still ran the marina, kept the boats maintained, and reservations still sent vacationers to the lake, it was no longer a place of easy, cheerful conversation, no longer did locals and tourists meet to pass the time. Without Kate, the marina lost its charm, and for Stuart it became a place of silence, of grief, of loneliness, the beginning of his solitary existence.

Eric, his friend since childhood, did his best to help his friend in his grief, saying that Kate would not want her brother to live this way, but Stuart rebuffed him.

"Kate loved this marina and the people to which we rented boats and dock space. I have to keep it going for her, it's what she wanted." If his friend told him he was working too hard, giving up his chance for a normal life, Stuart would counter, "This is my life now. I have to accept it." Though he would have preferred to work alone, he was persuaded to hire an office person, Thelma, who answered phones and took reservations;

and a teenager, Adam, who cleaned boats between guests. Thelma, a widow loved Stuart like a son, and Eric's family considered him one of their own, but even in the midst of these caring people he was not able to shake the sense of aloneness, of abandonment. His sister's death was still a raw, aching wound that time and prayer had not been able to heal, though he knew it was not normal to grieve for so long. Help, me, Lord, he would pray as he cast his line on the water, to accept my sister's death and to trust you with the rest of my life. And send me someone, Lord to fill the empty place in my heart, someone that needs to be loved so I won't feel so alone. I can handle everything else, and someday I will accept that Kate is gone and go on. But I just can't seem to do it alone.

He threw his line a few more times. The fish were not biting, and the boats needed to be prepared for the upcoming season. Realizing he was wasting time that needed to be spent on maintenance, Stuart reeled in his line and motored back to the dock.

Eric stopped by Kingfisher Cove with the meal his mother had sent for Stuart, but his friend was not anywhere to be found. Knowing that he was probably fishing, Eric took the food inside to the living quarters behind the marina office and left it in the refrigerator. It was near nine, and the sporting good megastore his father owned, Hook's was already open for business. Stopping to check on Stuart made him late for work, and though he was the boss' son he was nonetheless expected to be on time and working just as any other member of the staff. Al Hook had opened a bait shop thirty years ago with only a handful of money and his sheer determination to support his growing family. Now his children were grown, and the simple bait shop was a sporting goods mecca, a destination store for hunters, fishermen, anyone who enjoyed the great outdoors. He sold bait, fishing and hunting gear, water sport equipment, camping supplies, and since the beginning of January, just weeks ago, boats. The store was large enough to hold a showroom and even housed a restaurant where the locals and tourists alike could sample lake fish and trade stories of the one that got away.

Eric didn't bother to leave a note for his friend; leaving Stuart dinner was a weekly occurrence. Getting Stuart to join the Hook family at dinner was a cause for celebration; the only time he left the marina was to go to the family store for supplies, and to eat in the restaurant. Eric prayed for his friend daily, that he would be comforted, that his grief would

subside, but Eric himself knew the pain of losing Kate. He loved her too, more than he ever let Stuart or Kate herself know. She was four years older than him, and thought of him as a little brother, but he was devoted to her, even if only as her brother's friend. When she died, he thought he would never love again, but unlike Stuart he was able to come to terms with Kate's death, taking comfort from his faith, and the knowledge she was in a much better place.

"Katie, girl," he promised as if she was listening to him speak, "I'll help your brother to smile again if it's the only thing I ever do. I know you don't want him to live this way, and you are probably stamping your foot and yelling at him to get a grip. I'm doing the best I can, so hang in there. I just know something will happen soon."

As he ran to his truck, thinking of how furious his father would be when he walked in the store ten minutes late, Eric spotted Stuart's boat tooling toward the marina. He called out a greeting and left before his friend came close enough to hear.

It was the phone that stopped the women as they prepared to go boat shopping, leaving Lacey angry and disappointed.

"Why, Emily? What is so important that he can't wait a few hours?"

"He says he needs me now," Emily explained. "I promised him I would help him with his taxes when he got his W-2 forms in the mail. He's not good with figures."

More likely, he's too cheap to have his taxes done, Lacey thought with disgust. And Emily is cheap labor, anytime he needs to lift a finger. Ever since the accident, he and Emily's first date, when she had been distracted for a moment and lost control of the car sending them down an embankment and breaking his leg, Raymond used guilt to manipulate her. He spent a week in the hospital, and more time recovering at home, but since then he kept Emily in servitude to him by reminding her that it was Emily's carelessness and neglect that led to his injury and debilitation. She reasoned that it was only fair that she should take care of his needs; it was her fault alone he was hurt. Lacey thought he was playing the wounded victim much longer than necessary, and though he claimed that he and Emily were a couple, and therefore she belonged to him, Lacey was sure the only one Raymond cared for was himself. Emily was merely an indentured servant; the accident that injured him was her crime. Lacey

spent time on her knees praying that her sister would see that she owed him nothing, that her debt to him had long since been paid, but he was nothing if not cunning, knowing just how to make Emily respond. And all Lacey could do was pray; her arguments to her sister fell on deaf ears.

"It's been almost a year, Emily," Lacey said to her sister. "The man has skied in Colorado and gone backpacking in Europe. He's not helpless or an invalid. You owe him nothing."

But guilt was Emily's undoing, it had always been. That and chocolate. It was a routine with her—feeling guilty and eating chocolate. Then feeling guilty about eating the chocolate. Regular exercise kept her from putting on the pounds, but guilt was her constant companion as long as she knew Raymond. She alone was responsible for his condition, Emily reminded her sister.

"If not for my carelessness, I would not be in this situation," Emily explained. "I have to accept that."

"He's playing you Em. And it's time for it to stop. Leave him be today, come shopping with me for the boat. Do something for Emily for a change, not because you feel you have to make up for your past."

"Not today," said Emily. "I promised him, and I have to keep my word."

"Emily, he can do it himself, it has nothing to do with his leg!"

"God expects me to be responsible for my actions."

Lacey groaned. "God would make him forgive you if Raymond belonged to Him, but he doesn't, Emily. Another reason you shouldn't be seeing him."

"I'm trying to lead him to Christ. I'm the only Christian he knows; the only example of Christianity."

"He's smarter than he looks, Emily." Lacey crossed her arms and glared at her sister. "He knows you want to please God, and uses your faith to get what he wants."

Emily bit her lip. She knew that her relationship with Raymond was wrong, and was aware that he used her guilt over the accident to manipulate her. But like he said, who else would have her-- a half-witted woman who couldn't even keep her eyes on the road. She was lucky he kept her; no man would want a woman that didn't have enough sense to ease the car to a safe stop when she felt the wheel turning too fast. Raymond told her she was fortunate to have him to point out her faults so she could better herself.

"I tell you these things because I care about you," he claimed, though his comments seemed more cruel than helpful. And because they were true, had no choice but to believe him. Now she was stuck in an unhappy relationship with no other options, and she had to accept her fate, even though her sister told her otherwise.

"You have to believe, Emily that God wants more for your life than this man who treats you so rotten. Somewhere out there is a man who will love and appreciate the person you are, which by the way is bright, funny and compassionate. You have so much to offer the right person, not this...leech that uses you. Trust God, I promise He'll show you."

Emily wished fervently that Lacey were right, that God did have something better for her. But her own sister, who trusted God in everything, could not find someone to love and appreciate *her*—how could Emily expect any better? Lacey liked to say that God is in the details, but so far it seemed like God forgot about Lacey altogether.

Lacey was not so easily discouraged, however. "He's going to lead me to someone, Emily, you'll see. I don't know where or how, but I'm going to trust Him, and do anything He tells me. I want everyone to know that God is real, and I can rely on Him. My job is to be obedient and ready."

"And that's why we need to go get that boat, Emily. Today. God's told me what to do. Please, go with me. I don't want to do this alone."

Emily sighed, torn between her sister and her promise to Ray. "Okay, Lacey. Let me go to Raymond's for a while, then I promise, I'll be home in time to go look at boats."

Lacey nodded. "I'll call my boss and see what he recommends; you know how much he likes to fish. I think he docks a boat on the lake outside town, that big one with the houseboats. He probably knows the best place to find a bass boat. Please, Emily. Just a few hours. For me."

She didn't know how she would do it, but Emily vowed to have Raymond's taxes done and then leave before he made her do anything else. Whether he liked it or not, Lacey needed her too. And she wanted a day away from him, even if he punished her for it later. One day's peace was worth a week of his nagging.

Raymond's taxes would not get done today, even if she had wanted to finish. He presented her with his W-2 forms but he had no federal tax forms, and the post office was already closed. Emily felt a

small thrill of victory. There was no reason for her to stay, so she put her coat on and fished her keys out of her purse.

“Hold it, where do you think you’re going?” Raymond said as he walked into his living room.

“I’m going shopping with Lacey. I promised.” Emily headed for the door.

“What about the laundry? I don’t have any clean pants, what am I supposed to do for today?”

“Guess you’ll have to wash them,” Emily replied, slipping out the door before he could argue. She hurried to her car, half-wondering if he would follow her, but he didn’t. Instead her pager began beeping before she was out of the parking lot.

Lacey was thrilled that her sister returned home so fast. “I talked to my boss, and he said that the only place to even consider shopping is Hook’s. I guess it’s this huge guy store with fishing, hunting and outdoor stuff. He says they sell boats there too, and all the stuff we’ll need, like fishing poles.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard of the place,” Emily said. “How do we get there?”

“I’ve got directions,” Lacey assured her sister. “My boss says we can’t miss it.”

Emily reached for the paper in Lacey’s hand. “That never stopped us before. Let me see where we’re going.”

Lacey showed her sister the map she had drawn, according to her boss’ instructions. “Go south on the interstate to Lakewood, then west to the dam, north on route 127. He said the road winds around the lake, but if we stay on 127 we should be able to see Hook’s as we go around the water.”

“That’s not too complicated,” Emily quipped. “South is down, north is up and go around the lake.”

“Men think we women are so helpless when it comes to directions.” Lacey rolled her eyes. “We’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

An hour later they were hopelessly lost somewhere in or around Lakewood. All they knew was that they were near the lake because they saw frequent signs advertising bait and marinas, and that they had best stop to ask for directions before the car ran out of gas. A sign that said Kingfisher Cove Marina Entrance was just ahead, so they decided to go there and hope it was open in the winter. The actual office was halfway

down a steep hill, still a ways from the boat launch at the edge of the water.

“People pull boats down this hill?” Lacey said in wonder. “I would be scared to drive a trailer down here.”

She parked the Cougar at the Marina office, but before they went inside, the women walked to the very bottom of the hill to look at the water. Though the wind was cold, the water was calm, clear and very inviting. Winter had been mild this year, with barely a hint of the usual ice and snow. To look at the lake today, it would seem that spring had already arrived, and soon the waters would be filled with boaters.

“Look how beautiful it is,” Emily sighed. “And Lacey, houseboats. I’ve never seen them before. Doesn’t that look like fun?”

“Expensive fun,” replied Lacey. “I’ve heard it’s almost two thousand dollars to rent one for a week. I can only imagine what it costs to buy one.”

“Maybe, if we like the bass boat, we’ll want to upgrade to something bigger. I think I could live on the lake.”

Lacey smirked. “Without phones, television, the Internet? She glanced at the opposite shore, with its cliffs and hilly terrain. “It’s not like you can float to the mall from here.”

“Oh, right.” Emily dismissed the thought.

Lacey laughed to herself and walked with her sister to the marina office. The door sign said closed, but a woman with short gray hair and a friendly face met them outside as they approached, asking if she could be of service.

“We’re lost,” Lacey said as she reached the midpoint of the hill, breathing hard from the climb. “We’re trying to find Hook’s Sporting Goods, but I seem to have lost my way on these lake roads.”

“Al needs to get signs with better directions,” sighed the woman. “I tell him constantly how confusing these roads are to people who don’t live here. But you know men—mention directions and they look at you like you’re touched in the head. Al says real men don’t need directions.”

“But real women do,” countered Lacey.

“And even that’s not enough,” Emily agreed. “My sister and I need to be led by the hand.”

“He’s as bad as all the rest,” the woman said. “But you’re not far. Turn left out of here, and go about five minutes till you see a white house with a beautiful flower garden around the porch. Turn left again and stay

on that road. You'll see a big warehouse type building with a huge bass on the roof. You can't miss the fish."

"Now that's directions I can understand," laughed Lacey. "House with flowers and a big fish."

"Tell Al Thelma sent you. Or better yet," she said, winking at Lacey, "Ask for Eric. He's just the person for you."

"Thanks, Thelma." Lacey shook the older woman's hand. "I appreciate your help, and I'll badger Al about better signs."

"If you get lost again, go back to the house with the flower garden." Thelma smiled as she walked the women to the car. "It's my place and I brew a mean pot of tea. And I'm making chocolate chip cookies, but I always make more than I can eat."

Emily didn't need any more encouragement. "Cookies, Lacey! Homemade!"

"You are so transparent," Lacey sighed. To Thelma, she said, "Don't be surprised if we do stop after we go to Hooks. My sister never met chocolate she didn't like."

"I'll expect you then," Thelma said firmly. "Around here, you're only a stranger once. We love company."

Thelma watched them leave, waving as they drove up the steep hill. "Ah, Lord, I hear you," she chuckled, walking back to the office. "I've been waiting for this day for a long time."

Stuart looked up from his paperwork as Thelma returned from outside. "I thought you were going home," he said, setting his pen on the desk.

"I was, but I remembered you're going to Hook's this afternoon. Could you get me some butter from the grocery while you're out? I'm making cookies today, but I forgot to buy butter."

Stuart wondered why she didn't stop and buy some herself, but Thelma seldom asked him for anything. "Of course. I'm almost finished anyway."

She nodded, leaving once more, and silence except for the ticking of the clock and the hum of the beverage coolers surrounded Stuart. How could silence be so loud, he wondered, picking up the pen and returning his attention to the books. The months of January and February were slow at the marina, with only die-hard fishermen going out onto the cold waters of the lake. Even with this mild winter business was stalled, except for

families who called to reserve the houseboats ahead of season. This down time was necessary to maintain the houseboats before the busy summer, and Stuart was always busy no matter what the season. The phone rang, a request for a houseboat for Valentine's Day. The weather was mild enough to allow it to be taken for the weekend, so Stuart made a reservation with the couple. He wondered if he should advertise the rest of the boats for the same day. Why not? He had no plans for himself on Valentine Day, why not spend it renting out boats to lovers? Or to others, like him and Eric—lonely bachelors who had no one to share the day with, a fishing expedition to help them forget Valentines Day altogether. Kate would have loved the idea of renting out the boats to couples, but she would rebuke Stuart for not finding a date for himself. She was always on the lookout for women to keep company with her brother and Eric, not an easy task in this small lakefront community. Eric teased Kate that she was the only woman worth dating on the whole lake, and took her out a few times to prove it, but things never went any farther than friendship with her. Sometimes Stuart wondered what would have happened between his sister and friend if Kate had lived. Did she notice the way Eric watched her as she talked on the phone, how he followed her around the marina as she went about her daily routine? If so, she never let on, to either Stuart or Eric, and her death closed that chapter of their lives.

Stuart felt the familiar sadness that threatened to envelop him, and tried to shake his morose thoughts. He was nearly done with paperwork, and his stomach reminded him he had not eaten yet that day. Eric had left dinner in the refrigerator for his friend, but he had no desire to eat alone. As soon as he finished, he would get Thelma her butter and then go to Hook's for dinner. Listening to the same stories of fish lost, times gone by, and the impudence of the younger generation with the regulars who claimed a seat at the restaurant counter was a much better option than staying home with just the silence for company.



Chapter 2

This time the women had no trouble finding the sporting goods store.

“See? If men gave better directions we could go anywhere,” Lacey declared. “This place is huge!”

“So is that fish,” commented Emily, pointing to the roof. “Whose idea do you think that was?”

“Scary,” Lacey agreed. “It’s probably the owner’s concept of decorating. I can’t wait to see the inside of the store.”

Both Lacey and Emily were pleasantly surprised, however at the condition of the store. It was clean and neat, organized despite an unbelievably huge inventory that almost without exception catered to men. Entire rooms were devoted to a sporting theme—one for fishing, another for camping, still another for hunting. And in a corner, a small but tastefully decorated area held items of interest to women, books on how to clean and cook fish, and china decorated with fish scenes.

“Very appealing,” Lacey said dryly. “And look, Emily. Here’s coffee tables with dead animals in them.”

Actually, Emily thought the tables were quite striking, and in the right setting would be very tasteful, but she didn’t tell her sister.

“And there’s a restaurant in the middle of all this.” Lacey stopped at the entrance to look at the menu board. “We might as well eat while we’re here. There’s nothing else around for miles.”

“I refuse to eat in a place that sells food and bait under the same roof,” Emily sniffed, wrinkling her nose. “It smells like fish.”

“That’s because it’s the catch of the day,” Lacey informed her, reading the specials on the menu board. “Fresh lake perch. Caught today.”

“Real fish?” Emily winced. “Not store bought?”

Lacey made a face at her sister. “Where do you think stores get them?”

Emily shook her head, frowning. “In the store they seem... clean.”

“Let’s live dangerously.” Lacey signaled to the hostess, and they were led to a round table with barrel seats. The centerpiece of the restaurant was a circular aquarium that held a small shark swimming aimlessly around a coral reef. Booths lined the walls, and at the front of the restaurant was a long counter, filled with laughing men. Not a few of them gave Lacey and Emily inviting looks.

“There’s the other catch of the day,” Emily commented, as one of the men winked at her, but was pleasantly surprised to find more than just fish when she read the menu. She ordered a chef salad, figuring it was a safe bet, and her sister asked for the perch.

“If it smells fishy, you’re eating at another table,” warned Emily.

“Sad, isn’t it?” Lacey observed. “The closest we get to adventure is eating fresh fish in a sporting goods store. This bass boat could change everything for us.”

Emily looked at her sister in alarm. “We’re not actually going to use this thing, are we?”

“Why else would we buy it?” Lacey shrugged. “I mean, sure, I think it will help us attract guys—but what else am I supposed to do? Park it on the street and stand next to it?”

Emily raised her eyebrows. “Why not? You don’t know the first thing about boats.”

Lacey scoffed and sipped her soda. "How hard can it be? You put it in the water and float."

That seemed reasonable to Emily. "They have a motor to move them, and all we have to do is guide it, right?"

"Exactly."

Emily's pager beeped and she reached for it automatically.

"Ignore it!" Lacey pushed Emily's purse away. "You know who it is. He can wait."

"It might be important," Emily protested.

"It never is," Lacey said. "He pages you all the time to check on you. Forget him, and let's enjoy ourselves."

"He'll be mad if I don't call him, Lacey. I hate it when he's mad."

"So dump him!" She folded her arms and glared at Emily. "He doesn't own you. And Em, honest! You deserve so much better."

Emily disagreed. Who would want a twit like her? She was lucky Raymond paid attention to her at all. And he did care for her, in his own way.

"I'll call him when we get home," she sighed.

The meal was good, the fish superb, and though they were tempted to order dessert, Lacey recalled Thelma's invitation. After paying the check, Lacey and her sister wandered back into the store's fishing section. It had a trout stream that ran through the middle of the room, and Emily stopped on the bridge to admire the fish.

"I wonder if these are practice fish for beginners," Emily mused.

Lacey peered over the bridge into the water. "No way, these are probably pets."

"Hello, ladies, looking for something special?" Asked a man, probably the same age as Lacey's father. He was wearing a polo shirt and a nametag shaped like a fish. Lacey read the tag.

"Hi, Al. Your friend Thelma said to tell you she sent us, and to put up better signs so direction challenged women like us can find this place."

Al smiled as he shook both the women's hands. "She's always after me to put up more signs. But I don't see how anyone can miss this building. The bass on my roof can be seen for miles."

Lacey laughed. "We saw the bass, but finding our way on the road was another matter. Fortunately for us, Thelma was at the marina where we stopped to ask directions. She told us in language we could understand and invited us over for cookies. She's my new best friend."

"That's Stuart's place, Kingfisher Cove. Thelma's his office gal and let me tell you ladies, her cooking is legend in these parts. The desserts we serve in the restaurant are all her recipes. I've tried to hire her away from Stuart, but she says he needs her more than I do."

"Is Stuart her son?" Asked Emily.

"No, he owns the marina. Lost his sister, Kate to cancer last year, and his parents in a fire years ago. Lives there alone now, and doesn't get out much."

"I'm sorry," Emily said, feeling for this poor man who had suffered such loss. Probably an old hermit. She pictured him in an old pair of waders and boots, a pipe in his mouth, stubble on his chin. And he probably talked in two-word sentences. But to lose all his family...Emily hurt for him.

"Yeah, he could sure use a woman's touch out there again. It's not the same without Kate."

Emily looked at the salesman curiously. Was it her imagination, or did this salesman just drop a hint? Honestly! Were women so scarce in this town that they had to be recruited? She looked around the store, and realized she, Lacey, and the waitress were the only women in the building that she could see. Emily made a face at her sister, who returned it and cleared her throat before talking to their sales person.

"I'm looking for a bass, boat, Umm, Al. Mr. Hooks?"

His look of skepticism lasted only a fraction of a second. "For your husband?"

Lacey shook her head and grinned. "For me."

"I see. You're a fishing woman."

"No, not at all. I've never fished before," Lacey confessed. "I just want to buy a bass boat."

Emily grabbed her sister's sleeve and whispered, "Don't tell him that! He'll think we're some kind of morons!"

Al leaned against the rail of the bridge. "Sure you want to start out with a bass boat? Would something less sporty, like a pontoon work for you?"

"No, it has to be a bass boat. A pontoon won't attract..."

Emily kicked her sister.

"Ow, Em." Lacey pursed her lips and thought for a moment. "I'm working on something important, to me, at least. It has to be a bass boat; that was very clear."

Al let out a small chuckle. "Do you know what size you want, how much horsepower in the motor, what kind of options as far as fishing is concerned?"

"How about something safe, comfortable and easy to use?" Lacey asked, wincing at how stupid she must sound. Emily rolled her eyes and sighed.

The salesman motioned for the women to follow him to the boat showroom. Just before they entered that room there was a few smaller boats, some without motors. "These are my basic fishing boat, not bass boats. They're the least expensive, if you're just looking to fish."

"Oh, we're not going to fish," said Lacey. "I mean...Umm, I want something a bit more...impressive."

"That ups the stakes a bit," commented Al. "Let me show you the real bass boats, the ones my customers dream about. I mean love at first sight."

Lacey brightened. "Now you're talking. That's exactly what I'm hoping for."

Al looked at her out of the corner of his eye, just barely concealing his amusement. "You want something to be envied."

"I want something the men will salivate over," Lacey admitted, smiling uneasily.

"It's not cheap," Al warned.

"Uh, then how about the next best thing? It doesn't have to be the top of the line, just look real sharp."

Al shook his head in confusion. "Do you want a boat to fish in, or something to put in the front yard so people can admire it?"

Emily hid her embarrassment under her hand and turned away. "Lacey, maybe this isn't such a good idea after all..."

Giving up the charade, Lacey looked Al straight in the eyes. "I'm twenty-seven years old, Al, still single and my chances of finding someone are diminishing rapidly. I know my looks won't hold out forever, and my childbearing years are passing rapidly. I need an edge, some way to make men notice me. I'm ready to do what ever it takes."

"Oh, Lacey...for Pete's sake!" moaned Emily, wondering if she could hide under something.

Now Al understood, and grinned widely, his eyes giving away his amusement. "Attracting a man is just like fishing—knowing which bait

works best. You're a pretty girl. Smart too. I would think you'd have 'em knocking at your door."

"But I don't," explained Lacey. "And I feel like I've got to do something drastic to change things in my favor. I prayed, and this was God's answer. I heard him plain as day."

"Can't argue with God," Al agreed. "I'm a believer myself. Met my wife at church. She caught me breaking into the building one night before service and shot me in the backside with her daddy's gun. I was in the hospital for a week, and when I got out I married her."

Lacey laughed. "Because she you were in love, or because she could shoot?"

He winked at her. "All I saw was that cute face with one eye closed as she aimed that gun. It was love at first sight. I'd have asked her to marry me on the spot if she hadn't been pointing a gun at me."

"She married you, a burglar?" Lacey asked.

"Best thing that ever happened to me," Al claimed. "I was a changed man after she shot me."

Lacey laughed so hard she felt tears in her eyes. "I would LOVE to meet your wife!"

Al led them into the showroom. "I think she'd like to meet you too, miss."

To call it a room was inappropriate, it was more a warehouse, with boats of all sizes resting on trailers and waiting for customer inquiries. "We just recently added boats to our business," Al explained. "So I'm new at selling these, but my son, Eric knows much more about them than me. I'll page him, and tell you what I know until he gets here.

He showed them the bass boats, leading them up a row of ten or more. Lacey listened closely as he described each boat's features, but she had her eye on one in particular, with green over gray upholstered seats and sparkling paint on the outside. Al's practiced salesman's eye noticed her stare, and smiled.

"I had this one outside last week while we moved other boats to fit it in. It stopped traffic."

Lacey ran her hands along the sides. "This is a bass boat?" She looked at it in wonder. "It's so...pretty, I can't imagine fishing in it."

"Yeah, they're real nice until they actually get used," Al chuckled.

"Does the trailer come with it?" Emily asked.

"Of course," replied Al. "It's part of the package. You'll need to be sure you can pull it. What kind of car do you drive?"

"A Cougar," Lacey said.

"That's good. You'll also need a license plate for the trailer."

Lacey frowned. "Do I have to pass a test to get one?"

Al laughed and patted the side of the boat. "No, not at all. You have to register it, but the only other license you need is one to fish. You'll have to learn how to pull the boat, though."

Lacey made a face as she thought out loud. "If I fish, I'll have to bait my own hook."

"Lures," said Al. "I'll show you them later."

He helped the women onto the boat and let them explore. Lacey was surer by the minute that this was the boat for her.

"I like it," she said. "Is this is the best you have? I mean as long as I'm spending big money I want to be sure I get the best results."

"Oh, you'll get results, all right," Al assured her, taking her hand so she could climb back off the boat. "From the first week. Or I'll buy the boat back."

"You're serious?" Asked Lacey. "You don't think I'm crazy?"

"Got a date for Valentine's Day?"

"Umm, no..."

He crossed his arms and looked her in the eye. "I'll make you a deal. If you don't have a date for Valentine's Day...if you don't get date offers from at least five guys by then, I'll pay for your boat docking at Kingfisher Cove Marina for a year."

"Five date offers?" Lacey thought for a moment. "You won't send anyone out to ask me, will you?"

"Nope. On my word as a believer."

Lacey grinned. "Then let's do it. This boat."

Al nodded. "This one, for sure?"

Emily grasped the side of the boat to keep from falling off. Her sister had done some strange things in the belief that God had spoken to her, but none so expensive! And on such short notice!

"Lacey, don't you think you should sleep on this a day or so?" Emily cautioned.

"No way. I'm not getting any younger, Em." She followed Al to a corner desk where he went over the financial details, taxes and title. He

arranged for his "service department" to put a trailer hitch on the back of her car.

"Pulling a boat isn't as easy as it looks. You'll need instruction."

Lacey worried. "Ooh, I hadn't thought of that. I only thought about keeping it in the water."

Al shrugged. "My son Eric is the instructor for new boat owners. We'll throw in free lessons."

"You will?" Lacey sighed in relief.

He leaned back in his chair as he dialed the phone. "Hey Frank, find Eric. He's not answering my page. Tell him I need him in the boat showroom, and if he hurries I'll forget he was ten minutes late for work today."

A moment later, a younger version of Al appeared in the showroom. He was wearing the same polo shirt and nametag, but his sandy brown hair was quite differently styled, and more abundant than his father's. He crossed the room quickly, looking a bit puzzled, but his curiosity was directed more at his father than the women sitting in front of the desk.

"This is my son, Eric," Al said, as he approached, and waited while they all shook hands. To Eric, he said, "This lovely young lady is the new owner of the second to last bass boat, the green one."

Eric let out a low whistle, looking at her and then at the boat. "She's a beauty," he sighed. "I mean the boat," he added quickly. "Not that you're not..."

"Thanks...I guess," replied Lacey. "I can't wait to give it a try."

"You're getting some boat," Eric assured her. "The best, one I would love to have myself, if I could afford it. My boss is committed to cheap labor."

"He's just sore because I beat him to the sale," laughed Al. "Son, this gal is planning to take this boat on Saturday, but she needs to take our course on how to pull trailers and use the boat."

"Our what?" Eric gave his father a confused frown.

"Course...on...boat...towing," Al said slowly, willing his son to understand. "The one you teach to all single women who purchase boats from us."

"O-oh," replied Eric just as slowly. "Lessons, right. That would make me the instructor." He smiled brightly at Lacey, then turned back to his father. "Umm, dad, where do we give lessons? I forgot."

"At Stuart's place. The marina," Al replied as if he needed a reminder.

Eric slapped himself on the forehead and rolled his eyes. "Of course. Stupid me."

Lacey laughed at his silly expression. "Why do I get the impression I'm the very first student?"

"Probably because you are," confided Eric. "Dad likes to make things up as he goes along. I suppose I'll be the guide for your first bass fishing trip also."

"We certainly can't send them out of here not knowing how to use their own boat," Al explained as he stood. "It wouldn't be proper."

Lacey stood also, following Al's instruction and allowed him to lead her and Emily out of the showroom. He took them to the aisles of fishing equipment and turned them over to his son, saying he had a shipment to check on, and that Eric would answer any more questions. He shook both the girls' hands and disappeared into a back room.

Eric watched his father with an odd expression before turning his attention to the women. "Are you looking for supplies for your boat or fishing equipment?"

"Both," replied Lacey.

"You like to fish," he commented.

"Uh, sure, who doesn't?" Asked Lacey, elbowing her sister.

"I love to fish," said Emily dutifully.

"No kidding," replied Eric, his tone doubtful. "What kind of fish do you usually go after?"

"The ones in the lake," Emily said brightly.

He grinned, and placed a fishing rod in Lacey's hand. "What kind of bait do you use?"

"Worms," said Emily.

"Lures," replied Lacey. "Worms are...too slimy for me."

"And fishing pole?"

"Yes, I usually use one," Lacey assured him, holding the fishing rod upside down.

Eric covered his mouth to hide his amusement, and turned the pole around. "I'll just show you what I use."

He found another pole and explained why he liked the reel, turning and clicking it as if he were going to cast. Then he invited her to do the same.

Lacey blushed and smiled gratefully at the way he spared her embarrassment. He obviously knew she was clueless but didn't reveal her lack of knowledge; instead he kept talking as if she was just another customer.

"What I usually do for my female fishermen, or fisher-women, is to sell all the things they need to get started as a package." He moved down the aisle, gathering poles, reels, lures, line and various other necessities, placing the smaller items in a basket, and handing the larger items to the women. He explained each piece and why it was important; then when they had all they needed, he directed them to another part of the store that held safety equipment.

"The law says you have to have life vests for each person on board. I recommend these ski vests, they're the best flotation devices around. You couldn't sink if you tried. And they zip, so they're easy to use."

"We both swim," Emily informed him.

"Good, but in an emergency, these are your safest option. And I recommend you carry a cell phone when you're out on the water, some way to have contact with land."

"I have one," said Lacey. "I'll take those vests."

"And it wouldn't hurt to take a safe boating course taught by certified instructors." He carried the vests for them. "I can teach you what I know, but you would be better off with proper instruction."

"We aren't inconveniencing you by asking you to instruct us, are we?" Lacey asked.

"Not at all," Eric assured her. "Saturday is a workday for me. I'd much rather be paid for spending it on the lake with you than here at the store." He didn't add that he'd like to spend time anywhere with her, he found her captivating, her earnest effort to memorize everything he told her charming.

"Saturday will be perfect for me and Emily too," Lacey told him. "Should I meet you here?"

"Yes. Do you have a trailer hitch on your car?"

"No, but your father said he would put one on for me."

Eric laughed. "He's a man of many surprises. Bring your car here around nine on Saturday morning and we'll take care of it. Then I'll teach you how to drive pulling a trailer before we head to the lake."

"Is it hard?" Lacey asked, handing him her credit card.

"No, not really," Eric answered. He began ringing her purchase. "The trickiest part is backing the trailer into the water."

"We're going to put the boat in the water?" Emily asked.

Eric frowned good-naturedly. "You *are* going to use this boat, aren't you?"

Lacey blushed. "Of course. I just need to get used to driving around town with it."

He smiled at her. What a novice! He wondered why she was buying the boat, maybe trying to impress someone, a boyfriend perhaps? He certainly hoped not. "Does your boyfriend have a boat?"

"No, I mean, I don't have a...the boat's for me. I'll be using it myself."

This was encouraging. "I'll teach you how to handle the boat on the water, and then maybe we can do some fishing on company time," he said with a grin, sending a thrill through Lacey.

She managed not to show her delight. "I would be very grateful."

He bagged her purchase and handed the fishing poles to her. "Dress warm. It's been an unusually mild January, but it'll be cold out on the water."

"I will. Thanks, Eric. I'm really looking forward to this."

The two of them smiled at each other for a moment before Emily gently pushed her sister out the door, whispering, "I think you just hooked your first fish, if you get my drift."

"Why didn't we think of this before?" wondered Lacey, staring at the fish on the roof of the store.

"And why didn't we just buy fishing poles and save ourselves a fortune?" asked Emily.

"The boat was a perfect idea. It's working already," sighed Lacey, putting her purchases in the trunk.

The beeper in Emily's purse sounded again. "I need to find a phone," she said, looking around.

Lacey frowned and opened the car door. "You'll have to call him later. We promised we'd stop at Thelma's on the way home."

Emily wrung her hands nervously. "He told me to get a cell phone. It would be so much easier if I had one."

"Easier for him to bug you. Forget about him for now, you can't do anything about it anyway."

But worry formed a knot in her stomach. "Maybe I can call him from Thelma's."

"Em! He can live without you for a few hours!" Lacey ordered her in the car and left before she could protest, but Emily vowed to get a cell phone as soon as she could.

Stuart closed the marina office and brought the butter to Thelma's. As he entered her kitchen he was warmed by the heat from her oven and enticed by the smell of baking cookies. Thelma took the butter from him and put it in the refrigerator.

"Funny thing," she remarked as she closed the door, "I had butter after all."

Stuart gave her a look but said nothing.

"Don't just stand there, have some cookies," Thelma said.

"Thanks," replied Stuart. "But I'll just eat one and run. Eric's got some parts on order for me, and I want to get started on the job today."

"It can wait another hour," Thelma insisted. "You've already worked hard today. Relax. Eat."

"I sat at the desk all day," countered Stuart. "If I get any more relaxed I'll fall asleep."

Thelma laughed as if it was the funniest thing she had ever heard, slapping her thigh and wiping at her eyes.

Stuart frowned and crossed his arms. "You're up to something, Thelma."

"Me? No...Is that a car door?" Thelma hurried to the window. "Guess I'm hearing things."

Stuart eyed her suspiciously. "Expecting company?"

"Just some friends. Why don't you stay and meet them? I think you might like the girls, they're about your age."

"I really need to get started on that boat. Then I'm going to turn in early tonight."

Thelma pulled out a chair. "You have no social life, other than visiting with your customers at the marina or the old geezers at Hooks, Stuart. You need to get out more. It's not good for you to be so alone."

He agreed, but answered bitterly, "Apparently, it's what God intended for me, or I wouldn't have lost my entire family."

"You still have us, Stuart. The Hooks consider you family; they love you. So do I."

Ignoring the chair, Stuart moved to the door. “Thanks for your concern, Thelma, but I wouldn’t be good company right now. I’ve got all I can handle, getting the boats ready for summer. I don’t have time to socialize.”

Thelma wasn’t easily discouraged. She spent hours with both him and Kate, and knew the depth of Stuart’s grief and loneliness.

“He’s going to need someone when I’m gone,” Kate had told Thelma as she lay dying. “I tried to find him someone myself, but I’m running out of time. I’ll have to trust God to find him a wife after I’m...”

“Don’t you worry,” Thelma interrupted. “I’ll take care of him.”

But Thelma was not as successful as she had planned, and after Kate’s death Stuart retreated from the world, in a haze of pain and grief. The cheerful, pleasant person he was before Kate’s illness and death disappeared; replaced by a sad, quiet man who spent time alone, burying himself in his work. Though his faith was a comfort to him, he was still shaken and peppered God with unanswerable questions. How could God take the people he loved and leave him to go on alone? Would he ever find relief from his loneliness and grief? He tried to accept his lot in life; to make the best of what God had given him, but he kept going with the business not out of gratefulness, but in respect to Kate’s wishes. She loved this lake and the marina. Her customers were like family to her, many returning every year. She insisted that Stuart keep Kingfisher Cove going for the ones who counted on this place for yearly vacations, and for the regulars who docked their boats over the winter. She cared for them, even after her death, through Stuart. He kept many pictures of her and the customers on the wall of the marina store; she and the guests and the fish they caught. There were many pictures of Kate alone, holding fish; she was an expert fisherman, and even led charters. The men loved her; she was one of them. No one could ever replace her.

Stuart excused himself and left for Hooks. Thelma truly cared for him, and maybe someday he would find someone who cared for him in another way, but for now he had to concentrate on his work at the marina, the boats, and the season ahead. Who would want him anyway, a man so crippled by grief that he cut himself off from the rest of the world? What could he offer anyone but a shell of the man he once was?

As he left Thelma’s, a red Cougar turned into her driveway. Must be her company, he mused. I hope they like chocolate.

“Hey!” Called Eric, seeing Stuart enter the restaurant. “Listen to this, Stu—I sold a boat today to a woman today, she was...really something. Anyway, she bought a bass boat, and I’m going to bring her to your place and show her how to use it.”

Stuart took a seat at the counter, and Eric sat next to him. “A woman bought a bass boat? For who?”

Eric slapped the counter and laughed. “For herself! Dad said she told him that God said to buy a bass boat, so she did!”

“Just like that?”

“Yep.” Eric shook his head in wonder. “She tried to make it sound like she fished all the time, but she didn’t have a clue. Didn’t even know how to hold a fishing rod, she had it upside down.” He chuckled at the memory. “I’m going to take her out on the lake Saturday, show her how to fish and use the boat.”

“Aren’t you the gentleman.” Stuart signaled to the waitress, who brought him a cup of coffee.

“Dad told her I was the boating instructor, the one who teaches single women how to use their new boats.”

Stuart smiled slightly. “Like you’ve ever had a woman buy a boat before. Your dad is such a character.”

“I don’t mind this time.” Eric rested his head on his hand and sighed. “She was so...pretty, the same color hair as Kate, and she was courageous too.”

“Because she bought a boat?”

Eric shook his head. “Because she trusted God enough to act. I wish I could do that.”

“You would, Eric. Anything God tells you.” Stuart didn’t doubt his friend’s faith for a moment. Even when Kate was dying, Eric held fast to his confession, and refused to blame God for her loss. He told Kate that he envied her, going to be with the Savior before him. Kate confided to her brother that Eric helped her immensely as she faced death; he made Heaven real to her, and showed her that it was a goal, a prize to be sought. She tried to impart this same message to Stuart, but he was too entrenched in losing her to see Heaven as a reward. She may be happy there, but all he could think about was how much he would miss her.

“Why don’t you join me,” Eric suggested, getting his friend’s attention again. “She’s got a friend, I think it’s her sister, and she’s real cute. We could make a day of it.”

Stuart frowned and shook his head. "I need to work on the boats, get them ready for summer."

"One day's not going to make a difference," Eric insisted. "You need to get away once in a while."

"Thank you Thelma," Stuart teased. He did need to get away, but the thought of being stuck on a boat for hours with a couple of strangers who didn't know the first thing about fishing or boats...Eric was looking at him so earnestly that he couldn't turn him down, at least not yet.

"I'll see," was all he could promise.

"Good, because I might need you to cover my back if things don't go smooth."

"She did want your help, didn't she?" Stuart asked. It seemed odd that a woman would allow a perfect stranger to take her out on the lake alone.

"Yes, she was pretty psyched about the boat, and I think she realizes she can trust me. Dad wouldn't have suggested it if he didn't think it also."

Stuart agreed. "She must have impressed him if he's sending his baby son out alone with her."

"Yeah," laughed Eric. "Boat instructor! I didn't get it at first, then I saw my dad rolling his eyes and winking at me. I almost laughed out loud!"

"He's so subtle," said Stuart with a grin.

"She realized it too," replied Eric. "But she wasn't mad. I gotta tell you...she's a good-looking woman with a bass boat. If she learns to fish I'm might just ask her to marry me."

"All you need is a pick-up truck and a hound dog and your life will be complete." Stuart downed his cup of coffee and signaled for another one.

"I wonder if she's seeing anyone..." Eric's voice was wishful. "A woman with a boat like that could have any man she wants."

"Maybe if you're real nice to her she'll let you kiss...the boat." Stuart laughed out loud, the first time since Kate fell ill.

Eric looked at his friend sharply. "Better watch it, Stu. Your face might freeze like that."

"I hope it does. I'm tired of being sad." But suddenly he didn't feel like laughing anymore.

"She never wanted you to mope, you know," Eric reminded him. "If she were here now, she'd smack you on the head and tell you to quit whining."

"Well, she's not," snapped Stuart. "She never will be." He stood up and threw a dollar on the counter.

"You'll see her again, Stuart. "Hang on to your beliefs."

Stuart shot him a look. "I believe, Eric. I know I'll see her again. But it doesn't make it any easier to live without her now."

Eric patted his friend on the back and bid him to sit on the seat again. "I know, Stu. We all miss her." He ordered a hamburger and fries for the both of them and opened a catalog of boating supplies. They spent the rest of the afternoon talking business.

Thelma opened the door before the women were out of the car. "You made it!" She exclaimed, greeting them as old friends. "Come in, I just pulled a batch of cookies out of the oven."

"I can smell them from out here," Emily sighed, following her nose into the kitchen. "Ooh, Thelma it smells wonderful."

"I was hoping you would come," Thelma said, inviting the girls to sit and placing a platter of cookies in front of them. "You just missed Stuart. He stopped by, but had to go get parts for the boats."

"Speaking of boats," Lacey said, "You're looking a the newest owner of a bass boat, top of the line, sparkling green, a fisherman's dream."

"Sounds like Al's words to me," commented Thelma. "He's quite a salesman."

Lacey bit into a cookie and sighed. "These are great. Al told me that I would be quite in demand with the men, now that I'm a boat owner. He said that if I didn't get a date for Valentine's Day, or at least five offers, he'd pay my dock space at your marina for a year."

Thelma hooted. "He's right! No man can resist a woman with a boat."

"His son Eric is going to take me out on the lake in it on Saturday," Lacey said. "Show me how to use it."

"Is that so?" Thelma mused. "Are you going along also, young lady?" she said to Emily.

"I'm Emily. Yes, I can't let her go out alone on the lake with a stranger. He said he'd teach us how to fish."

"City girls, huh?" Thelma asked. "What made you buy the boat?"

"God told me to," answered Lacey. "I'm tired of being single, I want to find someone, and settle down, have children. I'm getting desperate! I needed something that would attract men to me, since I don't seem to be doing it on looks alone."

Emily agreed. "Scare them with your looks, maybe."

"My sister is my biggest source of encouragement," confided Lacey.

Thelma rose to get another pan of cookies out of the oven. "That boat ought to get you plenty of attention. But they'll all want to fish."

"I can live with that," replied Lacey. "At this point, I'm willing to let them do anything—I mean with my boat."

"And what about you, Emily?" asked Thelma. "Are you hoping to attract anyone?"

Emily shook her head. "I've got a...well, he doesn't like to be called my boyfriend. I guess I'm in a relationship."

Thelma frowned. "You're not sure?"

Lacey answered before Emily could. "He snaps his fingers and she goes running. He's not her boyfriend; he's just a guy who takes advantage of her kind and trusting nature."

"Lacey!" snapped Emily. "I'm sure Thelma's not interested!"

Lacey ignored her sister. "She's a lovely person, but he's got her thinking she owes him. They were in a car accident last year, and he broke his leg. Now he makes her do all kinds of things for him, out of guilt."

"He needs me," Emily insisted. "It's my fault he was injured."

Lacey sighed and turned to Thelma. "It breaks my heart to see Emily waste her time on a man who uses her. He doesn't deserve someone like her."

"No one else will have me," Emily said to herself, but Thelma heard every word, thanks to her new hearing aid battery. She appraised the lovely young woman with soft blonde hair and troubled eyes. When she was about the same age, Thelma was trapped in a bad marriage to an abusive man. If Thelma guessed right, Emily was a victim of abuse, or on her way to becoming one. He had already filled her head with hurtful things, and now she believed him. The best thing for her to do was to get away from him, so she could see that she was indeed capable of being loved, not the worthless person he told her she was. And Thelma knew

just the person to help her, someone who would cherish a kind-hearted woman...someone who was hurting also, whose heart needed mending...

"What time will you be going out on the lake?" Thelma asked.

"Around ten, I would guess," Lacey replied. "First I'm having a trailer hitch put on my car at Hook's, then Eric will bring me out on the water."

The wheels in Thelma's head were already spinning.



Chapter 3

Raymond was waiting in the apartment parking lot when Emily and her sister returned from their excursion. He jumped out of his car and grabbed Emily by her arm, pulling her from Lacey's vehicle.

"Ow, Ray, stop," Emily protested, shaking her arm away.

"Leave her alone!" Lacey ordered, racing around to the other side of the car.

"It's okay," Emily assured her sister. "He gets upset if I worry him."

Raymond glared at Lacey. "It's none of your business anyway. This is between Emily and me."

"My sister *is* my business," Lacey said, putting her hand on her hip.

"Come on, Emily. We'll talk in private." He pulled Emily along with him, despite Lacey's attempt to stop him.

"Hurt her and I'll have you arrested," Lacey warned Raymond. "I mean it."

"I'm fine," Emily insisted. "He'll calm down. If I had called he wouldn't be so upset."

Lacey bit her tongue to keep from saying something that would make things worse for Emily, but it was hard. She locked her car and went inside to the apartment, praying he would not do anything to her sister.

"She what?" Laughed Raymond derisively. "Talk about desperate! Why doesn't she just hang a sign around her neck, I'm a loser, I couldn't attract a man without props!"

"It's a beautiful boat! We're both going to learn to fish."

He howled. "That ought to be a sight! The two of you fishing. Well, you ain't gonna catch fish either, what do you know about it?"

Emily squirmed uncomfortably. "I guess I'll learn."

"You're gonna make a mess of it. Who's going to bait your hooks or take the fish off if you do catch any? Did you think about that?"

"We'll do it." She wished she hadn't told him. "I want to try."

"You can't even drive a car without hitting something. How are you going to operate a boat?"

Emily looked at the floor. "I didn't say I was. Lacey is taking lessons."

"Boat lessons?"

She looked at him. "Well, yeah. She has to learn."

"Who's teaching her?"

"The salesman." Emily wasn't about to tell him where they bought the boat.

"When are you going out on the lake? I gotta see this."

"I don't know..." hedged Emily. Lacey would not allow him aboard the boat, so there was no reason to tell.

He knew she wouldn't also. "I don't want you out on that thing with her. You're so clumsy you'd fall overboard and drown."

"We have ski vests. We can't drown."

He slapped the dashboard and shouted, "I said you're not going, you hear? If she wants to do something stupid and harebrained, fine. But she's not taking you with her."

Emily wished she had never told him about the boat. She was so excited about fishing, and going on the lake, her first real adventure of her life. But maybe he was right. This was something so new to her, and she was accident-prone. Maybe she shouldn't go after all.

"Hello, dimwit, I'm talking."

Emily realized Raymond was speaking, and apologized.

"What do all your brain cells do with their spare time?" He wondered. "Pay attention."

"Why do you always say such mean and hurtful things to me?" Emily asked. "I don't treat you like that."

"I'm just trying to help you," Raymond said. "It's not my fault you're so touchy."

"I don't like it," Emily told him. "You make me feel bad about myself."

He scoffed and turned on the car. "I'm just telling you the truth. How you feel is your own problem."

"I feel," said Emily, opening the car door, "like staying home with my sister tonight."

"Aw, come on Em. Get over it. I'll take you to dinner. Or better yet, we can fix something at my place."

She shook her head and got out of the car. "I already ate. See you later." Slamming the car door, she went inside the apartment house without looking back.

"Hooray for you, Em!" Lacey said as she entered the apartment.

But the phone was already ringing, and Emily spent the next half-hour apologizing to Raymond before going out again.

Saturday Lacey was up early, and packed a cooler full of food, drinks and a bag holding sunscreen, bug spray, and a book to read.

"It's January," Emily laughed. "Not August."

"It's best to be prepared," countered Lacey. "The sun still shines in winter, and it's been so unseasonably warm, there has to be bugs on the water."

Emily peered into the cooler. "What did you pack to eat?"

"Chicken, cole slaw, and snacks. Mostly picnic stuff."

"Will we have room on the boat for that?"

"I think so," replied Lacey. "Help me carry this to the car."

Emily grasped the handle of the cooler. "What about the fishing poles?"

"In the car. And the life vests." They took the cooler outside, and returned for their purses. As Emily put hers on her shoulder the pager fell out. Lacey kicked it under the couch before her sister noticed.

"Ready?" Lacey asked.

"I'm kind of excited, actually," Emily admitted. "I want to catch a big fish like I saw on that fishing show."

"Me too," said Lacey as they went to the car. "But I'm nervous about pulling the boat. It's a good thing Eric is willing to help"

Emily smiled at her sister. "If you want to be alone with him, just say so. I'll pretend I want to fish on shore."

Lacey laughed. "I just might, so don't take it personal. He's...very cute. But I hardly know him. What am I saying? Don't you dare leave my side all day!"

They didn't get lost this time and arrived at the store with the big bass on top at nine. The parking lot was already half full even this early. Lacey and Emily went into the store and asked for Eric. He wasn't there yet, but had left instructions with the staff to take her car around to the back to install the trailer hitch. The women were told to wait for him in the restaurant, and the coffee was on him. Lacey surrendered her keys then went with her sister to wait for Eric.

He arrived about forty minutes later, apologizing for making them wait.

"My friend Stuart needed help with one of the boats this morning."

"Is it broke?" asked Emily.

"No, just routine maintenance," Eric said. "He owns a bunch of houseboats he rents in the summertime, and he works on them in the winter."

He appraised their outfits. They seemed to be wearing warm enough clothes, but it could get quite chilly on the water. He decided to borrow a couple blankets from the houseboats to cover their legs. Also he would need a pair of boots for when he put the boat in the water. Stuart had those. Eric had extra sweaters and coats. They should be fine.

"I'll bet your car is ready. Let's go hook up the boat."

Lacey squeezed her sister's arm. "This is going to be so much fun!"

Eric was amused. "I hope you still think that after I make you hoist the boat onto the trailer later."

"If I catch just one fish, I can die happy," Emily claimed. "A big one."

"For dinner?" asked Eric.

“Oh no,” answered Emily, making a face. “I couldn’t kill a poor innocent fish.”

The car was waiting, and the workers had pushed the boat outside. It sat behind the car, unhooked, as Eric had requested. He showed Lacey how to hitch the trailer properly, and then attached the wires so the lights would work. He showed her the straps that attached the boat to the trailer, and how to hook them. Then he sat her in the driver’s seat of her car while he explained how to pull a trailer.

“It turns different than your car when you back up, so it’s going to be tricky at first. We’ll drive around, to the marina, then we’ll work on backing it into the water.”

Lacey took a deep breath, and started the car, hoping she had memorized everything he told her. Eric and Emily climbed into the car, he in the passenger side. He told Lacey to adjust her mirrors, and pull slowly forward. She could feel the drag of the trailer as she moved.

“Take the corner of the parking lot wide,” Eric instructed. She thought she turned wide enough, but it wasn’t, and she knocked over the entrance sign by the street.

“Oh!” She gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

Eric jumped out to inspect the damage. “It’s okay,” he said when he returned. “We need a new sign anyway.”

Lacey felt terrible. “I’ll pay for it.”

He waved her off. “I can nail it up in five minutes. Let’s try again.”

This time she successfully pulled onto the road. It wasn’t too hard to maneuver on the street, and she remembered to take the corners wide. They arrived at the marina in minutes without incident.

“Drive all the way down to the bottom of the hill,” said Eric. “Stop parallel to the boat launch.”

She did, though she was terrified to drive down the steep hill with the boat. Eric didn’t seem concerned, however about the sharp angle of the slope, so she tried to relax. At the very bottom, Eric got out of the car to direct her, telling her to pull forward and line her car up with the dock. He saw Stuart on a houseboat and waved to him. Lacey, thinking he was signaling her, began to back up the boat. The trailer turned the wrong way, and took out one of Stuart’s signs.

“Oh, no,” she wailed.

“Hold it, Stop!” Eric yelled.

Lacey bit her lip and pulled forward again.

Emily jumped out of the car with her fishing pole. “I can’t watch!” She walked toward the docks with the rows of houseboats. “Call me when you’re in the water.”

Eric told Lacey to straighten out her wheels, and then slowly, slowly let her back the boat trailer into the water.

Emily felt bad, abandoning her sister, but she couldn’t be any help to her, so she walked to a dock between boats. The houseboats were huge, and she wished she could see inside them. From what she could see, they looked like an apartment on the water with a large porch, and she wondered what it would be like to spend a week on the lake in one. Maybe sometime Thelma could arrange for her and Lacey to go on a boat, even just for a few hours. They could swim, climb to the top of the vessel and go down the slide into the clean clear water, which even in January looked inviting. Emily moved to the end of the dock and peered into the water hoping to see fish. But there were none that she could see. Where should she cast her line? The men on television said to hug the shoreline, so she didn’t have far to throw.

Emily remembered what Eric said about the reel. “Pull this back, hold the line with your finger, and throw.”

She tried it, but forgot to move her finger, and the line didn’t let out. “Hmm.” She tried again, this time remembering to move her finger. The lure traveled a few feet into the water. Now she had the idea. She reeled the line in, pulled the lever back, and threw the pole backwards, then out.

“Here fishy,” she called softly. “Come and get it.” But it didn’t so she set it up to try again, this time throwing the line with all her might.

Instead of going into the water, the lure flew backward onto a houseboat, and caught on something,

“Well, shoot,” said Emily as she tugged at the line.

“Ow! Hey! What the--!” A male voice cried.

Emily dropped her pole and covered her mouth with her hands. She followed her line to the boat on the left, and found her lure embedded in the back of a man’s sweater.

“Ooh, I’m sorry!” She rushed to the boat.

He tried to pull his sweater around.

“Don’t move! It’s a lure!”

The man stopped struggling and waited for her, not willing to snag his fingers on a hook. Emily stepped onto the deck of the boat, terrified. She had hooked the man; surely he would be furious! She looked at him, sitting motionless on the deck, where he must have been working on a motor. His dark, wavy hair fell into his face, covering his eyes. He needed a haircut, she thought irrationally, considering the circumstances.

"Hi," she said, cringing. "I caught my lure in your back. Are you hurt?"

She waited for his outrage, but he seemed nonplused, as if it happened every day.

"It's not hooked on my skin," he assured her. "Can you pull it out, or is it embedded too deep?"

Emily leaned close to inspect it. The lure was hopelessly tangled.

"Oh, no," she whispered.

"If you'll help me, I'll take off my sweater," the man told her. Emily swallowed and nodded, expecting him to scold her for being so careless. While she held the lure away from his skin, he wiggled free of the garment, then inspected the hooks. He was wearing a flannel shirt under his sweater, and explained to Emily that it was not snared, which she was thankful for, but his sweater was another story.

"I'll replace your sweater," Emily said fearfully. "I can go get one as soon as my sister has learned to drive the boat."

"This old thing?" The man chuckled, showing her the sweater. "It's holier than the Bible. See?"

It was indeed, practically a rag with arms. But Emily worried he still thought she was reckless.

"Let me work on that," said the man, grinning and shaking his head, sending his wavy hair back into his face. He brushed it back, putting a baseball cap over it. "That's really stuck. I'll have to cut it out."

"I didn't mean to..." Emily began.

"It's no problem," he assured her. "I'll get my scissors." He reached into his tool chest and produced a Swiss army knife that looked even more battered than the sweater. He snipped threads, freeing one hook at a time, and then instructed Emily to hold the lure while he worked the metal claw. It was free in a matter of minutes, and then the man reeled her line in, careful not to snag her.

"Just learning how to cast?" He asked her.

"Could you tell?" She answered.

He raised his eyebrows, making Emily smile. Pulling back the lever, he showed Emily the proper way to hold the pole and line. He walked to the end of the dock with her and cast the line, then reeled it back in slowly.

"Try it," he said, handing her the pole.

She followed his instructions, hesitating when she was ready to throw. Hoping he was safely out of the way, she closed her eyes tightly and threw, making a small squeal as she did.

When she opened them, he was grinning at her with his beautiful eyes, and her line was in the water. She sighed in relief and looked to him for approval.

"Very good," he commented. "Now reel it in."

She took a cleansing breath, straightened her arms, and reeled, feeling a tug as she did.

"Ooh! Is that a fish?" she asked.

"Probably just the lure dragging the bottom of the lake."

She stopped reeling. "Is that bad?"

"No, not at all." He watched as she brought the lure out of the water and set the pole down on the dock.

"That was fun," she said nervously. "Sorry about your sweater."

"You're finished?" He asked in astonishment. "One cast?"

Emily blushed. "I don't want to risk hooking you again. And I'm going out on the boat with my sister and the guy who sold it to her. I can fish then."

"That's right, Eric. He told me you were coming this morning."

Emily looked confused. "You know him? Are you Stuart?"

"That's me," he said, amused at the way she was staring at him. "My sister and I inherited this place years ago, when I was just a kid."

"You look too young to own..." She stopped, embarrassed at her rude remark, but he didn't seem offended.

"Thelma's not your mother," Emily remembered.

"No, I have no family," he said, a shadow passing over his face. "My parents died when I was young, and I lost my sister to cancer a year ago."

Emily's heart hurt for him. "I'm so sorry."

He shrugged, but she saw sadness in his eyes. Surely he still grieved. She touched his arm in sympathy. "You must miss her terribly."

Stuart looked away. "She loved this place." He seemed wistful for a moment, but must have realized he was baring his emotion to a stranger. He cleared his throat.

"It looks like your sister has the boat in the water."

Emily let go of his sleeve. "I guess that's my cue."

"Are you going to fish?" Stuart asked.

"I think so."

"You'll need a license. There's a big fine if you're caught without one."

Emily looked disappointed. "I guess I won't be fishing today."

Stuart put his hands in his pant pockets. "I can sell you one at the office. It only takes a few minutes."

"Could you?" Emily asked, brightening. "I really want to catch a fish."

"Sure." He held her pole for her as they walked up the steep hill to the office, leaving it outside while they went into the store and filled out a paper.

"This is it?" asked Emily. "Now can I fish?"

"Yep. Keep it in the boat so you have it handy," Stuart suggested, reading her name and age. She was twenty-four, three years younger than he; her birthday had just passed.

"Who are all these people?" Emily asked, looking over the pictures lining the walls.

"Our customers with the fish they caught."

"Your sister was lovely."

Stuart guessed she deduced who Kate was from the many pictures of her. "Yes, she was."

"And well loved," Emily added. "It shows."

"Kate lived for this place...and me," Stuart explained, finding it comforting to share this with Emily. It felt natural to discuss his sister with her. "We lived on this lake most all of our lives. It was her idea to buy the houseboats and rent them."

"I would love to go on one." Emily perused more photos. "Look at the size of these fish!"

"Caught in this very lake," said Stuart proudly. "Maybe we can add your picture today."

"You think?" Emily gushed. "I'm just a beginner."

"The fish don't know that," Stuart assured her. Emily surveyed the rest of the room, looking at shelves of food, beverage coolers, and souvenirs while Stuart watched her.

"What a charming place!" She looked at the shirts on a display. "And you sell clothing?"

"Hats and shirts," Stuart replied. "People like to have mementos of their vacation." He took a sweatshirt off the rack. "Here, Emily. Happy birthday."

"For me?" Emily blinked her eyes a few times. Why would he give her a gift after what she did to his sweater?

"Try it on," he said as she looked at him in wonder. He helped her remove her jacket and she pulled on the sweat. "It looks great on you."

"Thank you so much," she said softly.

He was immensely pleased at her gratefulness, embarrassed that she was so astonished, and couldn't think of a fitting reply. The door opened, allowing Eric and another woman inside.

"I see you met Emily," Eric observed. "This is her sister, Lacey. She needs a fishing license."

Stuart greeted Lacey and went behind the counter to get the paper.

"What are you wearing?" Lacey asked her sister.

Emily showed Lacey the Kingfisher Cove Marina emblem on the front of the shirt. "Stuart gave it to me. It's warm."

"She hooked me," Stuart said to Eric, smiling.

Eric winked at his friend. "I'll bet she did."

"No, seriously, I hooked him with my lure," said Emily, approaching the counter. "I threw my line backwards and caught his sweater."

Lacey was aghast. "Emily, no! Did you hurt him?"

"Not at all," answered Stuart. "But I hope I'm not the only thing she catches today."

Emily smiled at him in agreement.

"We're about ready to shove off," Eric said as Lacey signed the paper. "Are you going to join us, Stuart?"

Stuart looked at Emily.

"Please?" She asked. "I promise not to snag you again."

"Just let me lock up the office," he said, smiling at her.

Lacey remembered the sign. "Oh, I'm sorry to tell you that I hit a sign when I was backing the boat into the water."

"I heard it go, and Eric's yelling," laughed Stuart. "Don't worry about it."

"That's two in one day," sighed Lacey.

Eric put his arm across her shoulder. "You'll get the hang of it." She smiled at him and then at her sister. Emily gave an approving nod, and followed Stuart out the door.

They waited while Stuart locked the office, then again while he and Eric fetched blankets from a houseboat. Stuart allowed Emily aboard, and she marveled over the lovely, comfortable interior. Sitting on the couch, she declared it was softer than hers was at home, but then the sofa was a cast off from her mother.

"Why don't you live in one of these?" Emily asked Stuart.

"I have living quarters behind the office," Stuart explained. "And if I lived in this, I couldn't rent it to vacationers. It brings in a good portion of my income."

They loaded the bass boat with the cooler, fishing supplies, blankets and then Stuart filled the tank with gas. Minutes later they were pulling away from the dock with Eric at the controls.

"I'll get us out to the middle and then let you take over," he told Lacey.

"There's less for me to hit out there," Lacey agreed. They were the only boat on the lake that she could see, and she began to relax.

The January air was colder than the women expected, especially when the boat was in motion, as a spray mist dampened their clothes.

"I'd kill for a mug of hot chocolate right now," Lacey said, shivering.

"I'd kill for chocolate period," Emily agreed. "Hot or cold." She rubbed her hands together for warmth.

Stuart took one of the blankets and tucked it around Emily's legs while Eric eased the boat toward an island. They had been traveling on the water for thirty minutes, and had yet to see any signs of civilization, save the marina from where they departed.

"C-c-can we fish now?" Emily asked through chattering teeth.

"Sure," replied Stuart, helping her with the pole. "Cast along the shoreline. The fish like to hide under the rocks that jut out into the water."

She followed his lead, throwing out and reeling back in, then repeating the motion while watching the water. Eric had readied Lacey's fishing pole, and she was doing the same off the other side of the boat.

"It's absolutely beautiful here," she breathed, letting the fresh air fill her lungs. "There's nothing but water, hills, and cliffs along the shore. How utterly peaceful."

Eric directed her attention to the opposite shore. He pointed to a spot half way to the top of the hill. "See that straight brown line in the trees? That's my house, I mean my dad's. I live at home with my parents."

"I can't...oh, you mean that big brown building? That's your house? Or is it a resort?" Asked Lacey.

"Our house," he answered casually. "In case you didn't notice, my dad has a thing for big rooms. And big fish."

"Is there a big bass on the top of your house too?" teased Lacey.

"Inside over the fireplace," replied Eric, drinking in the color of her eyes. "A small mouth bass from this lake."

"Caught by who?" asked Lacey.

"My mom," said Eric, tearing his eyes away from Lacey to check her line. "It kills my dad that she caught the biggest fish, and he's forever trying to get another one. We bought him one for Christmas, but he said that doesn't count."

Lacey laughed and handed Eric the pole. "We brought a picnic lunch. Are you men hungry?"

"Let's eat on the shore, it'll be warmer," Eric suggested. "The rocks hold warmth."

They tied the boat to a tree on the shore, and the men helped the women off the boat. Finding a spot in the sun, and using rocks for seats, they unpacked the cooler and passed around the food. As they ate, the sun warmed them and dried out their damp clothes. Emily removed her jacket and put it on the ground. Stuart was pleased that she still had the sweatshirt over the rest of her clothes.

Lacey asked about the lake water, remarking how clean it looked.

"It is," replied Stuart. "You can cook with it, though we mainly use it for showers and dish washing on the boats. Of course most people prefer to bathe right in the lake."

"How do they do that?" Emily wondered.

Stuart put his fingers in his hair. "They lather up, and then jump into the lake to rinse."

“What fun!” declared Emily. “But don’t they get bitten by the fish?” Stuart chuckled. “We don’t have any man eating fish in this lake.” Emily sighed in relief.

“The water is very deep, and when the fish see the boats, they go deeper anyway. We’ve never had any problems with swimmers and fish.”

They finished the picnic lunch and put everything back in the cooler.

“Would you like to see the island?” Eric asked. “It’s not huge, but there’s plenty of fossil rock to look at.”

“Oh, yes,” Lacey replied, jumping to her feet. “I love to explore, but the only place I can do it in the city is in a mall. It’s not the same.”

Stuart took Emily’s hand and helped her to her feet. “There’s some climbing involved, but we won’t let you fall.”

“I’m ready for adventure,” Emily said, holding on to Stuart’s hand, feeling more secure to know he had a firm hold on her as she climbed.

They formed a straight line as they made their way up the steep hill to the top of the island. They men went ahead of each of the women, pulling them by the hands, steadying them so they wouldn’t slip. Though it didn’t look far at the bottom, it was a long climb, and by the time they reached the plateau, the women were out of breath, so the men let them sit for a moment.

“When you’re able to stand, you’ll want to see the view,” Eric suggested. “You can see for miles from here.”

Lacey pushed herself to her feet and walked to where Eric stood. “Oh, Em, come see!” All around were hills, islands and clean blue water. A mist rose out of the trees near the top of the rise. Lacey breathed in deeply. “It smells so fresh! I’ve never seen anything so lovely. This must be what Heaven is like.”

Emily joined her sister and agreed. “You men are so...blessed to live on this water. You must thank God every day for allowing you to be here.” She glanced at Stuart in time to see a sad expression pass over his face.

“I used to,” he said heavily. “When Kate was alive. She used to quote Scripture, Psalm 104 about God’s role in creation. She said it proves there is a God.”

Emily quoted part of the Psalm “The Lord rejoices in all he has made. I memorized that years ago in case I ever saw any actual nature, like this. I wanted to use that verse when I praised God for his creation.”

Eric and Stuart passed a look between them, unseen by Lacey and Emily, who were gazing over the lake.

Emily wandered to the edge of the cliff and looked down to the rocks below. “This is beautiful. And scary,” she said as she peered over the edge.

“Dangerous too,” warned Stuart. “Don’t get too close to the edge, the rocks might give way.”

Emily took a step backward, but tripped over a branch and lost her footing. Rocks under her feet loosened and the ground crumbled beneath her. She cried out as she fell, but Stuart caught her and pulled her away from the cliff. Emily clung to him, shaking as she gathered her wits.

“These cliffs are unstable. That happens a lot,” Stuart explained. “Are you okay?”

“I think I just experienced my first adventure,” she said with a nervous laugh. “That counts, right?”

He nodded but didn’t release her. “The main ingredient in an adventure is risking your life. This counts.”

Emily smiled at him and called to her sister, “Did you hear that Lacey? I had a real adventure!”

“Hooray for you, danger girl. Now stay away from the cliff.”

Emily liked the feel of Stuart’s arms around her, but she reminded herself he was basically a stranger and she moved a safer distance from him.

Stuart tried not to be disappointed, but he too, liked the feel of her in his arms, and he too, reminded himself she was just an acquaintance. He stood again, wiping the dirt from his clothing, and helping Emily to do the same. The sun dipped behind a cloud and a chilling wind caught them by surprise, reminding them it was winter.

“Whew,” said Eric. “That feels like January.” The sky darkened in the next hour, a warning of weather to follow. Eric led the group to a side of the island that was easiest to descend, and helped Lacey stay upright as she slid in her shoes.

“I should have worn climbing boots,” Lacey remarked as she lost her footing again, sliding to a sitting position. “I didn’t know I would be off the water.”

“Sorry,” Eric replied. “I thought you would like to see the lake from the island.”

"I did, it was wonderful," Lacey assured him. "You're as good a tour guide as you are a teacher. It's a shame you don't have a better pupil."

"What do you mean?" He stopped and waited for her. "You're a quick learner, and you listen carefully to directions. I'll bet you don't hit any signs on the way home today."

Lacey laughed and allowed him to pull her to her feet. "You're very patient, and kind to give up a whole day to teach a helpless female to use her boat."

"I have a feeling you're not helpless at all, Lacey." He kept hold of her hand as they descended. "Just like my mother. She looks all frilly and fragile, but underneath...she's tough as steel. As kids, we feared her more than we did our dad."

"Your father told me how they met."

Eric stopped because they were sliding again. He braced his foot on a tree to anchor his body, and she slid into him.

"You okay?" He stepped onto the trail again. "True story, a legend in my family. Except that dad wasn't a burglar, like he lets people believe. He was the new youth pastor, and he lost his keys."

Lacey grabbed a tree branch. "She shot the new youth pastor?"

"In the seat. He taught standing up for weeks." Eric caught her as the tree branch broke. "Whoa, here, hang on to me."

Lacey caught both him and her breath. She could see the boat some yards below them. "Almost there. What a workout!"

"This is just a small island. Some of them take hours to climb." He held her more tightly than necessary, but she didn't protest.

"You'll show me more?" Lacey asked, exhilarated from the climb.

"Anytime," Eric said with feeling, gazing into her eyes with a warm smile. Lacey sighed and hoped he couldn't feel the wild beating of her heart. She and Eric stood staring at each other. Until Emily crashed into them both.

"Oops, sorry guys, I missed that last drop." Emily stood up and wiped sand from her clothes. Stuart jumped from the ledge carrying the rope from the boat.

"We'd better head home before it starts to rain or snow," he said, looping the rope.

Eric put the cooler on the boat and helped the women to board. Stuart gave the boat a push, and jumped onto the front as it moved away.

It dipped from his weight, causing him to stumble, but this time, Emily caught him.

"I saw it do that when we first left the dock," she explained.

"Thanks," he said, and sat next to her, then rose again to get the blanket for her. He wrapped it around her legs. "It's going to be an even colder ride back."

"I don't mind," she murmured, but ten minutes later she was shivering fiercely. Stuart slid close to her and wrapped the blanket around both her and him to give her more warmth. He rubbed her hands with his, and told her to stick them under her legs. She nodded gratefully and sat on her fingers.

Eric allowed Lacey to steer the boat and told her to head straight for the marina, explaining as they went what the buoys in the water meant, and what a no wake zone was. He told her to bring it to the dock, and helped to stop the boat so it didn't get damaged when they hit the wood. They let Stuart and Emily out, then drove to the ramp, where Eric backed the trailer into the water again, then showed Lacey how to secure the boat. After they pulled the boat and trailer out of the water, Eric allowed Lacey to finish hooking the boat, watching as she correctly remembered the steps.

"I am very impressed, Lacey," Eric said, shaking his head. "I only had to show you once."

"Don't let the blonde hair fool you," she quipped.

Eric thought her hair was more red than blonde but he knew better than to argue. He drove her and the boat up to the marina office and before they went inside, he reviewed all she had learned. It wasn't necessary; she knew it all anyway, but it gave him more time with her, and that was his real goal.

Stuart invited Emily into his living quarters at the rear of the store, and allowed her to warm her hands from the heat of his oven.

"It certainly got cold fast," she commented, rubbing her fingers.

"I think we're finally getting winter weather." Stuart filled a coffee maker with water. "I'll have some hot coffee for you in a minute."

She smiled. "Thank you. I had a great time on the lake, but I sure paid for it in cold! I think I'll wait until summer to do that again."

"It's much better when it's warm," agreed Stuart. He touched her hands to see if she was warming. "You need to get out of that wet jacket and shoes. I can loan you a pair of socks while yours dry out."

"If it's not a bother," Emily replied, still amazed at this man's kindness to such an undeserving person. He acted like she had nothing wrong with her at all, like he enjoyed being around her. Even though she had ruined his ratty sweater, and almost fell from a cliff. Now he was making coffee and lending her his socks. Emily didn't know how to react.

She was so frightened when she hooked him with the lure; it made Stuart wonder who had terrified her so. He wanted to show her kindness, and it was perfect that her birthday was just weeks ago, a great excuse to give her the sweatshirt. Stuart was more moved by her gratitude that anything else, except when she had touched his arm in sympathy concerning his sister. Her eyes were trusting, but curious, as if she couldn't figure why he paid any heed to her, and it made Stuart all the more anxious to please her. When she slipped on the rocks at the edge of the cliff, Stuart would have sacrificed his own life to save her. Holding onto her after was a brief reward. In the hours since he had met this woman, she had turned his lonely, silent world upside down. Now he wanted desperately to comfort her, keep her dry and warm and have her stay as long as he possibly could. When the coffee finished brewing, he brought her a mug to where she sat, curled up on the couch in his socks. She looked beautiful, her hair still wild from the wind, her cheeks rosy from the cold. When she reached for the mug their hands touched, and he felt an electrical current pass through him.

"Don't you hate static shocks?" she laughed, pulling back and spilling coffee on her shirt. "Oh, rats, I'm such a klutz."

"It's my fault," Stuart said, handing her a towel. "I forget that my carpets give off electricity."

The bell to the front door rang as Eric and Lacey entered.

"Remind me to give you the boat cover when we get back to Hook's," he said. "Where are you going to park the boat?"

"I talked to my apartment manager, and he said as long as it's not blocking any drives I can park it there. Oh, and I have to let him borrow it for the privilege."

Eric grinned. "You'll get that a lot. So be sure to get insurance on the boat in case someone sinks it."

She laughed. "Nobody better mess with my baby! I didn't buy it to use, but now I can't wait to go again!"

Eric looked at her in confusion. "You didn't buy the boat to use?"

Lacey kicked herself for letting that slip. Now that she had met Eric, and he was so very...interesting... the reason for having the boat seemed silly.

"Umm, it's not important. But I wish I had done this years ago! You're probably used to being out on the water, but to me, it was about the most exciting day I've ever had."

He agreed, but how could he tell her he felt the same also? Being with her brought a thrill he hadn't felt since Kate was alive.

"You are welcome to launch the boat from here anytime," said Stuart as they entered the living quarters. He produced a mug of coffee for each. "Or you can dock the boat here and go out on the lake whenever you feel like it."

"Al just might owe me a free year of boat docking," Lacey said to Stuart. "He bet me I'd have at least five date offers from men by Valentine's Day or he'd pay the marina fee."

"My dad said that?" Eric was amazed. "He's so tight he squeaks! I've never seen him go so far for a customer."

Stuart cleared his throat. "Eric, your dad already paid her dock space for a year."

"What?" Eric shook his head in wonder. "He had to have known he'd lose the bet when he made it. A beautiful woman with a bass boat...what man could resist?"

Lacey blushed. "One out of two isn't bad."

"He also said to give you this." Stuart handed her an envelope.

It was a gift certificate for the restaurant at Hooks, dinner for two. The note enclosed said, "Bring the winner in for Valentine's Day." She didn't read the next sentence aloud, but giggled at what was written. It said, "And tell Eric his dad said he could have the day off to join you."

"Your dad is remarkable," Lacey said to Eric.

"He certainly amazes me," Eric agreed.

Stuart noticed a large container on the table. He opened it to find a devil's food cake with thick brown frosting.

"Thelma was here," he observed.

Emily was at the table in a millisecond, sniffing. "Ahh, chocolate. Hold me back."

Stuart laughed as he found plates and silverware. None of it matched. Eric brought his and Lacey's coffee mugs to the table and held out a chair for her. The chairs were all a different style also. Stuart held out a chair for Emily, and then handed her the serving knife, probably one of Thelma's. He certainly had nothing that fancy.

Emily cut the cake and handed a piece to each of them, then claimed the remainder was her piece. The coffee warmed them, the cake filled them, and the sky outside lightened.

"No storm today," said Stuart, realizing he left his tools outside on the deck of the houseboat he was working on.

"We should be leaving; we've taken enough of your time," Lacey commented, aware that it was late afternoon. But none of them wanted the day to end.

"What I'd like to do sometime is take the houseboat out on the lake, cook you men dinner, then fish. That way we would be warm and still be out on the water," Emily said as she carried the dirty dishes to the sink.

"I've got plans to rent the houseboats out for Valentine's Day," said Stuart. "Of course, I could keep one..."

Emily's heart began to beat. Was he suggesting...she was afraid to think. He probably meant for all of them to go together. "Are we done with the coffee mugs? I need to wash these. This isn't lake water, is it?"

"No, it's well water," said Stuart. Was she changing the subject to avoid his invitation? "I can do the dishes later."

"Oh, no, I want to," Emily claimed. "It's not every day I hook a man, then get to wash his fine china."

"It's not everyday I get to fish with such an expert," Stuart teased. "Have you ever thought about hunting?"

"You trust me with a gun?" Emily laughed and snapped the dishtowel at him. "I'm really sorry about your sweater, Stuart. I hope it's not ruined."

"How would I tell?" He shrugged. "Thelma's been threatening to burn it for years. I'll go to the city and buy a new one next week."

"You may be an expert on the lake and the great outdoors, but the mall is my turf," Emily warned. "You'll need me to take you through the urban jungle of the mall, and navigate the stores with you."

"Now I'm scared," teased Stuart, but he was immensely pleased that he might see this woman again. Kate would approve, he was sure.

"Come on, sis, we've wasted enough of these men's time," Lacey claimed. "Thank you Stuart for your hospitality and for saving my sister's life. I don't know which I appreciate more."

He grinned. "You're welcome. Check in with me whenever you're here to take the boat out, and I'll help you get it in the water."

Lacey nodded. "I can't wait to try again, but I think I'll wait for warmer weather. How's March on the lake?"

"Sometimes rough. Call me first before you come out."

She said she would, then looked to Eric. He held her coat for her as she put it on, and walked with her to the car.

Emily's socks were not dry yet, so Stuart told her to keep his until he came to look for a sweater. She carried her shoes while he held her jacket, and they went out through the store.

"I didn't get my picture on the wall of fish," she said with disappointment as they walked through the room. "Maybe next time."

"Spring is a much better time to fish," Stuart informed her. "We can try again in April, and I'm sure you'll get something then."

"I would like that, very much," she said shyly. "Thanks for the shirt."

"It looks great on you," Stuart observed. "If you had fallen off that cliff, I would have had to clean it before I let them bury you in it."

She chuckled. "Don't forget to look me up when you shop."

He smiled. "I will. Next week sometime?"

"Yes." She shook his hand. He wanted to kiss her, but instead opened the car door for her. She gave him one last look before sliding onto the seat, and a moment later the car pulled away.

For the first time in a year, Stuart was glad he was alive. He whistled as he went to finish the work on the houseboat.



Chapter 4

Eric went inside the store to get the boat cover while the women waited outside in the parking lot. Lacey watched him go and clutched her sister by the arms and squealed.

“So! What did you think?” Lacey exclaimed.

“I think he likes you, Lacey. A lot. His face must hurt from smiling so much.”

“Me too! His father seems to think we’re a good match. Look at this note.”

Emily laughed as she read. “He sure does. How are you going to arrange to see him again?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I can come here too often; it will look like I’m chasing him...I’ll pray about it. God will show me.”

“I hope in a less expensive way,” Emily said, running her hand over the boat hull.

A man pulled up in a pickup truck that was more bondo than steel. Next to him on the passenger side was a hound dog that howled as the truck stopped.

“Shut up, dawg,” the man drawled and leaned out the window. “That’s some boat, Ma’am!”

“Thanks, I just bought it,” Lacey replied. “I took it out on the lake for the first time today.”

The man stared at her, then the boat, and finally back to her, his eyes wide. “A gift for your husband?”

“No, I’m single,” Lacey said, nudging her sister.

The man jumped out of his truck. “I’m Darryl, and this is my dog, Dawg.”

“Hi Dawg.” Lacey let the hound lick her hand. Darryl took off his cap and combed his hair with his fingers, then straightened his shirt. Holding his hat in his hand, he said in his most formal voice, “Would you do me the honor of having dinner with me tonight? I clean up real well, and I’ll take you to the nicest steakhouse in Baymont.”

Lacey was skeptical. “Did Al put you up to this?”

Darryl looked confused. “Who’s Al?”

“Never mind,” Lacey smiled. “Thanks for the offer, but I’ve had a long day already.”

“Tomorrow? Monday? I’m free all week,” the man volunteered.

“That’s because you’re unemployed, Darryl,” Eric said as he approached the women. “You can barely afford to feed your dog. Or your wife and kids.”

“Wife and kids!” gasped Lacey.

“I ain’t really married, you know that,” Darryl said to Eric.

“That’s not how Janie sees things.” Eric indicated that he should move on. Darryl grumbled but got into the truck and left.

“One,” laughed Emily. “Four more to go.”

Eric scowled, and put the tarp in Lacey’s back seat. “Make them give you a financial statement before you say yes. There’s plenty of Darryls living along the lake.”

Lacey smiled demurely. “I will. Tell your dad he was right.”

Eric didn’t like to admit it, but it was true; the next guy could be real competition. He opened Lacey’s car door for her.

“Thanks, Eric for your patient instruction. You were the best teacher I could have hoped for. Sorry about your sign.”

He shrugged. "Dad didn't even notice." He let her sit, then closed the door, and leaned in the open window. "Remember, wide turns, and to back up the trailer slowly. Call me if you need help."

"I had a great time, Eric. I'd love to do it again."

He grinned. "Me too. Whenever you're free."

She wanted to tell him every day after five and all day weekends, but she merely smiled instead. "Call me and we'll see what we can work out."

He said he would, and stepped back. Another pick-up truck circled the boat, the men staring at Lacey. She rolled her eyes and laughed, then waved as she pulled away. Eric watched her until he couldn't see her anymore, and went inside to finish his shift.

Lacey pulled into the parking lot of her apartment complex and maneuvered the boat into a parking space. She disconnected the trailer, then she and Emily covered the boat with the tarp, pulling it tight. Satisfied the boat was secured, they went inside to warm themselves.

An hour later, the apartment manager sent roses and an invitation for dinner to Lacey.



Raymond arrived at seven to see the boat. "Is that it, out in the parking lot?" He asked before even greeting Emily.

"That's the boat," she replied, allowing him inside.

"When you gonna let me take it out for a spin?" Raymond called to Lacey.

She was doing her nails. "How about a cold day you know where?"

"Aw, come on Lacey." He sat next to her on the couch. "We're friends, almost in-laws."

"Since when?"

He laughed pleasantly. "You know I love your sister. I just like to keep her guessing." He winked at Lacey.

Lacey winked back. "Yeah, it's so funny when you make her wonder what she does to make you treat her like garbage."

Emily gave her sister a dirty look. "Maybe another time, Ray. We were just learning how to use it today anyway."

He shot her a look. "You went out on the boat? After I told you not to?"

"I...well sure, I couldn't let Lacey go alone." She stepped back timidly as his eyes narrowed and he rose from the sofa. He stopped when he noticed the glare on Lacey's face. His face changed to a mask of concern.

"It's just, I worry about you, Em. You're not used to doing men's things...If I lost you..."

"You would have to do your own laundry," Lacey quipped.

"Lacey!" Emily moved to Ray and put her arms around his waist. "Thank you for your concern. We'll go some other time."

Lacey snorted in disgust and stomped out of the room.

"What's eating her?" Raymond sneered and gave Emily the same face. "And why didn't you call? I've been paging you all day."

Emily frowned. "My pager didn't beep once. I wonder if it's broken." She dialed her pager number and a beep sounded from under the couch.

"Oh, no wonder," she said, retrieving the pager. "It must have fallen out of my purse."

"How many times do I have to tell you to clip it to your clothes?" Raymond snatched it out of her hand and clipped it to her shirt. "I want to see this on you at all times, Emily."

"I can't, at work," she reminded him.

He picked up his coat and pulled her by the arm. "Get your coat on. We're going to get you a cell phone."

"Now?" Emily asked. "It's after seven."

Pushing her toward the door, he glowered, "Mall's open till nine-thirty. I'm not going through another day like this."

Emily hurriedly donned her coat and shoes as she rushed out the door with him. She returned home an hour later with a flip phone, a new number, and a screaming headache. He had badgered her the whole time, choosing the phone, the service contract, and options, saying she wasn't smart enough to decide these things for herself.

"Hide your pager under your clothes, and turn it to vibrate," instructed Raymond. "That way you can have it on you at work. And when I page you, I expect to be called, got that?"

"Yes, Raymond," she answered quietly, wishing she could lay her head somewhere.

"And I'll be checking your bill. You don't use this for anyone but me, understand?"

"Who would I call beside you and Lacey?" Emily wondered.

He laughed a short, mean spirited snort. "That's right, you don't have any friends. No one thinks you're worth the trouble. If it wasn't for me you'd be totally alone."

Emily thought about Stuart and his kindness to her when she hooked his sweater. Raymond would have punished her for weeks, but Stuart laughed it off, and spent the rest of the day doing nice things for her. She didn't feel stupid and ugly around him, and he almost made her believe she wasn't as bad as Raymond told her she was.

"Hey, Birdbrain! Back to earth," said Raymond. "Let's go to my place. I'm starving."

Emily only wanted to go home and sleep. "I'm tired, Ray, and I have church in the morning."

"So you can spend all day on a boat with your sister but you can't spend a few hours with me." He sniffed. "I see how you are."

"No, honest, Ray. I'll cook for you tomorrow. Really."

"It's okay. I know who's more important."

Emily sighed. "Okay, Ray. Let's make dinner, and then you can drive me home."

He turned the car on again. "Good. I've got pasta. But don't put so much garlic in it this time."

She cooked him the pasta, and he told her it was good, except not enough garlic and the noodles were overcooked.

"Sorry," she said, rinsing out the pans and finishing the dishes. It was late and she was so very tired. "Can you take me home now?"

"I just finished eating, for crying out loud," Raymond whined. "Why don't you just stay the night?"

"You know I would never do that," Emily replied. "We've discussed this before."

He slipped up behind her and kissed her on the neck. "You could change your mind."

"Raymond!" Emily shook him off.

He laughed. "Prude. You won't hold out forever."

"I'll hold out until I'm married. No sooner." Her faith demanded it, and she would not compromise for him or anyone. She was much more worried about displeasing God than Raymond, at least in this area.

"Fine, then you better get used to long nights alone. You ain't marriage material, Emily."

"What about us, Ray?"

He shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. I don't like to buy a car unless I test drive it first, if you get my drift."

She bit her lip. There would be no compromise in this area, no matter the cost. But if he didn't want her, who else would? Suddenly sad, she gathered her purse and coat.

"I need to go home."

"I said I'd take you in a while."

She sighed and sat on the arm of the chair. Once he started watching television, he might forget all about her, he often did. It was freezing outside, and a cold rain fell. Raymond turned the volume on the television set louder. Emily put on her coat and slipped out of the apartment. Cold rain would be more preferable than spending hours waiting for him to take her home.

Emily was drenched and shivering uncontrollably by the time she entered her apartment. Lacey was long asleep, so she quietly removed her wet clothing and started a hot shower. It helped, but by morning she was nursing a cold. By afternoon, she was bedridden.

"I thought you were fine when we came home from the lake," Lacey said, feeding her sister chicken soup.

"I was," Emily replied. "But I...got caught in the rain last night."

Lacey slammed the spoon down in the bowl, splattering broth on the comforter. "You walked home again! Why didn't you call me?"

"I knew you would be asleep." Emily wiped at the spill with a napkin.

Lacey knew it was futile to argue with her sister about Raymond, but she couldn't let him do these things to her! Why couldn't Emily see him for what he was, a con artist who used her for his own convenience? Please, God, Lacey pleaded silently, help her to break free of this man. Whatever it takes, Lord, please. Before something bad happens to her, or before he does something to hurt her. Help, Lord.

"You're not going anywhere today or tomorrow," Lacey decided. "I'll call your boss in the morning."

Emily was too ill to argue. She laid her head on the pillow and pulled the covers around her. Lacey put the chicken soup aside, and

wiped her sister's fevered brow with a cool cloth. When she was satisfied that Emily was comfortable, Lacey turned out the light and went into the living room, closing the door behind her.

The phone rang as Lacey was cleaning Emily's dishes. She wiped her hands dry and sat on the sofa as she answered.

"Let me talk to Emily," the voice on the other end of the line demanded.

"I don't think so, Raymond," Lacey said angrily. "She's in bed deathly ill from walking home in the rain last night."

"Yeah, right. Let me talk to her."

"You were too much of a jerk to drive her home."

"She left on her own. Are you going to give the phone to her?"

"No, I told you, she's sleeping!"

He sounded angry now. "I'm coming over and she better be there."

Lacey grasped the phone cord. "You do, and I'll call the police."

"For what?"

"I'll think of something."

He scoffed. "Aren't you supposed to be a Christian?"

"Aren't you supposed to be a gentleman?"

"At least I don't pretend to be something I'm not, princess."

"You don't fool anyone either," Lacey returned. "Leave her alone, she's sick." Lacey slammed the phone down, then remembering it was cordless, picked it up and turned it off. It's not the same when you can't hang up on anyone, she thought angrily.

The phone rang again.

"I mean it!" She shouted into the receiver.

"Mean what?" Asked Eric.

Lacey gasped. "Uh, how much I love that boat," she recovered. "I can't help but shout."

Eric laughed but sounded unconvinced. "I guess that answers my question. I called to see if you were satisfied with your purchase."

"Oh, yes, very much," Lacey assured him.

"Any more offers? Dad wants to know."

She laughed. "Tell him we're up to two now. My manager sent flowers and an invitation to dinner."

"Smooth," Eric said.

"A reduction on my rent would have made a better impression."

He agreed. "So, was your sister disappointed that she didn't catch any fish?"

Lacey shook her head, though he couldn't see her. "I don't think so; I'll have to ask her. She did say she had a great time. But she seems to have caught a cold and she's sick in bed right now. I'm a little worried."

"She was so cold out there. Stuart said he tried to warm her as best he could, but I guess she got sick anyway."

"No, she was fine when we returned from the lake. She went out later in the evening, and walked home in the rain."

Eric sounded surprised. "At night?"

"I told her she should have called me but she said I was asleep and she didn't want to wake me."

"I hope she feels better."

Lacey was touched by his concern. "I'll take her to the doctor if she gets worse. Right now she's sleeping comfortably."

She and Eric talked a while longer, about his family, his three sisters and one brother, about Lacey's parents, who were traveling the states in a motor home, and about his and her jobs. When Emily stirred, calling to her sister, Lacey said she needed to go.

"Thanks for calling, Eric."

"Uh, wait—," Eric said quickly. "How about dinner Friday night? And not at the restaurant?"

"I would love that," said Lacey with feeling. "Call me again this week?"

"Sure," he replied. "Tomorrow okay?"

She told him it was, and hung up the phone, then rushed to her sister's side.

Emily struggled to sit up in bed. "My pager's beeping. I need the phone..."

"Oh, no you don't," said Lacey, forcing her sister back on the pillow. She took the pager and turned it off, then made Emily comfortable.

"Sleep, Em. You need that more than anything right now. I'll take care of everything else."

Emily nodded and drifted back into sleep. Lacey carried the pager out of the room with her, and instead of placing it in Emily's purse, opened the living room window and threw it as far as she could.

Stuart decided to accept the Hook family's offer Sunday, and accompanied them to church, followed by dinner at the household. It was a standing offer, the same every Sunday, but today was the first time since Kate's death he felt like attending church. He couldn't bring himself to sing the Lord's praises with the anger he felt at God for taking her. Now, with his heart feeling the first balm of healing in the form of Emily's touch, a fissure was opened in his soul, and he was aware again of his need for God, and the relationship they once enjoyed. He missed God, His strength and comfort, and the companionship of the Father, whom Stuart had pushed away in his grief. How much better I would have felt if I ran to Him instead of from Him, he wondered. The load of grief was overwhelming, but God's word says to cast my cares on Him. When I cast my fishing line, I throw it as far as I can. What if I did that with my troubles?

When the invitation came at the end of service, Stuart, who was loath to bring any attention to his self, went forward and knelt. This is for you, Lord, he prayed silently, to show you I am sincere, and to ask you for two things; forgiveness for blaming you, and to strengthen me so I can trust you again.

The Hook family waited for Stuart, before heading to the massive house where a hearty dinner waited, as was their custom every Sunday. All of the Hook children and grandchildren gathered to eat, talk, play, and find companionship in each other. Often they teased Eric, asking the baby of the family when he was going to settle down and give his mother more grandchildren. Stuart laughed as Eric endured his weekly inquisition and ducked questions when he was asked the same.

"We think there is finally some hope, with this little lady who bought the bass boat," Al said to Stuart.

"He seems awfully fond of her," Stuart agreed. "I wasn't sure if it was the boat or her, but if he marries her he'll get both, so I guess it will work out either way."

"What about you, Stuart?" Asked Susan Hook. "My husband tells me there was a lovely young lady who accompanied her sister when she bought the boat."

"There was."

"And..." Mrs. Hook looked at him expectantly.

"She didn't have a boat of her own so I turned her down."

Eric laughed heartily. “She hooked him, literally. With a lure and those blue eyes. I haven’t seen Stuart smile like that since...Kate’s passing.”

Stuart grinned good-naturedly. “True. Her name is Emily.”

“Do you hear that, dear?” Susan said to Al. “Two girls in one day! We might have both of these men off our hands this year.”

“A little premature, mom.”

“Not in this family,” she reminded him. “There are no long engagements and we only give our hearts once. You are a Hook, dear; it’s in your blood. And you, Stuart are an honorary Hook. I expect no less from you.”

“Yes, your highness,” Eric teased. His mother was right about the family history of short engagements; his own parents set a record. But she was wrong about giving his heart only once—he had loved Kate, though no one ever knew it. And though he thought he would never love again, he learned this weekend he had the capacity. Whether anything happened with Lacey or not, he at least knew he was ready.

Stuart said no more about Emily; it was too early to make assumptions and he barely knew her anyway. But what he did know of her, he liked immensely. And he desperately wanted to find out all he could about this woman who captivated him so, who started the healing his heart needed so badly.

Later in the afternoon, Stuart returned home to his silent house, and prepared to once again work on the boats, but the phone rang before he made it to the door. It was Eric, telling him that Emily was sick. At first, Stuart was guilt stricken that he hadn’t done enough to keep her warm, but Eric explained that she was fine when she came home, but had been caught out in the rain later. Stuart wondered if her car had broken down and she had to walk, but Eric said he didn’t know.

“Is she laid up?” Stuart asked. “Real sick?”

“All I know is that she’s sick in bed and Lacey’s taking care of her,” Eric said.

“I’ve got to do something,” Stuart declared. “I’ll call Thelma, she’ll know what to do.”

“I’m sure it’s just a cold, Stuart. She’ll be fine.”

He wasn’t convinced. He had too many losses in his life; he couldn’t risk another one. As soon as he could, he went to Thelma’s and explained his predicament.

“I’m worried, Thelma. But I can’t just go over there.”

“You can’t. I can.” She bustled around the kitchen gathering medicine and comfort food. “Call Eric and tell him I need a ride. And go get some flowers for Emily while I’m waiting for him.”

Stuart ran out the door to his truck and returned in fifteen minutes with red roses and more chocolate than he had ever eaten in his life. Eric had just arrived and was helping Thelma carry things out to his Dodge Dakota, his amusement at Stuart’s concern showing on his face.

“This is just a cold, Stu. What would you do if it was pneumonia?”

“I’m going along,” he said to Thelma.

“You’ll do no such thing,” Thelma stated. “She won’t want to be seen at her worst. That’ll bother her more than being sick. We’ll call you later. Go home and wait.”

Stuart didn’t like her orders, but he knew better than to disobey. “I’ll be waiting for your call,” he said as she climbed into Eric’s truck. She waved to him and left Stuart standing in her driveway, but when he got into his truck, there were cookies on his seat.

Emily slept for hours, and Lacey used the time to read her boat manual, learning all about the company that manufactured it, and where the fuses were. If she weren’t so worried about her sister she would have fallen asleep reading. At seven, the doorbell rang, and she leaped to answer it, ready to do battle with Raymond. To her surprise, it was Thelma and Eric, carrying goodies.

“Thelma! How did you find me?” Lacey gasped as she opened the door.

Thelma pointed behind her. “Eric had your address, and we saw the boat in front of your building. Stuart sent me to take care of Emily. He’s just sick about her being, well...sick.”

Lacey stepped aside to allow Eric and Thelma inside. “Stuart’s not here?”

Eric handed Lacey a package. “Thelma wouldn’t let him. She said women don’t like to be seen at their worst.”

“I know this is true,” Lacey laughed. “Come on, Thelma, I’ll take you to Emily.”

They left Eric in the living room while they tended to Lacey’s sister. Eric popped a few cookies in his mouth and searched for milk to drink, taking his treats into the next room and turning on the television.

The doorbell rang again, but Lacey didn't come out of the room so Eric went to the door for her.

"Can I help you?" He said to the small, angry man at the door.

"Who are you?" The man demanded.

"Who are you?" Eric answered, giving him a dirty look.

"None of your business, unless you're trying to steal my Emily."

The man attempted to enter, but Eric blocked him.

"You're Emily's boyfriend?" Eric asked in disbelief.

"What's it to ya?"

"She never said..." Eric began, and stopped. Why didn't Emily say anything about him? He looked at the man...shorter than Eric by far with a chip on his shoulder a mile wide. Eric knew his type well; he saw all sorts of men at his store. This man obviously bullied Emily, which would explain her timid nature. But if Eric guessed right, he would not be able to do the same to someone bigger than him. Eric decided to call his bluff.

"She doesn't want to see you. There's a new guy in town, and he's not afraid of a scrappy little thing like you. You've been replaced, pal."

"WHAT?" The man sneered, his eyes narrowing. "She ain't got anybody, I'm the only one who puts up with her."

"Want to make something of it?" Eric challenged, rolling up his sleeves.

The man thought about it, then backed away saying angrily, "We'll see about who gets Emily. She ain't gonna take care of you either, she's a prude! You'll find out for yourself. But you ain't rid of me. Watch your back, creep!"

"I'll watch yours instead," laughed Eric as he closed the door.

Lacey walked into the living room. "Who was that?"

"Door to door salesman," Eric said. "Not a very nice one, either."

"On a Sunday?" Lacey shook her head. "They have no respect for the Lord's day."

Eric mumbled his agreement.

"Emily's worse. I don't know what to do."

"Thelma will. She can do anything." Eric put his arms around Lacey. "She'll be fine."

But Thelma came out of the bedroom and said Emily needed a doctor's care. "I can only do so much. She needs to get some antibiotics in her before she gets any worse. I think we should take her to an emergency room."

"I'll drive," said Eric. "You get her ready."

She was too weak to walk, so Eric carried her to his truck, putting her in the back seat with her sister. Emily lay her head on her sister's lap and breathed laboriously.

"It's his fault, the jerk," Lacey said tearfully, and Thelma knew she wasn't talking about Stuart. "Why can't she break away from him?"

"She has to find for herself what he is," Thelma said. "He's got her believing that she's undeserving and stupid. Until she gets away from him she won't realize it."

"But he controls her, Thelma. I can't get her away from him long enough to give her a chance to see. She thinks she can't get anyone else, that she deserves the way he treats her."

"No one does," Eric said. "If she can't see it, then it's up to you to show her."

"I try, Eric. I tell her all the time, but he plays with her mind. Last night he made her walk home in the rain! He orders her around, and he tells her all the time how worthless she is. And she believes him! That's what bothers me the most. I can't stop it!" She cried into a tissue.

"We have to pray that God opens her eyes," Thelma says. "And that she sees she is worth loving."

"Yesterday, she was so taken with Stuart, I could tell. I hoped she would see that not all men are like Raymond. But when we came home, he was here waiting, and she was under his control again."

Thelma knew exactly what Lacey meant. "It's abuse, plain and simple. He's beaten her down until she believes his lies. But she can't see that, and she won't until she finds a better way to live."

"She's a Christian, Thelma," Lacey said and blew her nose. "And yet she still lets him hurt her."

"She needs to learn the difference between meek and weak," Eric commented. He took Emily to the emergency entrance at Mercy Hospital, and helped her into a wheelchair. While the women took her inside, he parked the truck and called Stuart, explaining what was happening and where they were. He also told him about Emily's boyfriend.

"I met him, and was not impressed," Eric said in an understatement. "If you really like her, Stuart, you're going to have to convince her she is deserving of love."

"How do I do that?" Stuart wondered.

“Just be there for her,” Eric suggested. “She’ll figure it out for herself. And keep her away from that creep.”

“I intend to do just that,” replied Stuart. “I want her all for myself.”

Eric said he would call if there was any news, and went to be with Lacey. They waited a long time while Emily was treated, then the doctor came out to the waiting room and informed Lacey that they would keep her sister for a day or two, depending on how well the antibiotic worked.

“She has fluid in her lungs, which is indicative of pneumonia,” the doctor said. “But we’re treating her and I think she’ll come through fine.”

“So should I stay with her tonight?” Lacey asked.

“If you want, we can let you stay in her room. She might want you there.” He went to give orders to move her to a room. Lacey turned to Eric and Thelma.

“I’m so thankful that you were here with me, but I guess there’s nothing more for you to do.”

“I’ll take you home, Thelma,” Eric said. “Lacey, if you need, I’ll come back and stay with you.”

“Thanks, Eric, I mean it, but I have a long night ahead, and you have to work tomorrow.” She stood and hugged both of them. “I can call to let you know how she is.”

“I’ll come back anyway tomorrow,” he said. “You’ll need a ride home to shower and get your car.”

He was too thoughtful, Lacey sighed. She would really like to keep him around. She walked him and Thelma out to his truck and thanked them again for their help. Eric took her hand and held it tight, then let go and left with Thelma.

I should have kissed her, he thought, but reminded himself this was not the place, or the way he wanted their first kiss to happen. There was always tomorrow.

While Lacey was waiting for Emily to be put in a room, she called her parents. They were somewhere in Arizona at a campground filled with travelers just like them, senior citizens traveling across the United States in motor homes.

“Mom?” Lacey said. “What’s that noise in the background?”

“We’re having a hoe-down,” replied Mrs. Blessing. “Your dad dancing with the women. I stopped to rest.”

“I just called to tell you that Emily is sick, mom. She’s in the hospital with pneumonia.”

“Oh, no! I’ll call your dad and we’ll head home right away.”

“I don’t think that will be necessary. She’s responding to the antibiotic, and they think she’ll only be in a few days.”

“How did this happen?” Sheila asked.

“Raymond made her walk home in the rain.”

Lacey could feel her mother’s outrage through the phone. “If your dad and I ever meet this...horrible man, we’ll knock him into next week!”

“If I don’t first,” Lacey said. “He’s got this hold on her, but I’m praying she’ll break free of him.”

“Praying is fine, dear but fists speak louder than words. Your dad will not be pleased.”

“We can’t just beat him up, Mom.”

“Oh, no?”

“Anyway, I’ll call you tomorrow and let you know how Em’s doing.”

“You do that, Lacey. Dad and I will be waiting for your call.”

Lacey went to the room that Emily was in. There were two beds, and the nurse said Lacey could occupy one tonight. She was grateful, and wished she had some reading material with her since it looked like Emily was going to sleep for a while. The nurse told her the gift shop was still open and Lacey said she would go there for a magazine, but asked that no visitors be allowed in Emily’s room while she was gone. Raymond probably didn’t know where Emily was, but Lacey didn’t want him around in any case.

He didn’t bother them, and Lacey fell into a troubled sleep, waking every time a nurse came in to check Emily’s vitals. Finally, morning came and her sister stirred.

“Emily,” Lacey whispered. “Do you know where you are?”

Her sister moaned but did not answer. The nurse entered and checked on Emily.

“Is she not fully conscious?” asked Lacey.

“She’s sedated,” the nurse replied. “It would help if you talked to her.”

“Em, you’re in the hospital,” Lacey said. “You have pneumonia; you caught it when Raymond made you walk home in the rain. He made you get sick.”

Emily made a sound.

"Stuart sent you roses, Emily. He's worried about you. I think he likes you. He's a kindhearted man, Em. He also sent chocolate, but you can't have any until you are awake. Do you hear me? When you wake up and start to improve you can have chocolate, but not till then."

Emily began to toss her head and thrash on the bed. Lacey looked at the nurse in alarm, but the woman only laughed and congratulated Lacey. You've found the motivation for Emily to wake up and fight this thing. Is it Stuart or chocolate?"

"Definitely chocolate," laughed Lacey. "Nothing else motivates her like that."

"Keep telling her then," said the nurse. "We'll have her out of here in no time if she takes charge of her illness."

Around noon, to Lacey's surprise, Stuart and Eric stood outside the door of Emily's room. She invited them in, explaining that Emily was still sedated, but they visited with her anyway. Stuart brought her a large teddy bear that he left at the foot of the bed, and told her to wake up so they could go fishing. They all agreed that Emily looked frail, but her color was improving. Eric asked Lacey if she wanted to go home and shower, and Lacey never hesitated, finding her purse and coat.

"I feel like a walking ball of slime," she said. The nurse entered and said they were going to do some lab work on Emily, and would they wait outside?

"Why don't we take you to your apartment to change?" Eric asked. "I guess this would be the perfect time."

Lacey reminded the nurse not to let anyone in the room.

"Do you want me to stay?" Stuart asked.

"No, they won't let you in anyway. And if she wakes up while you're there, she'll start shrieking about her hair not being combed. That could set her back a week or two."

He laughed. "She looked just fine to me."

"Men just don't understand," Lacey sighed.

They went back to the apartment, and Lacey showered while the men waited in the next room. Eric found some cookies and snacked while Stuart looked at the pictures Emily kept: her parents and sister, other family members. He could smell the perfume from her room, it smelled just like Emily. And her apartment was decorated in the typically feminine way, flowers and pictures. Kate never bothered to decorate, or even match cups and plates. She was more interested the marina and her

customers to be bothered with the living quarters. Stuart was embarrassed when Emily mentioned his mismatched dishes. If she and Stuart became close, he would buy matching dinnerware and furniture. Anything she wanted.

The doorbell rang, and Lacey called out for them to answer it. Stuart did, since he was closest. It was Raymond, if the description Eric gave him was correct.

"Oh, you again," grunted Eric as he approached. "I thought I told you to get lost."

Raymond pushed at Stuart, but he wouldn't move. "Where is she?"

Stuart held his ground. "Who is this?"

"That's the guy I told you about," Eric replied. "The little creep."

Stuart took a step forward, pushing Raymond back. "You need to leave before you get carried out."

"Not till I see Emily."

"Ain't gonna happen, pal."

"Emily!" Raymond called.

"Go away!" called Lacey.

"You can't fool me; that's her sister."

Stuart shook his head and grinned. "He's too smart for us, Eric. Guess we'll just have to hurt him."

"Yep," agreed Eric. They both pounced, but Raymond was out the door so fast he was a blur. Stuart followed him outside.

"Don't come back again, if you value your life. We'll be watching for you."

Raymond sneered at him. "I don't have to come back, she'll come running to me. She needs me."

Stuart raised his eyebrows. "For what?" He asked derisively.

"You'll see," Raymond answered, slamming his car door shut. He sped out of the parking lot, and Stuart went back inside.

"What does she see in him?" he asked Eric.

"Go figure," Eric replied. "I'll let Lacey fill you in on what I missed when we talked."



Chapter 6

They returned to the hospital to find Emily sitting up in bed. Though she was happy to see her sister, she about had a coronary when the men walked in behind her. Throwing the sheet over her head, she shrieked, bringing the nurses running.

"Lacey!" Emily thundered, belying her condition. "Get my make-up!"

The men laughed and retreated to the cafeteria while Lacey made her sister presentable.

"What happened to me?" Emily asked Lacey. "I remember you telling me to get some rest, then that's all I remember until just a while ago."

"You were real sick, Em. Raymond made you walk home in the rain, remember?"

Emily nodded. "But it wasn't his fault, really. It was my decision to walk home."

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Lacey glared at her sister. "He knew you would be walking in the cold rain. Em, he let you!"

Emily sighed and wiped her face with a cloth. "So Stuart and Eric are here to visit?"

"Yes, but I won't let him in until you're presentable."

"In a hospital gown? I'll keep covered. How did Stuart know I was here?"

"Eric told him. He's the one who drove you here."

"Stuart?"

"No, Eric. Stuart sent Thelma to our house with flowers, chocolate and medicine."

"Wow." Emily searched for the chocolate. "Where is it?"

"At home."

Emily brushed her hair quickly. "Get me out of here. I've got chocolates at home."

"Ha, Em. Here, hold still. We're almost done." She applied Emily's mascara for her and called Eric's cell phone.

"She's ready, come on up," Lacey said.

"And bring chocolate!" added Emily loudly.

"You are so pushy." Lacey laughed and asked if Eric heard that.

"I'll tell Stuart, he's the one who wants to impress her."

Minutes later, the men returned bearing chocolate. Stuart's heart skipped a beat when Emily gave him a weak smile and took his hand. For a moment he was reminded of when Kate lay dying in the hospital and fought the urge to run. He didn't want to risk losing anyone again. Maybe it was a mistake to feel anything for Emily...what if he had to give her up? But his fears melted away as she held his hand and bid him to sit next to her.

"Thanks, Stuart for the flowers."

"I left them at your apartment. Sorry. I should have brought more."

She smiled shyly. "A woman can never have enough flowers. But what I'm really happy to see is the chocolate."

He held out a candy bar to her. "I didn't know what kind you liked so I bought them all."

She took the candy bar, but did not eat it, yet. "I can't believe you did that for me."

Lacey pushed Eric toward the door. "We have to go, Emily. I just remembered something Eric and I need to do."

"What?" Asked Emily.

"Leave," laughed Eric, as she pushed him through the doorway.

Emily rubbed Stuart's wrist as she spoke to him. "It must be difficult for you to visit hospitals."

"It is; I haven't been in one since Kate's death. But I was worried about you." He found it difficult to talk while she touched him. "I was afraid you had gotten sick from our time on the lake."

"I didn't," she assured him. "You took very good care of me, even with what I did to you."

"You would have had me without the hook," said Stuart. "But it sure was an interesting way to meet."

"We still have to shop for your sweater," Emily reminded him.

"We will, as soon as you're well."

She felt sleepy and he noticed the fatigue in her eyes. "You need to rest. I'll call you tomorrow, if you like."

"Please," said Emily, as sleep overtook her. Stuart watched her for a few minutes, and went into the hall where Eric and Lacey waited.

"She's asleep," he told them.

"I can't thank you both for everything," Lacey said. "We barely know you, but you've treated us like treasured friends."

"Darn parents raised us right," Eric sighed. "Well, our job is done. And I'm AWOL from work."

Lacey walked with them to the elevators, hugged each of them, before returning to her sister's room. Emily slept soundly into the early evening. When she finally woke, she called for her sister. Lacey was at her side instantly.

"Lacey, I dreamed Stuart was here, and he brought me chocolate."

"He was, silly. He sent you flowers too."

Emily looked confused. "Why?"

"Duh, Em."

"Oh yeah." She giggled. "Chocolate and flowers. And that shirt."

"We met some very nice men." Lacey popped a chocolate in her mouth.

"Did Raymond try to get hold of me?" Emily asked.

"You're not serious." Lacey stopped chewing and stared.

"He'll be mad if he can't."

"So?"

Emily looked away. "I don't like it when he's mad at me. It makes me feel bad."

"Emily, listen." Lacey sat next to her sister on the bed. "You are in the hospital because of him. Stuart and Eric, they're nice men. Stuart would never treat you like Raymond. And he thinks you are very special. You like him, don't you?"

"Yes, but Lacey, I hardly know Stuart, and Raymond needs me."

"He needs a good whipping," Lacey corrected. "Em, please. Give Stuart a chance to prove all men are not like Ray."

Emily smiled uncertainly. "I want to. But what's going to happen when he finds out what I'm really like? Will he hate me?"

"Let him worry about that. He already knows that you are compassionate, thoughtful, a wonderful person. That is how he sees you, Emily, though you don't believe it."

Lacey clasped her sister's hand. "And if you give him a chance, you may find out you feel the same about him."

"I already do, Lacey. I think he is the most wonderful man I've ever met. I just can't believe he would want someone like me."

A light knock made both of the women look at the door. A man in a white coat, possibly a doctor looked inquisitively at the girls.

"Excuse me, I heard one of you owns a bass boat," the man said to them.

"Number three," laughed Emily. "Two more to go."

Stuart returned to the hospital the next evening, this time carrying books and stationary.

"So I can write to you while I'm in here?" Emily asked, taking the gifts and kissing him on the cheek.

"I'm kind of running out of ideas," he said sheepishly. "Flowers, chocolates, stuffed animals; that was easy. I don't know what else women like. Maybe perfume?"

"This is perfect," Emily assured him. "I'd rather curl up on the couch on a cold winter's night with a good book than anything else."

"I'm hoping to change all that," Stuart teased. He sat next to her in the chair. "Thelma sends her regards. She says as soon as you're out we're to have dinner at her place."

"Hmm. That's nice of her...but..."

Stuart felt a pang. Was she changing her mind about him?

Emily looked at him bashfully. "What I'd really like is to cook you dinner on the houseboat and go fishing like we discussed."

He grinned. "Me too. You don't have to cook. I can have Thelma..."

Emily put her hand to Stuart's mouth. "Let me cook; it's one of the great pleasures in my life. If you are well fed and happy, it will mean more to me than a night out on the town."

He kissed her hand lightly and held it. "How would you like to..."

The door was thrown open and a gray haired man flew into the room.

"Touch her and die!" He threw Emily's stuffed animal on the floor and pounced on Stuart, flailing at him with his arms.

"Daddy, I'd like you to meet my friend Stuart."

The man stopped. "Stuart?"

"Stu—art," Emily repeated.

He shook Stuart's hand. "Hello, son. Nice to meet you."

"Stuart, this is my father, Neil Blessing."

Stuart brushed his hair back from his eyes and straightened his clothes. "Mr. Blessing. You have a lovely daughter."

"Yes, thank you. We think so too." He kissed his daughter on the cheek. "Your mother and I were so worried!"

"I'm fine now, Daddy. They said I can go home tomorrow."

"Good." The door opened again, and Mrs. Blessing entered, her worried eyes directed at Stuart.

"Stuart," he said quickly.

She looked relieved. "I'm Sheila Blessing. How are you feeling, baby?" She rushed to her daughter's side.

"Better Mom. I can't believe you and Daddy are here. How did you know?"

Sheila felt her daughter's forehead. "Lacey called. We came as soon as we heard."

"She was very ill," said Stuart.

Sheila looked at the young man. "You're a friend of my daughter's?"

"He owns a marina on Eagle Lake," Emily informed her. "He and his friend Eric taught Lacey and I to fish and use her new boat."

"Lacey bought a boat?" Neil asked. "A jet ski?"

"No, dad, a bass boat."

He looked amazed. "Lacey bought a bass boat? To fish?"

"I guess you could say that." Emily chuckled. "She caught one too."

Stuart eyed her with an odd expression. Lacey hadn't caught any fish when they were out on the lake. Emily smiled at him and nodded at Eric as he and Lacey entered the room. Stuart understood and chuckled also.

"Mom and Dad, this is Lacey's teacher and fishing instructor, Eric," Emily said. He shook both their hands.

"What's this about my girl buying a bass boat?" Neil asked him.

"She did, sir. And she's very good at handling it."

Neil stared at Eric. "You taught her how to use it?"

"My dad sold her the boat. I just helped out. She's a very quick learner."

Lacey moved forward to hug her parents. "I couldn't have done it without Eric. He's been so helpful."

"But why a bass boat? And where did you get the money?"

"It's a long story, dad, but rest assured I didn't use any of yours."

He scoffed. "Don't have any to give you anyway. Your mom spends it faster than I can make it."

"I would love for you to see my boat, Dad. Even take you fishing." Lacey held her father's hand.

"Maybe when it's warmer. Or you can come visit us in Arizona."

Sheila sat by her daughter's side. "So tell us, Emily, what the doctor says."

Eric and Stuart moved to the door. "We'd better let you visit," they said before they walked out into the hallway. Lacey followed.

"Wait," she said as they walked away. "You don't have to leave."

"You should spend time with your family," Eric told her. "We can come by tomorrow or the next day."

"Are we still on for Friday?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Eric answered. "Wild horses couldn't keep me away."

"Good, let's hope the weather doesn't either." She kissed him lightly on the cheek and said good-bye. He stared at her for a moment, and then joined Stuart as he walked into the elevator.

Emily was not released until Saturday, to her great displeasure. She kept saying she felt fine, but they could not bring her fever down until then, and she was so ready to go home, she drove her family up the walls. Friday she spent pacing in her hospital room until Stuart came to see her. She made him take her to the cafeteria to eat, claiming the hospital food was inedible.

"This doesn't count as a date, does it?" he asked as they sat at a table. "I'd hate for our first date to be here, with you in a robe and slippers."

"No, of course not. I want our first date to be on the houseboat, wearing waders and a fishing gear belt."

He laughed. "Is that all you think about, Emily? Fishing?"

"No," she replied. "Sometimes I think about shopping."

"So where is your family tonight?" He asked.

"Lacey and Eric were going to dinner, so my mom and dad invited themselves along. Dad wanted to see Hook's and Mom wanted to eat there."

Stuart laughed. "Eric's in for quite a night with your dad. He worries about the both of you."

"Lacey never gave him a minute's trouble," Emily said. "Or me, until..." She stopped and looked at the table.

"What's the matter, Em?" Stuart took her hand.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Are you going to eat that cake?"

He wondered when and if she would ever tell him about Raymond. He wanted to tell her he knew, and that it didn't matter, as long as she stayed with him. I want to protect her and show her she is deserving of love, he thought. I want her to know she doesn't have to settle for someone like him. I want her! I'll do anything for you Emily, just ask. But he kept his thoughts to himself. If she wasn't ready to tell him, she wasn't ready to commit to him either. He had to be patient, and win her affection.

Eric was slightly; no *monumentally* disappointed that he would not be spending the evening alone with Lacey. Her father had invited himself along, but Eric realized that Lacey seldom saw her parents, and Eric could take her out any other evening. They met at Hook's, when Eric's shift was over, and enjoyed dinner in the restaurant before Eric took the family on a tour of the store. Neil was very impressed, not only by the store, but by the

young man who was obviously fond of his daughter. Eric told of his amusement when Lacey bought the boat, and tried to make it seem like she was a fisherman. Both men laughed at her inexperience. Eric told Mr. Blessing how rapidly she learned to use the boat and trailer, and how impressed he was at her skill.

"And the boat has done something else for your daughter," Eric laughed. "The men are tripping over themselves to ask her out."

"She's never been one to date a swarm of guys," Mr. Blessing said. "Her Mom and I were holding our breath that one of them would finally get hitched and make us grandparents. I guess this should help."

"She's absolutely incredible, even without the boat," Eric insisted. "Any man would be lucky to get her."

Neil gave him a stern look. "Any guy would have to get my approval first. He would have to be gainfully employed, so he can support her, and willing to be faithful to only her. And he would have to love her, more than he loves himself. She deserves no less."

Eric looked Mr. Blessing in the eye. "I intend to be that man, sir."

Neil smiled. "Good, son. That's what I wanted to hear."

They entered the boat showroom and Eric showed the Blessings their line of pleasure and fishing boats. Neil said he was more of a landlubber, but some of the pontoons made him think twice. Lacey and her mother walked to the end so she could show her mom the bass boats. A group of men were already admiring one, and in this group was none other than Darryl.

"Hey! There she is! The one I told you about," Darryl called to his friends. In seconds Lacey was surrounded by adoring males, each competing for her attention.

"Help, Eric!" she called, laughing. Before he could reach her she had three date offers and a marriage proposal. He moved swiftly to her side and pulled her away from the crowd.

"Sorry guys, she's not up for grabs." He was chagrined; she seemed to be enjoying the attention. "Right, Lacey?"

"Oh, right," she repeated, winking at her mother. "Maybe another time." They moved out of the showroom and made plans to meet back at the apartment.

"We should get to know each other before we leave on Sunday," Neil decided. Eric was sure he would not live through this weekend

without kissing Lacey, but with little choice, he followed the family back to the parking lot.

Another group of men waited to speak to Lacey outside. Eric groaned in exasperation. "She's not available, guys!" He turned to Lacey. "Are you?"

"Good question," replied Lacey, lowering her lashes. "I still don't have a date for Valentine's Day. Your father will win the bet after all."

Eric grinned. "Please, Lacey. Spend Valentine's Day with me. I promise; I won't make you bring the boat."

"Now you're talking," Lacey said, patting his cheek. He wanted to kiss her badly, but it would have been in front of her parents and a whole parking lot full of men. Kissing her in front of the guys would be acceptable. Then they would know to whom she belonged. But kissing her in front of her parents? He didn't think so. He instead gripped his truck keys so hard he broke the keychain.

Stuart left the hospital long after visiting hours was over; neither he nor Emily wanted to spend the rest of the night alone. Her family said they would be here tomorrow to bring her home, but she still had all night to wait.

"I hate this," she said for the fiftieth time. "I feel fine. Why won't they let me go home?"

"They want to be sure you're ready," Stuart replied for the fiftieth time.

"I want you to take me out fishing this weekend," Emily said.

"It's still rainy and cold," protested Stuart. "I wouldn't want you to get sick again."

"I won't," Emily insisted. "You took very good care of me before."

He smiled at her. "You're very hard to resist, Emily. But your family would have my head."

"They'll never know."

How could he refuse her? "Okay, but on a houseboat so you'll be warm and dry."

She squealed. "Thanks, Stuart! I loved being on the boat, but I still want to catch a fish."

"Just not tomorrow after you get out of the hospital. Let's wait until next Saturday."

"Then let's do something else," she suggested. "I need to take you shopping for a sweater."

"I would like that," he said. "After church?"

"That would be perfect. My parents are leaving tomorrow morning. I guess this weather doesn't suit them."

He vowed to make sure she didn't miss them when they were gone. The nurse came in for the third time.

"You absolutely have to leave this time," she said sternly to Stuart. "And I am going to escort you to the door."

He stood and said good-bye in a much more informal way than he intended. "I'll see you Sunday for sure," he called on his way out. "Don't forget me now that I'm gone."

Forget him? She smiled to herself. He was fast becoming everything to her.

The Blessings left early Sunday morning, confident their daughters were good hands. Lacey and Emily promised to write if they promised to stay in one place long enough for the letters to reach them.

Emily dressed carefully for church, knowing she would see Stuart immediately after. She did her hair in an elaborate style, much different than the casual tail she wore while in the hospital, and wore a dress with a matching sweater, but her shoes were the most comfortable pair she owned. They didn't match, and she didn't care, but she wanted to be at her best even after hours of shopping.

Apologizing repeatedly to both God and Lacey, she watched the clock and waited for service to end. When she could stand it no longer, she forced her sister out of the pew and home, and ran to her room to check her hair and makeup before Stuart arrived. She was spraying cologne when the phone rang, and she called to Lacey that she had it.

"Hello?" she asked into the handset.

"So, Em, finally, your police dogs aren't answering the phone."

"Hi, Raymond," she said without enthusiasm.

"That's it? After we've been apart all this time? I miss you, Emily."

"I have to go."

"No, wait, Emily. I never got to apologize and I've been trying to for a week." His tone changed. "My life is misery without you, baby."

She hesitated. "I'm sorry, Ray."

"Emily, we need to talk. I need to make it up to you, for all this. Don't you miss me, even a little?"

"Of course I do."

"Then, Em, throw me a bone." He sounded like he was crying.

"You know how I feel about you."

She felt the familiar guilt. How could she hurt him?

"Emily, just five minutes. Please. Let's talk."

"Okay, Raymond." She sighed. "But I'm going away right now."

"Tonight, Em? I promise you won't be sorry."

"Yes, tonight. Later. But no promises, Ray. Just talk."

"Okay," he sniffed.

"I do care for you, Ray. We'll talk." She hung up the phone.

"Sucker," he laughed after the click.

The phone call left her shaken, and she took a minute to catch her breath after she put the handset back on the nightstand. Why did he have to call just now, when she was so looking forward to being with Stuart? Now she was reminded that her first allegiance was to Raymond, who was really her boyfriend, and whom she was essentially cheating on with Stuart. We're not married, she reminded herself, not really even dating, just...what? I cook and clean for him and he in turn tells me what a brainless twit I am...then I believe him. Stuart makes me feel...valuable, capable, as if I was a normal person instead of a bother. But I owe Raymond. It's not his fault he was hurt, and needs care. If it wasn't for me...She felt tears sting her eyes. I can't have Stuart, I owe Raymond, and it was my own carelessness that sealed my fate. Now that I've met someone who I could love for a very long time, I have to give him up because of my stupidity.

The doorbell rang, making Emily's heart sink. I have to send him away, she thought in despair. A moment later, Lacey poked her head into Emily's room to see what was keeping her, and found her sister on the floor in tears.

"Emily! What's wrong?" Lacey ran to her and put her arms around her weeping sister.

"You have to send him away for me, Lacey. I can't."

"Send him away? What do you mean? Emily, you were so excited about seeing him you made me leave church early." Lacey found her sister a tissue.

"I can't go with him, Lacey. I want to, I do, but it's not right."

"How is it not right, Em? You both like each other immensely, and you're good for him. What could keep you apart?"

Emily blew her nose into a tissue. "Me, that's what. I blew it last year when I had the accident. It was my fault, Lacey. And a man was injured because of my carelessness. No matter what I feel for Stuart, I owe Raymond for the damage I caused him."

"No, you don't!" Lacey groaned in frustration. "You have paid for that over and over. It's done. He's well, and playing on your guilt."

"It's not done, Lacey. Send Stuart away. Tell him I am so sorry."

Lacey went out into the living room, knowing Stuart had heard every word.

"He called just before you arrived," Lacey said. "I couldn't get to the phone in time. I don't know what to do."

"I'm not about to let that weasel win," Stuart told her. "I'll talk to her." He went into the bedroom and knelt on the floor next to Emily.

"Oh, Stuart, I told Lacey to send you away," she said despondently. "I'm sorry, I truly am."

He took her hand. "I can't leave. Someone ruined my best sweater and I need a guide to take me through the mall to get another one."

She laughed slightly. "If that's your best sweater, you're more of a fashion victim than I thought."

"That's why I need help from someone who knows how to dress a man."

"I owe you, I know." She pulled her hand from his and looked away.

He claimed it again. "I'm not asking for you to marry me, just help me find a sweater. Can you do that for me?"

"Stuart, you are a wonderful man. I could..." she sighed. "It doesn't matter. You need someone who has more to offer than me. I know you think I'm normal, but I'm not. My incompetence caused an accident and sooner or later I would do the same to you. I can't let that happen to you, it would kill me."

He laughed. "Worse than being hooked by a fishing lure?"

"I'm being serious!"

"So am I, Emily. Let me decide whether I want to risk being with you. I take full responsibility for whatever happens. And I promise not to

blame you. But what I want from you right now, today isn't a pledge of undying love or commitment. I want someone to take me shopping for a sweater. I need a friend. No strings."

"I...I could do that, I suppose..."

"And I'll drive."

She smiled. "I suppose you've heard what a lousy driver I am."

"Only from you."

"It's true. I don't drive unless I absolutely have to anymore."

"I had an accident once," Stuart said, sitting on the floor. "I was playing with the buttons on my radio and let my car drift left of center. I hit a van carrying school children."

"Oh, Stuart."

"Fortunately no one was hurt, but I was afraid to drive for a long time after that. But you know what, Emily? I did get back into my car, and I have never taken my eyes off the road again, for even a moment. It actually made me a better driver."

"But you didn't hurt anyone."

He looked in her eyes. "I might have. It took me a long time to get over my guilt. But God forgives us for our mistakes. We all screw up sometime, we're only human. If He can find it in his heart to forgive us, why can't we?"

"But we are still responsible for our actions." Emily's eyes misted.

"How did you pay for the accident?" Stuart asked.

"My insurance covered injuries, and I had to pay a fine. And I've spent all year helping this person get over his injuries."

"What will it take for you to finally pay for your role in the accident?"

"I don't know, really. I'm doing everything I can."

"The Bible says an eye for an eye. Did you do that?"

"No, of course not."

"But you're willing to give your life for this person. Was this person injured for life?"

"No, he's all better."

"Then you are done."

"I don't feel done."

"Because you haven't received God's forgiveness. When you do, you will be set free, Em. But I can't do that for you."

She was quiet for a moment, and he knew she wasn't yet convinced, but it would take time for his words to take root in her heart. *God, he prayed, take over from here. I give her to you. Help me to be a good friend to her until she's ready to accept your forgiveness, and make sure it's me she turns to after she does!*

"So, danger girl, how about that expedition into the wilds of the mall?"

She smiled and pulled him up from the floor as she stood. "It's going to take a lot of hiking, but don't worry, I won't let you fall, or miss a sale."

"Yes but will you save me if I'm in danger of being trampled by bargain seekers?"

"I'll guard you with my life," she promised.

What he would have given to kiss her at that moment! *Slow down*, he warned himself. *You've got the edge, don't frighten her away*. He followed her into the living room, and told Lacey he'd have her home at before the mall closed, or the limit on his Visa was reached, whichever came first.

"Better take out a bank loan," teased Lacey. "She's a Blessing, but not a financial one."



Chapter 7

With Emily gone, and the apartment quiet, Lacey allowed herself the pleasure of a nap. It had been quite a week, and it finally caught up with her Sunday afternoon. She hadn't heard from Eric, and he was probably with his family anyway, so she figured the day was lost anyhow. Closing her curtains tightly and pulling the covers over her head, she surrendered to sleep, at one point thinking she heard a knock on her door, but ignoring it in favor of drowsiness. A few hours later she was rested, alert, and her hair was sticking up on one side of her head. She laughed at the spectacle, and showered so she could return her hair to its normal blunt cut. When she was presentable again, she wandered to the living room and looked out the window at her boat. Someone had placed flowers and a note on the tarp, and she groaned in annoyance.

"Who is it this time? The garbage men?" She pulled on her shoes and went outside. A man in a Jeep Cherokee drove slowly past and smiled at her.

"It's parked for the winter," she called as he opened his window.

"See you in the spring," he called back and drove away.

"This is a bit much, Lord," Lacey mused as she reached for the envelope. "I guess it's true—be careful what you pray for; you just might get it." There was a card inside the envelope. It read, "Lacey. Sorry I missed you. Thought you might like to get away today and I was right, because you're gone. Thinking of you and not your boat. Love, Eric."

She missed him! Why didn't she answer the doorbell earlier? It must have been him. She smelled the flowers, leaning against her boat and kicking the tires in frustration. Lacey laid her chin on the boat and wished she had stayed awake.

An engine sounded behind her. Not another one, she sighed, and didn't bother to turn around.

"Excuse me miss, do you know who owns this boat?"

"Not a clue," she said, walking away.

The car caught up with her. "Because I have a date with her on Valentine's Day."

"No, you don't...Eric!" She spun around and slapped at him. "You had me going for a minute!"

"Nice flowers."

"Just another admirer." She rolled her eyes. "Another desperate man. I'm getting bored with all this."

"I'll bet." He pulled the car into an empty space and stepped out to greet her.

"Where did you get this car?" Lacey asked. "A Corvette. Very impressive."

"It attracts women. Like a man in the park holding a baby. Drives 'em wild."

She laughed and hugged him. "I am so sorry I missed you earlier. Come inside."

He followed her into the apartment, and held her flowers while she searched for something to put them in. She finally settled for an oversized drinking glass, and added them to the collection on the dining room table.

"I can see why you're getting bored with all this," Eric commented, counting the bouquets.

"Actually, I'm thrilled. I've never had so much attention in my life."

Eric's heart sank a bit. She had plenty of offers to choose from; what would make her keep him?

"Tell your father I lost the bet. I'll pay him for the dock space," Lacey said.

"He won't want you to," Eric assured her. "But what he does want is for you to join us at my house for dinner. Sunday is our family day, and my mom wants very much to meet you."

"She does?" Lacey was thrilled. This was a very good sign. "I would love to, but on one condition."

"What is that?" Asked Eric.

"I bring some kind of dessert. I won't go empty-handed."

"Deal," replied Eric.

"I'll get my purse," said Lacey.

Despite visiting almost every store in the mall, Stuart and Emily were not able to find even one suitable sweater, maybe because they were more concerned with pleasing each other than concentrating on the chore that had brought them together. At first, Emily told herself she must only help him shop, that they did not technically belong together, but he was so attentive, so grateful for her assistance, that she found herself relaxing and enjoying his company. What a wonderful feeling, to be appreciated. It was a rare luxury in her life. She found herself trying to please him in ways other than shopping; listening to his stories of his sister and the marina, letting him choose their meal at the restaurant, and finding reasons to touch him as they went about the stores. This seemed to please him the most, he was like a thirsty man, drinking in her affection, and this to her was the most rewarding aspect of her time with him.

As they sat across from each other in the restaurant waiting for their meal, smiling at each other and touching lightly, Emily reached out and brushed his hair away from his eyes.

"You need a haircut," she said, tucking his hair behind his ear.

"You think?" He replied as his hair fell again.

She pushed it back once more. "You look more like a surfer than the owner of a marina."

"Give me ten years." He took her hand and held it, gazing into her eyes. "I had a great day, Emily. You're right. The mall is a much scarier place than the lake."

"I didn't get to be a hero, though," she said. "Like you were for me."

"Oh, but you are," he replied, leaning closer to her. "Two weeks ago I had no reason to live. Now I want to celebrate."

"Hold that thought." She closed her eyes tightly and then opened them again. "You're still here. I'm not imagining this."

He grinned and kissed her hand. "I'd go for your lips, but this table is holding me back."

"Down, boy. We're in public," she reminded him.

He sat back on the booth. "You are so lovely. I could stare at you forever."

"You don't get out much, do you?" she teased. "Although I hope I'm more pleasant to look at than fish."

"Definitely. And I would imagine, better to kiss."

"Oh, yuck!" she laughed. "Tell me you've never kissed a fish!"

"You've never caught a seven pound bass before. You'd kiss it too."

Her laughter was like a gift to him. He hadn't enjoyed a woman's laugh since his sister was silenced. Oh, Emily if you only knew how hard I've fallen for you. I won't give you up no matter what, to Raymond or anyone. I need you and your musical laugh, your touch that makes me dizzy, your caring eyes that melt my frozen heart. Somehow, some way, I'm going to win your heart, and I'm going to keep it and cherish it for as long as God allows. And I'm going to make you the happiest woman on the face of the earth, or at least the lake, and you will know that you are loved.

The food arrived, interrupting his thoughts, and he reluctantly let go of her hand.

As Eric pulled into the long driveway that led to the family home, Lacey wondered how they managed to drive such a steep incline when the ground froze.

"It doesn't really freeze here very often, but when it does, it's no problem," Eric explained. "We have a heated driveway, and it keeps the ice away."

"Heated driveway!" Lacey exclaimed. "I've never heard of that!"

"Mom's idea. She wasn't about to slide to the bottom of the hill in a car. My dad did that a few times and wrecked her new van. We got the driveway right after."

Lacey laughed. She couldn't wait to meet this remarkable woman.

"I have to warn you," Eric said as they parked in the rear of the house in an actual parking space. "There's more family than you can count, and all of them are here."

"Oh, I feel better now."

He grinned. "You won't remember all their names today so just smile and act like you've known them forever. It makes them wonder."

"I won't be quizzed or anything, will I?" She stared at the huge structure Eric called home. He opened a side door and they entered a room—the indoor swimming pool. Lacey was speechless as he led her through that room to another; actually a series of rooms, all contained in one huge space and separated by furniture and other dividers, but no walls. The windows rose two stories high and she could see over the lake as if they were standing on thin air above it.

"Eric, is my mouth hanging open?" she asked, tugging on his sleeve.

"Your mouth is...fine," he replied, not telling her he wanted to taste it. He swallowed hard. "We get this reaction from all our first time visitors. I'm kind of bored with it, actually."

She laughed at his quotation of her words. "It's very...beautiful. But I can't help wondering, why a pool when you have the whole lake?"

"It's a status thing," Eric replied honestly. "Plus my mom can keep an eye on her kids and grandkids. She doesn't like being outdoors."

"I thought she was quite the sports-woman," Lacey said, confused.

"She hates bugs," Eric confided. "If we get a mosquito in the house she hunts it down like she's on safari."

Lacey laughed and slapped Eric's arm.

"I'm not kidding," he said seriously. He took Lacey into the common area where his family was watching the grandchildren play a video game on the wide-screen television. There were eight or nine of them, in ages ranging from newborn to teen, and they raced to greet their uncle.

"Hello you rascals. I brought someone to meet you."

The adults turned in their seats to view Eric's friend. Lacey felt a moment of panic. There were so many of them, how would she ever remember their names? She counted ten adults, including Al.

"Mom, Dad, Rick, Kathy, Bill, Tina, Peg, Rich, Jen, and Al junior, this is Lacey Blessing."

"Hello," she managed, immediately forgetting all their names.

Eric's mother Susan rose from the sofa, a newborn baby in her arms. She handed him to Eric and reached for Lacey's hand. "Hello, Lacey. Eric's told us all about you. It's wonderful to finally meet you."

"I guess he warned you about me," Lacey replied.

"He did mention that you might have a trail of admirers bearing gifts and requests to see your boat."

"They're not after me for my body, I assure you."

Susan laughed lightly. "Al told me about you and your boat. I said, finally, a woman who uses common sense!"

"Actually, God told me to buy it, so I can't take the credit."

"Really?" Susan seemed intrigued.

"I was sure your husband would think me daft, but if he did, he covered it well. Then your son saved me from making an utter fool out of myself when I tried to make it look like I actually fished. He was so patient and kind, teaching me how to use my new boat."

"I enjoyed it. She's a quick study." Eric smiled at Lacey.

"And I only ran down two signs," Lacey said.

"What signs?" Asked Al.

"Nothing to worry about," answered Eric quickly. "She learned so fast I expect her to win a bass tournament next year."

"Only if you bait my hooks," replied Lacey.

Susan led Lacey to the large kitchen and they gathered around the huge table.

"How is your sister?" Susan asked.

"Much better, thank you," Lacey answered. "She's at the mall with Stuart right now."

"We are so pleased that he's interested in someone!" Susan poured a cup of coffee for Lacey. "After his sister Kate died he became a recluse and retreated from the world. We couldn't seem to help him no matter what we did."

"Emily has a lot of compassion—sometimes too much. She is perfect for him, and she herself needs someone to care for her."

Susan leaned forward and tapped Lacey's arm. "Thelma about sent herself into a fit trying to make sure those two met after you girls visited, and then it happened anyway."

"Emily hooked him," Eric said.

"In more ways than one," chuckled Susan. "We consider Stuart family, and it's family tradition for the men to be lured, caught and drawn in by the women."

"I met my husband at a wrestling match," Peg informed Lacey. The referee asked for volunteers from the audience to wrestle the pros. I thought Rich was cute, so I raised my hand."

Her husband continued, "She jumped in the ring and smiled as if she was seriously going to wrestle me! No way was I going to hurt a lady, especially one as pretty as her. I shook her hand and said, 'don't worry, I won't hurt you,' and she flipped me on my back!" He laughed and kissed Peg. "I fell for her, literally."

Bill was next. "I met my wife, Tina at a drag race. This car that competed against me looked like it was held together with duct tape, but when we raced it left me in the dust. I guess it was her brother's car and she stole it from him one Sunday and entered the contest. Anyway, when I shook her hand to congratulate her, thinking she was a guy, she took off her helmet, and her hair fell down her back...It was love, man."

Lacey's eyes wandered to Peg, who was clearly as in love with her husband as if they had just met. Eric glanced at Lacey, and she smiled back at him. He looked adorable, holding his newborn nephew and she wondered if he wanted children of his own... and if he would want them with her.

Another sister, with the same hair and eyes as Eric, said, "It wasn't as dramatic for us. Rick and I were both counselors at Christian summer camp, though different ones. He was at a boy's camp across the river from us. We crossed paths while canoeing, and I accidentally tipped his canoe when he got close. I saved him from drowning, gave him mouth to mouth resuscitation."

"I let her work on me for twenty minutes before I let on that I could swim," Rick laughed. "Then at night I snuck away from my camp to sing love songs under her cabin window."

"He had the wrong cabin," Kathy told them. "For the rest of the summer, the camp director thought she had a secret admirer."

Lacey laughed along with the rest of them, amused and pleased to be included in the family stories. They shared a meal, and the dessert Lacey provided, and later Eric suggested the two of them take a walk in the woods surrounding the house.

She was grateful to get away from the commotion for a few minutes. Her head was spinning, trying to remember names, and who belonged to whom. She had managed to separate a few of Eric's siblings and their spouses, but she was at a loss to repeat any of the children's names. She wondered how Eric kept track of all of them.

"Name tags help," he teased. "For last year's company Christmas party, Dad had badges made for each of us just like we wear at the store."

"I can only imagine how festive Christmas must be at your house," Lacey sighed, thinking of the lonely day she shared with her sister last year.

"It's pretty much chaos," Eric admitted. "We all swim, that's a tradition."

Lacey smiled, thinking of all of them splashing in the pool.

Eric walked her to a spot in the woods overlooking the lake. "You can't see it from here, but the marina is to the left, a couple miles." He stopped and leaned against a thick tree branch. "This was our climbing tree when we were kids. Our house was a lot smaller then."

"But you still lived in these woods?"

He nodded. "Stuart and I have been friends since kindergarten. Later, in our teens, he, Kate and I were the three musketeers. She raised him after her parents died, when he was thirteen and she was seventeen. Kate devoted her life to him, and they were close friends as well as siblings."

"And you were close to her also?" Lacey moved to his side.

"I was practically her shadow, till she died last year. She was very special. I miss her something fierce."

"Did you love her?" Lacey asked.

"Yes, more than she knew," Eric admitted. "She was older than me but I adored her."

Lacey thought how wonderful Kate must have been. She was terribly jealous of this woman she had never met.

Eric bent close to Lacey. "But what I felt for her pales in comparison to what I feel for you."

She stopped breathing, paralyzed, watching him. He stepped in front of her and touched her chin with his curled finger, pulling her face to his.

"Do you feel the same about me, Lacey?" He whispered as their eyes met.

"I am very...pleased," she said.

"Pleased?" He repeated, stopping short of kissing her. "You mean, pleased to meet you, or pleased...what other kind of pleased is there?"

She moved back against the branch. "I've waited all my life to hear someone say those words to me; no one ever has. Certainly nothing like the last two weeks."

"Oh, I get it." He fought despair. "You're in demand now, and you want to date around. I can't blame you. I guess I would do the same." *I am such an idiot for thinking she might feel the same about me*, he told himself.

"No, that's not what I mean," Lacey replied, seeing the look in his eyes. "You are a most unique and wonderful man, Eric...Almost too good to be true!" She played with the collar of his shirt. "And for someone like you to say what you just did to me...it's almost unbelievable."

"What are you saying?" He put his hands on his hips and frowned.

"I'm saying," she moved her hands to his chest and brushed at imaginary lint, "That I have this practical side to me that says, 'the man has everything. He's handsome, rich—I noticed, Eric—funny, smart, absolutely charming'...So why, if he could have any woman in the world, would he choose me?" She let her hands drop. "Of course the unpractical side tells me, 'What do you care? Shut up and kiss him!'"

"First of all, Lacey," Eric said, folding his arms, "I live in a very remote area. I don't have my pick of women, unless I'm not too particular about whether or not they are related or have teeth."

She smiled.

"And I did have someone I loved, Kate, and spent years devoted to her, though only as her friend. That was fine with me; I felt fortunate, just knowing her. Then she died, and I realized that I needed something more than just friendship from a woman. My sisters and brother all married, had kids, and I lost out."

He stroked her hair. "Then you waltz into my life, to buy a boat of all things. I was sure you would really lose it when you took it out on the lake! But you didn't; you were great, you listened to me and made me feel like I was the smartest person alive. I knew you were trying to please me when you worked so hard to do just what I told you, and I said to myself, this one is a keeper."

"Ooh, those fisherman words make me tingly all over, Lacey gushed. "I could lose my head around you. But Eric, it's only been a few weeks—days really. If we make big declarations about each other this soon, I'm afraid we won't be able to live up to each other's expectations."

"You know, you're absolutely right," Eric said, rubbing his chin. "You should shut up and kiss me." He closed the distance between them and kissed her passionately, the way he had intended to when he brought her out into the woods. Her lips were like a banquet to him and he tasted them repeatedly, savoring the feel of her in his arms. He pulled away from her and sighed. "I see your point," he gasped, trying to catch his breath. "That kiss about knocked my socks off. We couldn't kiss like that all the time."

"No?" Asked Lacey with a coy smile. "I was just getting warmed up."

He groaned and fell to the ground. Lacey laughed and climbed up to sit on the tree branch, dangling her feet over him. He reached up and pulled off her shoes.

"I guess you're trapped now," he teased. "Unless you want to walk barefoot through these woods."

"I'm wearing socks, silly. And I'm not going anywhere without you, shoes or no shoes."

He started to pull at her socks.

"Hey!" She kicked him away. "I'm not that kind of girl!"

"Oh, that's right. City girls wear socks and shoes to bed, don't they?"

"Socks, yes. Now you know all my secrets."

"No not all of them. I still don't know why you chose me when you could have had Darryl."

"Because, silly," she said, dropping off the branch next to him and pinning him to the ground with her arms, "I like my men to have teeth."

"I feel better now," laughed Eric. Lacey pulled him to a sitting position.

"Say something outdoors-ish to me," she growled, kissing him lightly. "You know, that manly sports talk."

He thought for a moment. "Umm...fishing gear." He lowered his voice. "Lock and load. Deer hunting season."

She rolled her eyes and moaned. "You're making me weak."

He kissed her and whispered against her lips, "Target practice. Small mouth bass."

"Ahhh," she breathed.

"Camouflage. Jerk bait."

"Jerk bait?" She laughed.

"I'm having a tough time thinking," he said.

"Then let me take over." She kissed his chin. "Ouch. You need to shave."

"Hurts?"

"Hurts sooo good." She let kisses fall on his face and neck.

Eric moaned. "So, Lacey, do you want to get married on Valentine's Day?"

"Yes, a three week courtship would please your parents, I'm sure."

"They were married in two."

"What?" She sat back on her knees. "Are you serious?"

"About them or us?"

"Eric!"

"I asked you first."

She laughed. "No, you didn't."

"Oh," He stood and wiped the leaves from his clothes. "Yes, two weeks. Her father almost shot my dad a second time."

"And it lasted."

Eric kissed her. "He says he got her pregnant on the honeymoon so she couldn't change her mind."

"That sounds like him. What about your sisters and brother?"

"All of them eloped. It's another family tradition."

Lacey laughed out loud. "So that's how they afforded that house, with all the money they saved by not paying for weddings."

"No, but I'm sure it helped."

She wrapped her arms around his waist. "So if we were married on Valentine's Day, would I be pregnant the next day?"

"Absolutely. Or I'd at least die trying."

Lacey sighed and leaned against the tree. "That's the most irresistible thing in the world to a woman, you know. A handsome man who wants marriage and children. Add chocolate and I'd throw myself at your feet."

"Just like a beautiful woman with a bass boat. All we needed was the right lures."

"So, Mr. Hook," Lacey murmured, bringing him close to her by his shirt, "Want to use my bass boat? If you marry me, I'll let you take it out whenever you like."

"I'll give you all the chocolate you can eat, if you promise that I'm the only one you will ever lend your boat to," he replied, grinning.

"It's a deal. Shall we shake on it?" She leaned into his embrace.

"Not a chance. I'm sealing this with a kiss."

A voice called to them from the direction of the house. "Uncle Eric!" One of his nephews burst into the clearing. "Grandma says if you don't come back to the house in the next ten minutes, they're sending out a search party—with wedding presents!"

Eric and Lacey laughed.

"Who are we to defy tradition?" Lacey maintained. "Tell them I want the china with the fish on it, and one of those coffee tables with dead animals inside."

Eric's nephew ran ahead to the house.

"Where will we take our honeymoon?" Lacey asked.

"In a houseboat on the lake," Eric answered. "We'll live there until we get a place of our own."

"Better make it fast," she warned him. "I'm not giving birth on the water."

"I promise," said Eric. "Let's go surprise my family."

Stuart walked Emily to the door of her apartment. It was later than he intended to bring her home, but he wanted to make the day last as long as possible. She hadn't objected, and seemed to enjoy his company.

"I feel bad, Stuart," she said as she turned the key in the lock. "We never did get you a sweater."

He shrugged. "It's not important. And it gives me a reason to see you again."

She smiled shyly. "Actually, I have something for you." She opened the apartment door. "Wait here while I get it."

He waited in the doorway as she went to her room, and returned with a large box.

"Here," she said, setting the box on the sofa and opening it. He moved to be next to her. She took a white, hand knitted sweater from the box and held it up to his chest.

"It fits!" She exclaimed, running her hand over the fabric. "I've been knitting this for a couple years, I don't know why. Well, now I do. This is for you, Stuart. To replace the one I ruined."

He smiled, touching the garment. "I guess we wasted the whole day looking, when you had one here all along."

"Not wasted at all. It was a great excuse to spend time together." She took the sweater and folded it back into the box.

"Thank you, Emily. No one's ever done that for me before."

She was humbled and pleased at his gratitude. "You showed me kindness when I didn't deserve it. I want to do the same for you. Only you do deserve it, you are a kind and thoughtful person."

"That's the way we marina owners are," he teased. "Unless you have a boat, you'll never know."

She smiled into his eyes as she moved close enough to play with his hair. He brought his hand up to the middle of her back and gathered her close to him. Bending slightly, he pressed his lips lightly against hers, and kissed her deeply as she surrendered to his embrace.

"Emily," he said breathlessly, "I want you to know that I..."

The phone rang, and she jumped, suddenly remembering her conversation with Raymond earlier.

Stuart frowned. "Do you need to get that?"

She became agitated. "No, I..."

He eyed her carefully. She backed away, looking at the phone as if it were on fire.

"Emily?"

She looked at him with a dazed expression. "I should...I mean I have to answer that."

"Should I go?" He picked up the box and waited for her answer.

She nodded miserably. Stuart was certain who was on the other end of the line. He went into the apartment hall, and closed the door behind him but stayed to listen, knowing the walls were paper-thin. He heard every bit of her end of the conversation.

"Hello? I know, Ray. No, I just got in. I know I said I would but...don't yell at me, please. I know you didn't mean for me to get sick; I shouldn't have walked home in the rain. It's my fault. You're right. It was

stupid." She sounded defeated. "With a friend. No, I won't. Ray, please. Because he makes me feel special, wanted, and he doesn't think I'm stupid, that's why. He's not just saying that. I don't know why he likes me, yes I know there's nothing to attract him. No, Ray I would never hurt you. I know you care. Okay, we can talk. But just talk, Ray. Maybe I do care more for him. Okay, just for a few minutes."

Stuart stood in the hall, his heart sinking. What do I do now, Lord? If I leave, he wins! This guy controls her. What if he hurts her? I need her, God, and she needs me to show her how special she is, a treasure. What can I do? Raymond was sneaky and conniving. He wouldn't confront Emily here, in front of Lacey; he knew she disproved of him. His answer was easy when he heard Emily's next words.

"I'll be over in a few minutes, but I'm not staying long."

That was all Stuart needed. He ran out of the building into the parking lot. Forgive me now, Lord, but this is something I have to do. Hoping he had the right car, he slipped underneath, and with his trusty Swiss army knife, cut the wire to her battery, then ran to his own truck and backed up slightly. As Emily walked out the door of the building, he moved his truck forward as if he was just pulling in. She stopped when she saw him.

"Stuart!" She called. "Did you forget something?"

He hopped out of his truck. "I think I may have dropped my cell phone when I left. Did you see it in the hall?"

She frowned. "No, but I really didn't look."

"Going somewhere?" He asked casually.

"I have an errand to run. I forgot about it earlier."

"Oh." He started back to his truck. "See you around."

She looked at him longingly, then sat in her car and turned the key. It did nothing. Stuart waited while she tried a few more times, and then knocked on her window.

"Need a lift?"

She rolled the window down. "It won't do anything."

"Hmm." He told her to open the hood, and he played with a few wires. "Now try."

Nothing.

"Sorry Emily. I guess it's too dark for me to fix it tonight."

He almost laughed at the look of relief in her eyes.

"It's okay, Stuart," she said, getting out of the car and locking it. "I didn't want to go anyway."

They went back to the apartment, and Stuart resolved to stay until Lacey returned home even if Emily objected. She didn't however, and turned the phone off before inviting him to sit with her on the sofa.

"I can come by tomorrow morning and give you a ride to work," he offered.

"Oh, Stuart, that's so early, and it's a long drive for you." She moved closer to him. "I'll have Lacey take me." She looked at him through her lashes. "But I'll need a ride home."

"I'll be there," he promised. "Uh, where?"

She laughed and told him. "I can't tell you how much I hate being cooped up in a building all the time. I envy you, Stuart, with the whole lake as your office. I'm going to go on Lacey's boat as often as she lets me."

"I'll take you out every day," Stuart promised, his arms finding their way around her. "Any time you like."

"Thanks, but you have a business to run, boats to rent, and souvenirs to sell."

"I would close tomorrow if it meant I'd be with you every day," he vowed, "but my sister would kill me. She'd come back to haunt me."

"Don't even!" Emily touched his face with her hands. "I want to visit your marina. I need you there. Who will teach me to fish if you don't?"

"Ugh, Em. You're as demanding as my sister was." He kissed her. "And thank you, Emily. For the first time, I'm remembering Kate with a smile on my face."

Emily vowed right there to mend his broken heart, no matter what it took. "You know, Stuart, you should re-name the marina Kate's Cove, after your sister. I'll paint the sign for you—did you know I'm artistic?"

"No, but you amaze me every day."

"I stopped when..." She let the sentence drop.

He wisely changed the subject. "I'm thinking, Em. Valentine's Day is coming up next week, and I'd kind of like to spend it with someone fishing off the houseboat. Someone who can cook, someone who could help me eat chocolates and cut lures out of my sweaters, someone...beautiful and kindhearted who makes me feel like the luckiest man alive when I'm with her."

"Did you say chocolate?" Emily asked. "If you fed me chocolate, I'd bait my own hooks. I'd bait your hooks and clean fish. I'd make you ten sweaters."

"So, do you think we could maybe spend Valentine's Day together?" Stuart kissed her neck and shoulders.

"It's very possible," she teased. "If the guy who owns the marina has an extra boat. They're very expensive to rent, though."

He moved his kisses to her lips. "He's a close personal friend of mine. I'll twist his arm."

"I can't think of anything I would like more," Emily whispered.

"I can," teased Stuart, but you'll have to wait until we're co-owners of the marina."

"Is that a possibility?" She asked, his kisses making her weak.

"Most definitely," he murmured.

A key turned in the doorlock, making them both jump and sit up straight. Lacey entered and eyed them both with amusement.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

"Yes, but you live here, so I can't argue."

"Not for long," Lacey said. "I've got big plans for Valentine's Day."

"Like what?" Asked Emily.

"Oh, you know. Dinner with Eric and marriage."

"What?" Emily jumped off the couch and into her sister's arms. "That's incredible! Will you keep the boat?"

"Of course, silly, it's our legacy to our children." Lacey smiled and hugged her sister. "In the grand tradition of Eric's family we are eloping on our second date."

"It's a tradition?" Emily asked, skeptical.

"Yes," answered Lacey. "And Stuart is an honorary Hook, so watch out, danger girl!"

She looked at Stuart, who was grinning and nodding.

"Whew. What a week," Emily sighed. "But wait, Lacey, if you leave here, I'll be alone, and..." She put her palm to her forehead in distress. "I'm happy for you, Lacey, but...I'm not strong enough to be on my own. He'll..."

"He won't hurt you, Emily. I won't let him." Stuart moved to her side.

"You know about Raymond?" She asked. "I never told you."

"I met him."

"You did?" She put her hand to her mouth. "Oh, Stuart, I'm so sorry. I should have told you. I really care for you...and I couldn't hurt you."

"You couldn't hurt anyone, Emily. I know that." He took her hands. "But men like him, Em, they prefer women they can push around, someone easy to manipulate, compassionate, like you. They use your good qualities for bad purposes, make you look like the bad guy."

"But I did owe him, Stuart. We were in a car accident, it was my fault. He needed me. And I felt so guilty. He reminded me constantly that I was to blame for his injury, and no one else would want someone as careless and stupid as me."

"I would," Stuart said quietly.

"You are unique...so very kind. I was so afraid you'd be angry when I ruined your sweater."

He laughed. "You looked so scared! I almost laughed out loud. Do you know how many times I've been hooked? Mostly my fingers."

"But you didn't get angry or make me feel bad. That meant so much to me."

"Emily, real men aren't mean, they don't belittle others or force them to do things out of guilt," Lacey said to her sister. "Compare Stuart with Raymond. Who makes you feel loved, appreciated, happy about yourself?"

Emily looked at Stuart and smiled.

Lacey continued. "Who makes you feel worthless and stupid? And Em, who would God want for you?"

"I know the answers, Lacey. But I'm afraid—not of you, Stuart. Of me. What if I hurt you?"

"How could you hurt me, Emily?" He stared at her. "Burn dinner? Hook me with a lure?"

"What if I can't be what you need?" She looked at him earnestly.

He brushed her hair off her shoulder. "So what? Maybe things won't work out between us. It happens. We have no guarantees. But Emily, I won't punish you. I'll simply move on."

"Ugh, Stuart. You're too nice."

"Oh, yeah? You should have seen him with Raymond," Lacey informed her. "He ran him out of here and threatened him."

"You didn't!" Emily laughed.

"I'll do it again if I have to," Stuart vowed.

"You did that for me," Emily said in wonder. "And you hardly know me."

"I like what I do know," he insisted. "And I know Kate would have loved you also."

"I wish I had known her," Emily said.

He grinned. "Stick around long enough, you will. She was the marina."

"It hurts me to think how much you must miss her." Emily touched his arm.

"It's getting better."

Lacey chose this moment to disappear.

Stuart looked at the clock. "It's really late now, Em. And you have to work tomorrow. Me too. Thelma will have my hide for being late. See you after work?"

"Yes. I hope you're not too tired."

"I can sleep on the boat and pretend I'm doing maintenance."

She put both her hands on his chest. "You'll be there at five? You won't forget?"

"Not a chance." He kissed her in a way that would remind her whom she wanted to be with. "See you tomorrow, Emily. Dream about me."

She assured him she would, and let him out the door. As soon as it was closed, she yelled, "Lacey! Give me my pager and cell phone!"

"Why?" asked Lacey as she came out of her room.

"I want you to destroy them for me. Break them into little pieces."

"Uh, I already got rid of your pager. But I can't let you destroy your cell phone; you're under contract. We'll change the number. Or trade phones."

"I guess that will work. I've made up my mind, Lacey. I choose Stuart."

"Atta girl."

Emily pulled out the chocolate Stuart had bought her and offered it to her sister. "Now, tell me everything, Lacey. And don't leave out a single word!"

They talked the rest of the night, until morning.



Chapter 8

Emily was at her desk, looking out the window and wishing for two things—sleep and Stuart. It was four-thirty, the day's accounts were finished, and she had a half-hour before she could punch the time clock. Stuart would be here at five. If only she could spend the next thirty minutes sleeping...A shadow made her look up from the desk. Raymond stood in front of her, smiling and holding roses.

She frowned. "How did you get in here?"

"Told 'em I was your fiancée. They're morons in security."

Emily looked around anxiously. "Ray, this is not the place..."

"Let's go somewhere we can be alone." He handed her the flowers.

She didn't take them.

"You were supposed to come over last night," he reminded her.

"I couldn't...I mean," she said, correcting her words, "I didn't want to. It's over, Ray. I have someone else."

"But you love *me*, Emily. You need me. He'll dump you anyway when he finds out you're damaged goods."

"You made me that way, remember?" Anger flashed in her eyes. "I showed you nothing but kindness and you..." A tear slipped from her eye. "Go away. I don't love you, I never have. I didn't like you on our first date, when we had the car accident. I thought you were a jerk and I was hurrying home to get rid of you." There. She finally admitted it to herself.

"I'm gonna sue you, Emily. For damages."

"You already did, through my insurance company. You said that was common practice, nothing personal."

He leaned close to her and whispered menacingly. "I'll hurt him, Emily. If you choose him over me, I'll hurt him so bad he won't ever want to see you again. It'll be your fault. Do you want to see him hurt? If you love him, Emily, dump him."

She bit her lip. Would he? She recalled the time Raymond threw dinner across the room because it was overcooked. And the time no one else knew about, when he had dragged her down a staircase because she dared to take too long to move. She explained the bruises, saying she had tripped at work and fell against a desk. Stuart meant so much to her; she couldn't let him be hurt because of her own selfish desire to be with him.

"Do it, Em," Raymond hissed. "Or else."

She stared at her desk in misery. Raymond moved into her eyesight, and straightened slowly. "I knew you'd see things my way. I'll expect you tonight at eight. And wear something real nice. Tonight, everything is going to change." He dropped the roses on the desk and walked away.

Dear God, Emily prayed, show me what to do. I confess I've allowed him to separate me from you, and look at the mess I've caused because of it! Please, God, protect Stuart. Intervene for me. And Lord, forgive me. If I had obeyed you in the first place, and not dated an unbeliever, I wouldn't be in this predicament.

At five o'clock, a heavy hearted Emily walked out to the parking lot where Stuart stood by his truck waiting. He smiled in greeting and kissed her in front of all the other employees. She looked nervously around the parking lot, and spotted Raymond in a car on the other side of Stuart's truck. He raised his hand and made a shooting gesture.

“Umm, Stuart, I think...I think you’d better just take me home. I’m really tired.”

Stuart frowned. “You don’t feel well?”

“No, I’m fine, uh, tired though.”

“You don’t want to see me? You changed your mind?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” She turned frightened eyes to the car on the other side of the truck. Stuart followed her gaze.

“Oh, you’re afraid of he’ll cause trouble?” Stuart laughed. “Is that it?”

“Stuart,” she cried, taking his arm, “He said he’ll hurt you if I don’t break it off with you. Please! You mean too much to me!”

Stuart laughed again and waved to Raymond. “Hey, Ray! Two words, JAIL TIME!” He shook his head, chuckling. Raymond made a face at him and ground the starter on his car. It wouldn’t start.

Stuart turned to Emily. “Remember when I told you I lost my cell phone last night?”

She nodded.

“A ruse. I heard your phone conversation with Ray. I disabled your car so you couldn’t meet him, then pretended I was back to find my phone.”

A slow smile crossed her face. “Clever boy!”

“And today, I was here at four—I found myself falling asleep at the marina and thought I might be late picking you up from work, so I left early, figuring I could sleep in the parking lot here. That...creep parked next to my truck. I forgot he thought Eric was your new boyfriend. He ignored me and went inside, and...” Stuart held up a spark plug.

“You really should lock your car,” Stuart called to Raymond. “You never know what you’re going to lose.”

Emily laughed too, and threw herself into Stuart’s arms.

“Now, Emily we have some fishing to do.” He helped her into his truck. “I hope you snag something better than me.”

“Oh, no,” replied Emily, kissing him with all she had in her. “There is no better catch than you, Stuart.”