

Breakthrough

by Anna Frances Mattea

Chapter 1

Alex quickly sifted through her in-box for a plain white envelope. She'd had a challenging morning . . . Digi-Pro Printing refused to take responsibility for an error. The Development Department delayed the release of the E-Value software. A key competitor had slashed prices in an attempt to recapture market share . . .

But Alex loved a challenge . . . the more, the better. Focusing on the task at hand, Alex found the envelope she was looking for—a note from Q.F. She sliced open the envelope and extracted the page. Q.F.—whoever Q.F. was—had sent a single comic strip this time. The first frame showed a CEO jumping on a conference table, gesturing wildly, explaining his amazing new idea for increasing profits. “Brilliant!” his staff exclaimed as they clapped. But when the staff returned to their cubicles, they quickly filed their notes in overflowing bins labeled “CEO’s great ideas” . . . and then resumed their ‘real’ work.

Alex smiled. The CEO reminded her of Cal, the owner and president of Fischer Technologies, her current employer. Incredible, far-reaching strategies occurred to Cal while most people slept. He spent the night thinking through details, building enthusiasm . . . eagerly anticipating an audience. Early on, his wife Marie made it clear he was not to wake her at 2 a.m. to discuss his latest brainchild. Any time after six o'clock, she was happy to make a pot of coffee and listen.

But Cal was usually in the office by 6 a.m., drawing diagrams, creating spreadsheets, firing off emails. One of the challenges for the executive team was reigning in their beloved CEO, assessing priorities and making sure Cal's ideas were well funded and managed before launching his next scheme. Alex adored Cal. She was grateful to him for hiring her away from a corporation with no conscience to serve as Marketing Director at Fischer Technologies.

Alex's thoughts returned to the comic. She received notes from Q.F. approximately once each week, usually on Fridays . . . as she had for the past four months. The fact that she did not know Q.F.'s identity drove her crazy. The postmark, flag stamp and simple initials yielded no clues. Alex had combed directories and her memory for anyone whose name began with "Q"—employees, colleagues, church members, fellow alumni, girlhood friends, clients—no one came to mind. Somehow, she was determined to tease Q.F. out and make this secret pal reveal herself . . . or himself.

"So how's our favorite marketing director today?"

Alex paused at the sound of Brian's voice. *As if he cared*, she thought. Fischer's vice president of sales, Brian White, stood at her office door, smiling. Brian had three hobbies in Alex's opinion: 1) thinking of himself; 2) admiring himself; and 3) advancing himself. The charismatic sandy-haired, steel-eyed VP put on a caring veneer, and yet he was one of the worst gossips Alex had ever met. Fortunately, she kept her private life walled off from her career, so Brian had yet to discover any material he could use against her. Alex intended to keep it that way.

Alex gave Brian a big smile. "I'm thrilled," she answered. "Did you hear about the response to our fall marketing campaign? Sales of the E-Vision

software are up 50%!" *And you had nothing to do with it.* Alex thought silently, knowing that fact would irritate him.

"Congratulations," Brian said flatly. "Don't forget the staff meeting."

Forgive me, Lord, Alex frowned—her motives stunk and she knew it.

Please show me how to respond to that weasel.

Alex picked up her leather portfolio. She glided down the corridor to the conference room, her well chosen heels tapping the linoleum floor. Her designer shoes matched her sleek, lavender Armani suit. Alex never paid full price for these items; instead, she found "gently used" clothing over the Internet at great prices. Her well manicured nails complimented her crisp shoulder-length haircut. Most would describe Alex as petite, but what she lacked in stature, she made up for in spunk and a drive for perfection.

When Alex stepped into the conference room, Cal, Brian and Mark were already present. The only absentee from senior management was Ira, the Chief Financial Officer. A moment later, Ira strode in, apologizing profusely for his lack of punctuality. *He's only 1 minute late,* Alex smiled to herself.

"The good news," Ira said, adjusting his glasses, "is thanks to the success of the E-Vision marketing campaign, our sales for this quarter are at an all time high."

"Woo Hoo!" everyone cheered. Cal clapped Alex on the back. Here at Fischer Technologies, she was one of the guys. She liked that.

"It was a team effort," Alex said graciously, seeking to soothe Brian's ego. Her attempt went unnoticed.

Ira—short, graying, good-hearted Ira—proceeded to summarize Fischer Technologies' current financial picture. Cal asked a few questions, but overall, he was pleased. He turned the meeting over to Mark, Vice President of Product Development.

Tall, athletic, reserved, Mark Hanson was a software engineer by training. Somewhere in his mid-30s, Mark had a quiet, conciliatory way about him. He put people at ease while inspiring them to do their best. Mark's creative team had developed groundbreaking products for HMOs and the consumer health industry. He was very much in demand, and yet Cal and Mark had worked together for so long, no one doubted they would work together for the remainder of their careers.

Alex listened to each division's report. Her marketing summary concluded the discussion, with Cal, Mark and Ira congratulating her again on her team's success. Brian was noticeably quiet.

Shortly after the meeting, Alex left for her doctor's appointment. For months now, her scalp had itched. What alarmed her was a newly formed patch on the side of her head, about the size of a nickel, completely bare. Fortunately, Alex had hair to spare; her thick, straight strands had disguised the problem. But, she did not want to take any chances.

Chapter 2

Dr. Stephens had known Alex's family, the Rausches, for years.

"It's good to see you, Alexa," he smiled. "How are you?"

Only her family and closest friends called her "Alexa." She had switched to "Alex" during her college years, thinking a more masculine name would

serve her better in the business world. Alex was the only sibling left in the city. Her sister had moved to the next county; her brother, to Virginia. Her parents had died in a car crash when she was twenty. Alex was grateful her grandmother was still alive.

“I’m doing well, Dr. Stephens, thank you . . . except I seem to be losing my hair.”

Dr. Stephens studied her scalp. “How long has this been going on?” he asked.

“The itching has been going on for three or four months,” she said. “The bald spot appeared about two weeks ago.”

“Hmmm. Have any of the women in your family been diagnosed with alopecia?” Dr. Stephens asked.

“Not that I know of,” Alex replied. “What is that?”

“Hair loss,” he replied.

“Am I going bald?” Alex asked, alarmed.

“I don’t know yet,” the doctor replied. “I’m going to tug on your hair at various locations on your scalp.”

Dr. Stephens took hold of a small section of hair and pulled. He tried two more sections.

“You are definitely losing hair,” he said. He studied some of the hairs shafts.

Alex felt a wave of panic.

“Alexa, alopecia is not fatal,” Dr. Stephens explained. “It’s a condition that occurs in approximately two percent of the general population, both men and women. Sometimes it goes into remission; sometimes it recurs . . .”

Alex gasped. “How can I stop this?”

“I want to test your thyroid function. We also need to look at your diet, medications, any medical conditions . . .” Dr. Stephens paused as he examined her scalp once again.

“I don’t see any hair follicles remaining in that patch on the side of your head, which means you may have the scarring form of alopecia,” he said.

“What exactly does that mean?” Alex asked.

“It affects how we approach treatment,” he replied, avoiding a direct answer. “I’m going to prescribe a topical ointment for now. You need to check your family history. I want to see you early next week.”

With that, Dr. Stephens left to follow up with another patient. Alex tried to collect her thoughts and reign in her emotions. *Bald. I’m going bald!*

* * * * *

Alex was supposed to have dinner that evening with Hollister Vaughn, her well known and much sought-after boyfriend. Alex called him from Dr. Stephen’s parking lot and cancelled.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yes, just tired,” she replied. How could she tell him about her hair?

Hollister was an attorney with a well connected and influential family. He had aspirations of running for public office; in fact, Alex and Hollister had met at a political debate. They had been seeing each other steadily now for

about three months. Alex had felt the relationship taking a positive turn. She liked to imagine herself in an elegant white gown, softly saying the words, “I do,” as she looked lovingly into Hollis’ emerald eyes.

Alex thought back to the day they first met. She was curious about the candidates for governor and attended a debate to hear their positions firsthand. During the break, a friend introduced her to Hollister, or Hollis, as his friends called him. She was immediately smitten. He wore a dark navy suit, accenting his tan, well proportioned form.

“What do you think of the debate so far?” Hollis had asked her. Alex gave him an earful—she seldom lacked an opinion. Hollis disagreed with her assessment of candidate Jess Armstrong. Alex suggested Hollis was buying into Armstrong’s marketing spin and overlooking her track record. Hollis’ green eyes sparkled. He loved a good debate. Alex was full of fire. Not to mention gorgeous and entertaining. They nearly missed the next round. Hollis asked her out for coffee afterwards to continue their conversation. He broke up with his girlfriend the following week. . . .

But what would Hollis think of a wife with no hair? “Arrrrrrgh,” Alex moaned. She cried out to God: *Please, please, don’t let this happen to me.*

On her way home, Alex stopped at Jordan Ridge, a nature preserve on the outskirts of the city. She changed in the back of her car, threw on her favorite sneakers and jogged to an outcrop of rock not far from the trail. Alex climbed the rocks to a ledge in front of a steep rock wall and sat, looking out at the view of the city skyline. She continued praying, asking God for healing, seeking His peace. She thought about a passage in the gospel of Matthew . . .

“And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; . . .”

Alex sighed. She felt some comfort. God knew about her hair. He cared. Eventually, however, there may not be much hair left for Him to count. Alex prayed for a miracle.

* * * * *

Over the weekend, Alex found two more bare spots forming at the back of her scalp. Her insides twisted. Alex called Allie, her older sister, and learned one of their aunts had gone bald in her thirties. *Not good*, Alex thought.

“Why are you asking?” Allie wanted to know.

“I have a spot that itches on my scalp,” Alex replied, “It’s not a big deal. I was doing some reading and of course, started to worry I might go completely bald. You know me. I always prepare for the worst. I’m sure it’s nothing. How’s Gram?”

Allie frowned. She knew from her little sister’s tone it wasn’t “nothing,” but she refused to pry. Alexa would tell her in her own good time.

“Gram’s okay for now, but not great,” Allie reported. “When I showed up today, Gram had put dirty dishes back in the cupboard with the clean ones. When we talked, she seemed to be struggling with why I was there. I’m worried about her, Alexa. I had to remind her at least three times that she had asked me over to help her put up some pictures. And then she couldn’t remember where she had left them.”

“I’ll try to see her this weekend,” Alex replied.

“Please do,” Allie urged. “Then you, Alan and I should talk.” Alan was the gifted child, the favored eldest son. Even though their parents had tried to be fair, they could not disguise the sparkle in their eyes when Alan strode

into the room. Growing up, the girls always felt as though they were competing for second place.

Alex gave Allie a hug over the phone. Allie had always been a rock for her, and yet at some level, they were still competitors—sisters, three years apart, both striving to be the favorite daughter. Allie had married Jonathan shortly after college, had two boys within four years, and chose to stay home to raise them.

Alex focused on her career, following the steps of their executive father. She did well and prided herself on her track record. At the moment, however, she felt selfish and superficial. Here she was, worried about her hair, while Gram struggled with her memory.

Chapter 3

Three weeks later, Dr. Stephens confirmed his diagnosis of Alex's scalp condition—alopecia areata. The scarring meant there was little chance her hair would grow back. "The best strategy is to try and arrest its progress," Dr. Stephens explained. He gave Alex a corticosteroid injection and insisted she make another appointment in four weeks.

"Please promise me you will not worry," Dr. Stephens consoled her. "People don't love you because of your hair, Alexa. You are going to be okay."

Alex appreciated Dr. Stephen's attempt to comfort her. But his words had little impact. Alex returned home, threw herself on her bed and sobbed. That was Wednesday.

Thursday, Alex called in sick. She needed a day to regroup . . . to think . . . to plan. When she returned to the office on Friday, Alex found another envelope from Q.F. waiting for her.

She absent-mindedly opened the latest note, wondering what Q.F. had come up with this time. Q.F., her unknown friend, had sent a verse from Psalm 55:

“Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.”

Following the verse, Q.F. had scrawled “Are you okay?” with an email address, one she did not recognize.

Alex tensed. She quietly closed her office door and paced the floor. Had she been so obvious? She mentally reviewed the last four weeks. She had maintained her routine. She had tackled her usual pursuits as if nothing were wrong. Hollis seemed oblivious. No one at work or Bible Study had said anything. Alex thought she had completely hidden her distress. Apparently not. Whoever Q.F. was, wherever Q.F. was, she or he had noticed something. *Please Lord, Alex cried inside, don't let anyone find out!*

Alex needed to determine Q.F.'s identity. She needed to know how she might have given herself away. . . . and she needed to know now!

After a quick dinner, Alex sat at her keyboard in her home office and typed:

“Hello Q.F. – Thank you for sending all the notes. Great quotes and comics. Enjoyed the book reviews. Can we meet for coffee? --A. R.”

Alex hit the send key. Minutes later, she received a response.

“Alex, I can’t meet right now. Can we switch over to ‘chat?’” Q.F. gave her instructions.

Alex wasn’t sure she liked the chat idea. But if Q.F. turned out to be a weirdo, she could always turn off her computer and call the police.

“Alex, are you there?” Q.F.’s message flashed on her screen.

“Yes,” she answered. “When can we meet?”

“I’d rather talk online,” Q.F. responded.

Is Q.F. hiding something? Alex wondered.

“Are you male or female?” Alex asked.

“Male,” came the response.

“Are you married, divorced or dating anyone? Is that why you’d rather talk online?”

“No and no.”

“Good. What does Q.F. stand for?”

“Quiet Friend.”

“What a pain,” Alex typed, punctuated with an LOL for “Laugh out loud.” “Do you know how much time I’ve spent trying to figure out whose name begins with ‘Q’?! May I call you Quentin?”

“I’m sorry,” Q.F. replied. “Quentin is fine.”

“How did you become a Christian?” Alex asked.

From Q.F.’s notes, it was clear he was a believer . . . and he knew about her faith. That simple fact ruled out anyone from her past or from the office.

Alex kept quiet about her beliefs; no one except her family and her Christian friends knew she had made a commitment to follow Christ.

“I met the Lord through Campus Crusade in high school,” Q.F. replied.

“Do you go to my church?” Alex asked.

“No comment,” Quentin wrote. “I’d rather not tell you who I am for now.”

But Alex wanted to know now, not later. She tried a different approach. “Why did you start sending me notes?” Alex inquired.

“Have you ever met someone and instantly felt a connection?”

Yes, thought Alex, thinking of Hollis. Maybe Quentin was Hollis? The possibility warmed her heart.

Q.F. continued, “You are someone I would like to know better. Circumstances limit communication, so I opted for the notes—a poor substitute, but the best I could do. May I ask you something?”

“Okay,” Alex replied.

“The last time I saw you, you seemed weighed down, Alex. Is everything okay?”

Alex froze. Where had she last seen him? Could she trust this guy? What if he wasn’t Hollis?

“I thought I was doing a decent acting job,” Alex responded. “I wish you could tell me when and where we saw each other so I can figure out how I tipped you off that anything was wrong.”

“I doubt most people would notice. But I’m praying for you. Do you mind?”

This is insane, Alex thought.

“Please don’t say anything to anyone,” Alex shot back. “I did get some distressing news and I’m worried about someone in my family. I’m not comfortable sharing more . . .”

“No problem,” Quentin replied.

“So,” Alex continued, “what if we each share three things about ourselves that few people know? . . . And you get extra bonus points for something really personal.”

Alex figured this would be a good test. She could reveal “juicy” information that wouldn’t cause too many ripples if it got out. Over the next few weeks, she would watch and listen, looking for any sign Quentin had leaked her confidences.

“Okay,” Quentin answered. “I’ll start. 1) I have a weakness for warm, cinnamon sticky buns; 2) I’m planning to start my own business; 3) When I was 17, my brother died.”

“I’m very sorry about your brother,” Alex said. “How do you come to terms with the fact that someone you love is no longer here?” Alex still missed her own mom and dad.

“I still miss him,” Quentin wrote. “You never completely get over the gap when someone is gone. The smallest things can remind you Your turn.”

“Okay,” Alex replied, “1) When I’m stressed, there’s a special place at the nature preserve—Jordan Ridge—where I go to think; 2) I

once dated Andy Parish, the talk show host, before he was famous;
3) My nickname in college was Bubbles (if this leaks out, you are toast).”

“Don’t worry. You can trust me.”

Alex wrote back, “So what are you planning on the business front?”

Quentin described his interest in global warming and some of his experiences in the music world. “There’s a company in Maine that advises musicians on how to make their tours more eco-friendly. I’m evaluating whether or not it is possible to offer more comprehensive services and do something similar on a national scale at a profit . . .”

Alex was instantly caught up in the idea. She asked Quentin a number of questions. They discussed issues. Alex made observations from a marketing perspective.

“Thank you,” Quentin wrote. “You are very good!”

“The advice is good only if you succeed; and I think you will,” Alex replied.

They signed off well after midnight. By the end of the conversation, Alex had ruled out Hollis as Quentin’s alter ego. She could not remember the last time she’d seen Hollis recycle anything let alone express concern about changes in the climate.

She woke the next morning, thinking about additional strategies Quentin may be able to use. She would send an email that night. And she would keep what she shared about herself at a minimum. Alex wanted to see if the nickname “Bubbles,” or anything she had mentioned came back to her. She pulled on her sweats and dashed off to meet Hollis.

Chapter 4

Alex met Hollis, her prince, by the river trail. He looked impeccable in his crisp blue sweat suit, not one hair was out of place. His well carved features and vivid green eyes held her spellbound. How fortunate she was Hollis had noticed her!

Hollis gave her a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek. “Good morning, beautiful,” he said. Alex felt herself relax. Hollis was here. Everything was going to be okay. Alex and Hollis jogged the river trail together, enjoying the pleasant October morning. They shared stories from the week and discussed plans.

“My folks are celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary in February;” Hollis noted between breaths. “We are planning to take them on a cruise to Bermuda. Will you come?”

“I would love to!” Alex replied, hearing wedding bells in the back of her mind. What a perfect opportunity for Hollis to ask her to marry him, unless he was planning to ask her over the holidays. Alex smiled with anticipation.

When she returned home, Alex came up with a plan for dealing with the alopecia. She would fight it as long as possible, but in the event the hair loss did not stop, she would buy a wig—actually two. Ignoring the expense, Alex began the process of ordering two full lace wigs, matching her current hair color and length. When they arrived, she would shave her head and start wearing them. No one would know the difference.

A plan always left Alex in better spirits, but she still couldn’t bring herself to tell her friends, family, or even Hollis. He was so perfect. How would he

respond to having a girlfriend—or a wife—with a physical defect? Other than her height and the hair loss, Alex had to admit God had been very kind to her. Her large, almond eyes sparkled when she smiled. Her high cheek bones, Mediterranean skin and fine features made people think of models in fashion magazines. She had always been slender and made sure she kept herself fit.

Over the next few weeks, Alex and Hollis attended events, went to Bible study, enjoyed the outdoors and spent time with his family . . . but Alex felt increasingly uncomfortable. Maybe she didn't need to tell him. *No, that's ridiculous*, she thought. The first time he discovered her swimming, bald, no doubt he would feel betrayed. *Please dear God, give me wisdom.*

Maybe Quentin would have some ideas? Alex wondered. It had been more than a month since her first correspondence with him. He continued to send notes and comics, but made no attempt to get in touch with her unless she initiated contact. And she did. They talked online about his business plan. They played a game to see who could come up with the most creative questions . . .

“If you were shipwrecked on a tropical island, what books would you want with you?” . . .

“What historical figures would you most like to meet and why?” . . .

“What are three things people do that drive you crazy?”

Alex enjoyed Quentin's sense of humor on line as much as she did in the comics. No matter what they discussed, nothing came back to her off line. No one called her “Bubbles” or giggled at church or in the corridors at work when she walked by.

Just to be sure, Alex asked Brian if he had heard anything recently about her family or her college days.

Alex instantly had Brian's attention. "Is there something I should know?" he asked. "Why don't I take you to lunch. We can talk."

"No, thank you, Brian," Alex smiled. "I was just curious." She knew her question would prompt him to make inquiries. If there was dirt to be found, Brian would find it. One week later, still nothing.

By the end of the five weeks, Alex found herself chatting on line with Quentin at least three times each week. He seemed trustworthy. She needed to talk with someone. Why not Quentin? What was the worst thing that could happen if news spread that she was going bald? Alex braced herself and thought through the possibilities. She decided it was one of those tidbits people would feast on for a week or two, but then quickly forget as they moved on to the latest gossip, especially if she kept her cool. She could deflect any questions and leave people wondering; no one would know for sure. At least she hoped that is what would happen. It might even be a relief to get the word out.

That evening, Alex typed the email.

"Hi Quentin. If you are free, I was wondering if we could chat for a few minutes at 8 p.m. –A.R."

Almost immediately, an email came back.

"Sure. Talk to you then. "

Alex felt more and more nervous as 8 p.m. approached. She signed on early and waited. What would Quentin think? Why did she care???

"Hi Alex, are you there?"

"Yes."

“Thank you for your ideas the other day,” Quentin noted. “I’m taking the marketing in a new direction. But we can talk about that later. What’s on your mind?”

“Hold on,” Alex responded. “I psyched myself up to ask you something and now I’m shaking. I’m so on edge. Is this silly or what???”

“What’s wrong, Alex?”

“Okay, I’ll just put this out there. I’m seeing a doctor for treatments to my scalp. I have something called alopecia—I’m losing my hair and unless we find a remedy that works, I could be bald by next summer. . . . wait . . . I need a tissue . . . How vain is this! It’s hair, not cancer. People don’t die from this. Far worse, my grandmother is having trouble remembering things,” Alex revealed. “She is losing her mind and I’m worried about losing my hair?! How selfish is that.”

“Alex, I wish I could be there with you. I’m sorry to hear about your hair and your grandmother. You are going to be okay. God has not forgotten you. I’m thinking you will be just as beautiful without hair as you are with it. How can I convince you of this?”

Alex blew her nose and smiled. Did Quentin really think she was beautiful?

“Thank you,” she said, “One wonders about these things. . . . So if you were dating someone and you found out she was going bald, would that matter to you?”

“Not to me. . . . Why? . . . Are you dating someone?”

Hmmmm. So Quentin didn't know she was dating Hollis? That ruled out anyone from church.

"Yes," Alex replied. "We've been spending more time together lately. Hollis—my boyfriend—invited me on a cruise in February to celebrate his parents' 40th wedding anniversary. But every time I think of telling him I'm going bald, I can't. I love this man and yet I'm afraid of his reaction."

"Alex, give the guy a chance to come through for you. Men love to be heroes. He may surprise you."

"Thank you. I know I need to say something. Maybe this weekend. We're playing tennis. Should be nice . . . fall colors and all."

"Good. I will pray for you. Let me know how things go. And Alex, if you are serious about Hollis, you need to ask him if he's okay with our correspondence. If he's not, we should stop. If I were dating someone, exclusively, I would want her to feel she could count on me ahead of everyone else. I imagine Hollis wants the same kind of trust from you. I wouldn't mind if she had friends; what would matter is the priority of those friendships . . . does that make sense?"

Alex paused. A jumble of thoughts surged through her mind. Quentin was right, of course. But something about his words bothered her. Did Hollis feel this way about her? Would they be able to rely on each other unconditionally—ahead of everyone else—to get through life's storms? Together? After five months, Alex wondered. She suddenly realized she was taking a long time to respond . . .

"Sorry, Quentin. I'm thinking about what you said. I'd like to continue corresponding with you. . . . Are you sure you are single?"

How old are you? I'm surprised someone hasn't jumped at the chance to be your wife."

"Jumped at the chance? LOL. I've had two close calls but never made it to the altar. I'm close to your age, probably a little older. There are worse things than being single, just as there are worse things than losing one's hair. Take care of yourself, Alex. I wish you and Hollis God's absolute best and will continue to pray for you both."

"Thank you, Quentin. I will pray for you as well. –A. R."

Alex sighed as she shut down her computer. She knew one thing. She did not want to lose contact with Quentin. But would Hollis understand their correspondence? And where was Quentin coming from? Would it bother him to lose contact with her? How could Quentin be so "matter-of-fact" about whether or not they continued to chat? If they stopped writing each other, she would miss him. But would he miss her?

Alex had a strange dream that night . . . she was in a row boat with Hollis. The wind began to blow, then howl. The waves around their boat grew larger and more ominous. Suddenly, the water turned to icy, liquid hands. The hands grabbed at her. Alex screamed. Cold watery fingers closed over her, pulling her out of the boat, pushing her under, dragging her down. She tried to get Hollis' attention, desperate to let him know she was drowning. But her words caught in her throat. Her mouth filled with water. Alex caught a glimpse of Hollis through the waves; somehow, he had managed to stay in the boat . . . he kept rowing. . . . She was drowning, cold, forgotten . . . and he was headed for safety without her.

Alex woke, her heart racing. She had to know where Hollis stood.

Chapter 5

When morning came, Alex called to confirm their tennis date. They met at 2 p.m. at the recreation center. It was a good match. Afterwards, Hollis and Alex enjoyed a fruit smoothie, as they usually did. Alex enjoyed the warmth of his touch, the thrill of having him so close.

“Hollis, I need to tell you something,” Alex ventured.

Hollis studied her face, his eyes brimming with affection. “What is it, Alexa?”

Alex took a deep breath and sighed. She watched him closely as she told him she was losing her hair and might be bald by summer.

Hollis sighed, taking her hand, “I am so sorry to hear that. Are you okay?”

“Some days are better than others,” Alex answered. “It’s a hard idea to get used to.” Inwardly, Alex rejoiced at his response. Quentin had been right. Hollis wanted to be her hero.

Hollis asked if Alex had gotten a second or third opinion. What experts had she consulted? He asked many questions about the treatment and the prognosis.

Even though the conversation had gone well, Hollis was unusually quiet as they walked to their cars. When they parted, Alex kissed his cheek and whispered “thank you” in his ear. He stroked the side of her face. “You’re going to be okay, sweetheart.” And with that, he was gone. Alex forgot to mention her correspondence with Quentin.

Hollis and Alex attended Sunday school and sat with each other during worship, as always. Even though their conversation seemed normal, Alex sensed Hollis was more distant, more reserved. She began to suspect he was having a hard time with the alopecia. Cold, watery fear splashed down her back.

The following week, Hollis backed out of Bible Study and a date they had planned for Friday. He blamed work and was certain she would understand.

“Are you sure this has nothing to do with me losing my hair?” Alex challenged him.

“No, of course not,” Hollis replied. But Alex was not convinced.

The next week was much the same. Hollis seldom called. He found excuses, albeit good ones, for not getting together. Alex felt a growing sense of dread. He was not okay with her condition.

On Sunday, Alex confronted Hollis after church in the parking lot.

“Regardless of what you are saying or not saying, Hollis, I think you are having a hard time with the fact I am going bald.”

Hollis stared at the ground. He slowly raised his eyes to meet Alex’s face.

“I am so sorry, Lexa,” he responded. “I want to be here for you . . . and yes, I am having a hard time with it. You know I’d like to run for office someday. What if the press finds out? Suppose I make a successful run at the senate or the governor’s office. Can you imagine what the media could do with the fact that a senator’s wife is bald? Think of the tabloids.”

Alex stared hard at Hollis, not believing what she was hearing. In a flash, she realized whoever married Hollis wasn’t marrying a person, she was

marrying a life of appearances, polls, and ratings. “You know, Hollis, there are ways to use misfortune to your political advantage,” Alex replied coolly.

Hollis said nothing. Alex felt her temper rising.

“I’ll tell you what, Hollis,” Alex said, holding back her fury. “I’m going to make this easy for you. As of this moment, we are no longer in any sort of relationship. Don’t call me. Don’t apologize. Don’t send email. Don’t send flowers. We are through. Am I making myself clear?”

Hollis returned her stare, but said nothing. Wasn’t he going to fight for her? Wasn’t he going to make some attempt to hold on?

Alex felt disgusted. She turned, shaking, got in her car and slammed the door. She looked in her rearview mirror. Hollis simply walked away. He never objected. He never even tried. Alex’s tears flowed. How could he be so shallow? How could she be so blind? She felt as though someone had torn out her heart and stepped on it.

Alex raced home. She threw on a sweater and her jeans. She wanted to get to Jordan Ridge; she had to think. Alex grabbed a tissue, paused, then grabbed the entire box and ran out the door.

* * * * *

Alex stared at the cityscape from the overlook on Jordan Ridge, not believing what had just happened. Hollis, her prince charming, the man she hoped to marry, had simply turned and left. *Dear God, how could he be such a jerk?* She cried and cried. Eventually, the tears subsided. Far back in her mind, it occurred to her that somehow, she might be better off. What if she had married Hollis? In a strange way, she was thankful for the alopecia, thankful for the chance to see Hollis under pressure. But her

heart still ached . . . she had lost her dreams, her future. She wanted to talk with someone . . . with Quentin . . . she needed to connect with him . . .

* * * * *

Quentin seemed, as always, to be waiting for her email. He wrote back immediately. She wondered if he ever left his computer.

“Hi,” was all Alex said.

“What happened?” Quentin asked.

“Not good.” Alex wrote back. “Hollis is a jerk.” Fresh tears flowed. She took a moment to deal with them.

“Alex, I am sorry. Are you okay?”

“No. But I’ll be alright. Are you sure you and I couldn’t meet for coffee? I could really use a friend right now.”

“You have no idea how much I want to be with you. Technology only goes so far.”

“But you can’t, right?”

“No . . . it would create more problems than it would solve.”

“What does that mean, Quentin?! I’m a big girl. Whatever the problems are, I can handle them.”

“Alex, trust me. You will get through this disaster with Hollis. I’m amazed he can’t see what he is giving up. You are one in ten billion.”

“Well, thanks for that. . . .” Alex filed Quentin’s comment in the back of her mind. “How are things coming with your business plan?” she asked, moving to safer territory.

Quentin went on to describe the latest iteration. Alex was in her comfort zone now . . . business planning . . . marketing strategies . . . it was nice to get her mind off Hollis even if she could not understand why Quentin refused to meet her in person. Then she started thinking, if he was always at his computer, maybe he was disabled in some way, or maybe he was disfigured . . .

As the business discussion wound down, Alex brought up a new subject. “Quentin, have you ever worked with the handicapped or done anything with Special Olympics?”

“Yes, in fact. Why do you ask?”

“I have a neighbor whose son has cerebral palsy and I’d like to reach out to her. He’s about age 6 or 7 and I’m just not sure what to say or do.”

Quentin came back with a host of suggestions. Alex had a sense that perhaps her theory that he was disabled wasn’t far off. Alex was grateful for Quentin’s ideas. She had always wanted to connect with Gloria and her son, Josh, but felt awkward, uncertain. Now she at least had a place to start.

“Quentin, thank you,” Alex wrote in closing. “I have one more favor to ask you.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m wondering if you would call me Alexa? That’s my real name, the one my family and close friends use. I shortened it to Alex during college because I thought it would help me compete better in the business world.”

“I would be honored, Alexa,” Quentin responded. “Thank you.”

Chapter 6

Alex inadvertently walked into a circus at work the following Tuesday. As she went by Ira’s office, she asked him what was going on.

Ira explained, “One of Mark’s programmers made an error. He created a custom interface that brought down the client’s network and is wreaking havoc. It’s the Murphy account; you know, as in Murphy’s law.” Ira chuckled. He couldn’t help himself. “I’m sorry, this is serious and I’m making jokes.”

“Anyway, they shut Murphy Enterprises down for the day. Frank Murphy, the CEO, wants blood and is threatening to sue Fischer Technologies. Cal is angry. It’s possible we will lose a million dollar account. But Mark is standing by the programmer, Hank. Hank has been here for nine years. His wife has cancer and he has two teenage girls.”

“Oh Ira,” Alex moaned. “This is not a good way for anyone to start the day.”

“Cal scheduled an emergency exec meeting at 10 a.m. You need to be there.”

“Thanks, Ira,” Alex nodded. “I have a sudden urge to schedule an emergency root canal instead.”

Ira smiled. He had always liked Alex. “See you at 10,” he replied as she made her exit.

* * * * *

Alex was the first to arrive. Mark followed, looking sullen, beat up. He nodded but said nothing. Ira entered and sat next to Mark, lending silent support. A moment later, Cal stormed in with Brian close at his heels.

“By now you have all heard what happened to Frank Murphy’s network,” Cal began. The jovial atmosphere that usually accompanied their staff meetings was absent. “Mark will oversee damage control. He has until the end of the week to fix the interface and keep Murphy as a client. If Mark can’t do it, Hank is gone. We have to do something to help cover the loss.”

Alex clenched her hands under the table. Something wasn’t right. Hank wasn’t being paid enough for his dismissal to compensate for a million dollar loss.

Brian objected, “Hank should be fired immediately. Do you know how long it took us to land the Murphy account? Errors like this cannot happen. We need to send a message.”

Mark, Alex and Ira glared at Brian. *What a moron*, Alex thought.

“No, Brian,” Cal answered. “Hank will stay for now; provided Mark gets everything back under control this week. Then Hank will be on probation for the next six months. Mark has put himself personally on the line for Hank. He’s offered to take a pay cut and forego his annual bonus to help defray the cost of keeping Hank on board. I accepted his offer.”

“Cal!” Mark exploded, standing abruptly. “That was strictly between us. It has no bearing on this discussion.”

“I disagree, Mark,” Cal answered. “Sit down.”

Mark complied in form, but not in spirit. Alex had never seen him so angry.

Ira cleared his throat. “Cal, I may be able to help here.”

Cal shifted his fiery focus from Mark to Ira.

“We have plenty of cash in reserve,” Ira explained. “We are so far ahead this year that even if we lose Murphy, we can still reach our revenue targets. In other words, there is no need for Mark to sacrifice a pound of flesh.”

“Ira,” Cal flared. “That is not the issue here. It is a matter of principle. Hank is Mark’s responsibility and Mark dropped the ball.”

Alex’s mouth fell open. She couldn’t believe Cal was pinning this on Mark.

Mark stood and left the room. Cal ignored his departure.

“We will meet Monday at 9 a.m. to reassess the situation and the need for any further damage control.”

Alex was incensed. She opened her mouth to say the only damage control Cal needed to do was right here in this room, but Ira stopped her. He placed a hand on her arm, advising her with a look to keep her mouth shut.

When they were back in the corridor, Ira observed, “Cal is not in a rational frame of mind at the moment. The prospect of losing a million dollar client does strange things to his psyche. He will get back to his senses and all this will be forgotten, Alex. Just wait and see.”

Alex was disturbed by Cal’s behavior. She did not know Mark well, but admired him for putting himself on the line for the sake of his employee. She wanted Mark to know he had her support. Alex tentatively knocked on Mark’s office door.

“Who is it?” he barked.

Alex poked her head in, “Alex.”

Mark’s expression softened, yet retained its seriousness. He looked tired. With his thick black hair, fair skin, and startling blue eyes, Alex found him intriguingly handsome. She wondered why she hadn’t noticed him before.

“Come in,” Mark offered. Alex stepped inside and closed the door, never taking her hand off the cool metal doorknob. Mark eyed her intently.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m fine,” he sighed, leaning back and running a hand through his hair. “This isn’t the first time Cal and I haven’t seen eye-to-eye. I’m sure we’ll get through this.”

Alex studied his expression. “Are you saying that to convince me? Or to convince yourself?” she asked.

Mark smiled. “Good question, Alex” He avoided a direct answer. “The problem with Murphy isn’t as bad as it sounds. I already have three solid theories about what went wrong. I’ll head over there with Hank in a few minutes to see what we can do to fix the problem.”

Alex nodded. Mark continued, “Hank is a good guy. He’s an amazing programmer. You don’t cut off a loyal, competent employee like Hank on the basis of one irate phone call from a customer”

Mark sounded confident, determined.

“Hank and Murphy are both in good hands,” Alex said quietly. “I admire how you are handling this.”

“Don’t order any granite for a pedestal,” Mark said wryly, “we’re not through this mess yet.”

Alex smiled, “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

“Thank you, Alex” he said softly.

The way Mark looked at her caught Alex off guard. He was studying her, with unspoken questions in his kind, gentle eyes. Something flickered in their depths. Interest? Regard? Alex tightened her grip on the doorknob for support.

“So Alex, how are you doing?” Mark asked. The intensity of his focus unnerved her.

“I’m okay.” She replied.

Mark smiled. “And who are you trying to convince?” he asked.

Alex caught her breath. “I’ll let you know,” she said. Alex hurriedly slipped out the door.

Alex’s heart was racing. *What just happened in there?* She pushed the thought away and walked back to her office.

Mark did solve the problem at Murphy Enterprises. One of Murphy’s network managers had made an error when he installed the interface. He tried to make it look as though the error was in Hank’s original program. It was not. Frank Murphy was very apologetic. He called Cal immediately, complimenting him on how well Mark and Hank handled the situation and solved the problem. It had taken less than three hours and they were back in business. Cal apologized to Mark in front of the executive team. Hank kept his job. The only person who was annoyed was Brian; he had lost a potential advantage.

That evening, Alex described the circus at work to Quentin.

“All that was missing was the talking monkey,” she quipped.

Alex noted how much she admired her colleague’s stand.

“If I were stranded after a disaster of some kind with a group of people, Mark is the sort of person I would want on my team,” she observed.

Alex also described how it had been bothering her lately that she kept her work life so completely separate from her “real” life. She was convicted during worship that she needed to trust the Lord as much at work as she did for her salvation.

“Do you have any thoughts on this?” Alex asked Quentin.

“How well do you know your colleagues and your staff?”
he asked.

“Not very well,” Alex responded. “I keep myself and my team focused on reaching our goals. It’s different for women in the work world—guys get the benefit of the doubt; women are cast as the evil step mothers or false lovers if they’re not careful. It’s one thing for Mark to stick his neck out for Hank; if I did something similar, people would question my motives.”

“You’re rationalizing,” Quentin observed.

“But if I get to know people at work, I’ll appear too soft, too feminine,” Alex objected. “I’ll lose credibility and influence. How can I be open about my life and still keep the focus on what needs to be done?”

“Alex, you don’t have to share your personal concerns or problems. You’re right. That’s seldom appropriate, especially in your position. But you can take more of an interest in those you work with. Listen to them. Watch their eyes; their body language. Look for opportunities to help them.”

Quentin gently shared Scripture about serving the Lord with our lives and our work, not worrying about appearances.

“I get your point,” Alex wrote, “but I’m skeptical.”

“Why not experiment?” Quentin suggested. “For one week, focus on seeing your staff and colleagues as Christ sees them. Ask questions. Listen. Pray for them. You don’t have to talk about your faith; but watch for opportunities to demonstrate it.”

Alex accepted Quentin’s challenge: for one week, she would pray for Fischer Technologies and its employees, asking God to help her see them through His eyes.

“God cares about you, Alex. He has a way of knocking down the walls we construct to keep Him out. Trust Him.”

Chapter 7

Wednesday morning, Alex poured her usual cup of coffee and made her way to her office. But instead of a quick hello, she stopped for a moment to consider Beth—quiet, dependable Beth—her assistant for close to three years. Alex counted on this young, unassuming worker and yet she knew very little about her; only what Beth had shared on her resume.

“How are you doing?” Alex asked, actually noticing how tired Beth looked. Beth jumped. She paused, wondering at her boss’ question. Did Alex really want to know?

“I’m okay,” Beth replied. “Thank you for asking.”

“Seriously?” Alex asked.

Beth sighed. “It’s no big deal,” she stated. “My husband fell—he’s in construction. He broke his leg in two places and can’t work for a few months.”

“When did this happen?” Alex asked.

“Yesterday afternoon.”

Alex was puzzled. Why hadn’t Beth told her? Why hadn’t she asked for time off?

“Is he at home?”

“He has surgery later this morning,” Beth noted. “They need to insert a plate . . .”

“What are you doing here?” Alex asked, astounded.

“We can’t afford to have anything go wrong with my job,” Beth said as she glanced away.

Alex sat in the chair next to Beth’s desk, something she couldn’t remember doing before.

“Beth,” she said gently. “You have nothing to worry about here. Please, go, be with your husband. I appreciate your dedication, but we can manage. Call me if you need anything.”

“Really?” Beth looked at her boss, not quite believing what she was hearing.

“Yes,” Alex smiled. “I mean it.”

Beth stood. She quickly retrieved her handbag and keys from the cabinet behind her.

“Thank you, Alex,” she said. “It’s good to know you’re human . . . I’m sorry . . . that didn’t come out right.”

“Don’t worry, Beth. I know what you meant. Now get out of here,” she smiled kindly.

As soon as Beth disappeared, Alex entered her office and closed the door. She sat behind her desk and prayed. *Am I really such an ogre? She wondered. What else have I missed?*

Alex warmed at the thought of telling Quentin. She was so grateful for him. She longed to meet him. And yet, all her efforts to uncover his identity had yielded nothing. She quickly reviewed her progress—Quentin hadn’t known about Hollis; he obviously didn’t attend her church. He knew she was a believer, so he couldn’t be someone from her past or someone from work . . . or was there something she’d missed? Was he someone from the ski club? Or had she met him at the missions conference last spring?

A knock at her office door brought Alex back to the moment.

“Come in” Alex called.

Brian poked his head in. “Do you have a minute?” he asked.

“Sure,” Alex said. “Have a seat.”

Brian tentatively took a chair in front of her desk. He looked guarded, as if he expected an attack. Alex realized he had good reason.

“Brian,” Alex began. “Before you say anything, I owe you an apology.”

The man frowned. He did not trust what he was hearing.

“I’ve been hard on you and excluded you from the planning process. That’s not right. You were here long before me. You obviously know what you are doing or the company would not be where it is today. I’d like you to take a look at what we have for the E-Value campaign so far. Let me know what you think; how we can work together on this.”

Brian frowned. The tiger had velvety her claws. Could he trust her?

“Sure,” Brian said cautiously. “That’s the reason I’m here.”

Alex didn’t entirely believe him, but she took him at his word.

“Great,” she smiled. “I’ll email you the outline.”

Brian rose to leave and then paused, wondering if he had missed a punch line.

“Thank you, Alex,” he said. And he left.

Maybe the problem with Brian isn’t all Brian, Alex considered. Perhaps the problem is . . . well at least partly . . . something with me? The thought bothered her; she decided to think and pray about it later.

Alex had never enjoyed work as much as she did that week. She couldn’t wait to fire up her computer to share the stories with Quentin—how her experiences reshaped her purpose at work. Amazingly, her productivity did not diminish. Her staff seemed to have better morale.

Quentin encouraged her. He admired her efforts. He said all the right things.

“Quentin,” Alex ventured one evening. “I need to know something. Even though I have no clue who you are, I feel close to you. I worry that one day I’ll sign on and you won’t be here. How much longer until we can meet?”

For a long while, Quentin was silent.

“Quentin, are you still there?” Alex asked.

“Yes . . . I’m thinking.”

Alex left her computer for a snack, wondering if she had made a mistake. What would happen if she pushed Quentin to reveal himself? Alex feared she was falling in love with this man . . . if she hadn’t already. . . . but is it possible to fall in love with someone you’ve never actually seen or heard?

Alex returned to her screen; still, no response.

“Quentin,” she typed. “If there is something less than perfect about you . . . a disability . . . a handicap . . . or if you are disfigured in some way . . . please know it makes no difference to me.”

“Thank you, Alex,” Quentin returned, “that’s a relief. It’s also more complicated than that.”

So maybe he was handicapped? Disfigured? He didn’t deny it , Alex noted.

Quentin continued, “Let me think about this, Alex. I value your friendship. The last thing I want to do is create problems for you.”

“I don’t understand how meeting you would create problems,” Alex countered.

“I know. I’m sorry,” Quentin returned. And with that, he signed off.

Chapter 8

Alex retrieved a box, left by the shipping service, from her neighbor. The wigs. She shuddered as she touched the return address. Alex took the box inside but refused to open it. She still wanted to keep her natural hair as long as possible. She held up a mirror and lifted her hair to examine the latest bald patch. Fortunately, the spot was hidden behind her ear. So what if, eventually, she felt the urge to try a comb-over? Alex laughed. She pictured balding men who grew the sides long and then brushed the sides over the top. How could a comb-over possibly disguise anyone’s missing hair? If it didn’t work for guys with thinning hair; it certainly wouldn’t work for her. Soon, she feared, it would be time to shave her head. Alex shuddered.

That weekend, a local environmental group hosted a free symposium: “How to make your business more eco-friendly.” *Would Quentin be there?* Alex wondered. She decided to find out.

The old theater downtown served as the ideal venue for the symposium. Alex arrived early and yet the theater was packed. Most the auditorium seats were taken. Alex walked the ramp toward the front, studying each row for a place to sit, wondering how she could recognize Quentin.

“Hey Alex,” voices called out. “Over here.”

It was Cal and Mark. Alex was surprised to see them. They seemed to have resolved their differences.

“Are you going green, gentlemen?” Alex asked with a smile.

“Maybe,” Cal returned. “It could be good for business. Why don’t you join us?”

“I’m looking for a friend,” Alex explained. “He may be in a wheel chair.”

“The wheel chairs are down front,” Cal said, stating the obvious.

“We’ll save a seat for you,” Mark commented, “in case you change your mind.”

Alex studied each of the half dozen people in wheel chairs. She saw no males in their thirties or forties. Alex sighed. What was she thinking? How could she possibly recognize Quentin from the words he typed? She had no way of knowing his height, weight, eye or hair color. Was she hoping Quentin would wheel forward and suddenly introduce himself after all these months of mystery?

Alex noticed another acquaintance. Todd. Todd Kalakis. The account representative with Donovan Printing was sitting in the second row. Todd was on the short side, but well muscled. Dark. Competitive. Charming. He caught her eye and nodded. “Alex, good to see you,” he grinned. “How’s business?”

Alex recalled seeing something about Donovan Printing’s commitment to preserving the environment.

“Terrific,” Alex replied. “Todd, I know Donovan has taken a stand on environmental issues; would you be willing to meet with me next week and tell me more about what your company is doing?”

Todd smiled broadly. “Sure,” he replied. “Anything for one of my favorite customers.”

“You are such a schmooze,” Alex teased. He winked.

Alex wondered for a moment whether or not Todd could be the mysterious Q.F. She did not know enough about him to be certain; perhaps it was time to change that.

Alex made her way back to the seat next to Cal and Mark. She contemplated the impossibility of recognizing Quentin.

“No luck,” Alex explained as she took the seat next to Cal.

“Sorry,” Cal said. “How is it that you don’t know if your friend is in a wheelchair?” he asked.

“He’s someone I met online,” Alex admitted. “I’ve never actually seen him.”

Cal raised an eyebrow. Alex changed the subject.

“So what do you see as the advantages for FT in taking up the environmental banner?” she asked.

Cal described some of his thoughts but kept circling back to potential costs. Mark seemed preoccupied. For some reason, Alex was thankful Mark had missed her earlier remarks about meeting someone on line.

After the symposium, Cal suggested they go out for coffee and talk about making Fischer Technologies more environmentally friendly.

“Coffee?” Mark challenged. “Cal, if you’re going to hold us captive, the least you can do is feed us.”

Cal took Mark's not-so-subtle hint and offered to buy dinner for the three of them. Alex laughed.

"Mark is the reason there's a cap on the meal expense," Cal said.

"Otherwise, he would completely eat through our profits."

The three stopped at a cozy burger joint around the corner from the old theater. After the hostess seated them, Mark asked Alex for her thoughts on taking a stronger stand to protect the environment.

"While it would give us certain marketing advantages," Alex observed, "it seems to me we have a moral obligation to do more than what we're doing now—regardless of whether or not the Company sees any direct revenue from it."

Cal rolled his eyes. "Mark wants to eat through our profits. And now you want to save the world with them. We'll be lucky if the company survives the next decade."

Alex smiled. "Stop grumbling, Cal. We can phase this in. We'll start with recycling more—which won't cost you anything—and then come up with an internal campaign and a 'green slogan' to be used on everything that goes out the door. From what I heard today, you stand to benefit from increased employee morale and customer loyalty, even if we just take baby steps."

The waitress took their orders—burgers and fries all around, with a few extras for Mark. "I'm always hungry," he confessed.

Alex envied his metabolism. How the man could eat like that and still maintain his made-for-the-movies shape was beyond her.

Mark suggested an energy audit and incentives to decrease resource consumption, “all of which have the potential to decrease overheads, Cal.”

“But when do I see more sales?” Cal asked bluntly.

“Would you be open to an experiment?” Alex asked. She glanced at Mark. He nodded.

“Suppose we implement a low cost eco-friendly program and track the results for one year,” Alex explained. “If you see a positive impact on sales, we can expand the program.”

Mark continued, “But if ‘going green’ cuts into our profit margin without a corresponding increase in sales, “we can drop the program and go back to doing business the old way.”

How strange that Mark knew where she was going with this, Alex thought. It was as if they had rehearsed, yet she hardly knew him.

“Very well,” Cal conceded. “I want a written proposal from the two of you along with a cost/benefit analysis by the end of next week. We should be able to handle being green for one year, but Alex, do me a favor, make sure Mark doesn’t slip in any contingencies that require us to support his appetite. We’ll go bankrupt.”

“I’ll behave myself,” Mark smiled.

Cal excused himself, explaining he had promised Marie a night at the theater. “The things I do for that woman,” he muttered.

“Oh hush,” Alex said. “You know you adore her.”

Cal feigned alarm. “Please don’t tell her, Alex. I will lose the strength of my negotiating position.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Good. . . . Mark, are you free for racquetball tomorrow?” Cal asked.

“Sure. Call me after church.”

“Done.” And with that, Cal breezed out of the café.

Mark smiled, “You know Cal favors the green project, don’t you”

“Sometimes it’s hard to tell where his act leaves off and reality begins,” Alex remarked. “But it shouldn’t take us long to put an outline together. We can draft it now and then each of us can take different sections and fill in the details.”

“Works for me,” Mark noted.

As Alex and Mark worked through the outline, written on more than a few napkins, Alex was once again struck by the way they seemed to closely follow each others’ thoughts, even without all the words.

When they finished, Alex told Mark, “How strange. . . we seem to easily follow what each other is thinking, without much explaining. . . I’ve never had that happen before.”

“Me neither,” admitted Mark. “So if you tried, do you think you could read my mind?” he asked.

Alex laughed. “Let’s give it a shot,” she teased.

“Okay; I’m thinking of something”

“Mark, no hints.” Alex reprimanded him, “you can’t tell me anything.”

“Okay, okay.”

Alex looked at Mark's face. He smiled, but she hardly noticed. What captured her attention were his eyes—impossibly blue one minute, silver the next—like an inviting pool, shimmering in the moonlight. She wanted to dive in. Wait. She was supposed to be reading his thoughts.

Alex closed her eyes and tried to visualize his mind. *This is silly*, she thought. "I'm not getting anything," she laughed.

Mark took her hand. "Now try it," he said.

The warmth from his touch flowed through her. How odd. Somewhere in the back of her mind Alex acknowledged she should feel awkward. But she didn't. She felt amazingly calm, as if the world was as it should be. Alex studied Mark's expression.

"Well, that's a relief," she said. "I'm still not hearing anything . . . but I am getting a sense that . . . oh no, you'll laugh."

"Go on. Try me."

Alex grew serious. "I'm getting a sense that you are genuinely content . . . and the only thing that would make this moment more perfect for you is ordering dessert."

Mark laughed—a hearty, rich, masculine sound. Alex wanted to hear it again. "You, Miss Rauch, are exactly correct," he beamed. "Now it's my turn."

"Don't you want to order dessert first?"

"Later."

Mark took her hand again and studied her face. His eyes drew and held hers like a magnet. She couldn't have looked away if she'd wanted to. Alex felt her insides flutter. Did Mark have this effect on everyone?

"Relax," he said.

What did Mark see? She felt warm. She wanted to run, but refused to back down. She returned his gaze, challenging him to continue.

Mark let go of her hand and frowned. "Now you are going to laugh," he said.

"No I won't. I promise," Alex said. "What did you hear?"

"Nothing. But you seem concerned—as if there are burdens you are carrying. But I also sense strength, courage. I'm certain you will make it through whatever is bothering you and you will be a better person because of it." Mark smiled sheepishly, "Okay, so go ahead. Laugh."

Alex did not laugh. She could scarcely breathe. Rats. Why did she and Mark have to work for the same company? It would be so nice to have a friend, and to be a friend . . . to a real flesh and blood person. Not an email. Not a text message.

Alex clenched her hands in her lap, out of sight. She managed a smile.

"You are correct, Mr. Hanson. And now it is time for dessert."

Mark nodded and perused the dessert menu. Alex liked that he did not press her about her secrets.

"Shall I guess what you would like to order?" Mark grinned.

"No, thank you," Alex laughed. "That last exercise was scary enough for one evening."

As they waited for their desserts, Alex wanted to ask Mark about his church. About his personal life. Why not? It wasn't as if she was taking down the wall between her professional and personal life; she just wanted to install a window.

"What church do you go to?" Alex asked.

"Lakeside," he answered. Mark hesitated, "And you . . ."

"I'm over at Grace Community," Alex smiled.

Mark's face lit up. "Great! You're a believer."

Alex nodded.

His enthusiasm caught her by surprise. "I'm always encouraged to hear of other believers at the office," he said. "I'm convinced our success is a gift from God; that our prayers for our work and our customers make a difference. Cal doesn't see it that way, but he's softened over the years. We've seen too many unexplained coincidences. He doesn't think I'm nearly as insane as he used to."

Alex wanted to ask Mark how he came to know the Lord; but that implied permission for him to ask her the same question. Her testimony was too personal. It was one thing to install a window. It was another thing to actually open it.

"I didn't know there were other believers at the office," Alex admitted, "except for Ted in shipping of course. He's not shy."

"No," Mark smiled, "but his passion for the Lord and his work are a powerful testimony."

"Would you mind telling me about the others?" Alex asked thoughtfully.

“Sure, there’s Mike, Hank and Karen on my team; I’m not certain about Jenna and Alan in sales but it’s possible; Victoria in production is a believer; and then there’s Beth.”

“Beth?” Alex asked. “My Beth?”

Mark nodded.

“Good grief,” Alex exclaimed. “She’s been my assistant for more than two years and I didn’t have a clue.” Alex looked at Mark, embarrassed. “I haven’t been doing a very good job of trusting the Lord with my professional life. I don’t reach out or get to know people very well on a personal level. I don’t pray much about things at the office. I’m afraid to cross that boundary. Afraid something will be lost.” *Shut up*, Alex told herself. *You’re babbling and you never babble.*

“Alex,” Mark said softly, “it’s okay. You don’t have to explain. But if you don’t mind, I will pray for you.”

Alex nodded. “How can I pray for you?” she asked.

Mark frowned and was quiet for a moment. “I have my own burdens,” he said, “I want to be free of them. But I don’t want to hurt anyone. Ask God to give me wisdom.”

“I will.”

“Thank you, Alex.”

Mark and Alex finished their desserts without saying much, each one lost in thought. But the stillness was comfortable, as if they had known each other for years.

Mark walked Alex to her car, his jacket slung over his shoulder. He opened the door for her and smiled. In his smile, Alex felt the warmth of the sun.

“I’ll see you on Monday,” he said.

“Don’t count on it,” she teased.

And with that, Mark was gone.

Chapter 9

Alex hadn’t meant to give her conversation with Mark much thought. She never allowed herself to get close to men she worked with. *Never.* That would be messy. Unprofessional. And besides, she was interested in Quentin. The time with Mark was a fluke, something that should not have happened. And yet images of Mark invaded her thoughts, disturbing her equilibrium. She could not seem to shake the mental snapshots of his smile . . . the sound of his laugh . . . the warmth of his touch . . . And she could still feel that warmth. . . . The corners of her mouth raised in an unbidden smile. *Stop it!* Alex commanded herself. *He’s just a colleague. Don’t be an idiot.*

Alex mentally slammed the door on her thoughts of Mark as she closed the front door of her well appointed town house. Normally, she would have gone directly to her computer. She would have sent Quentin an email to see if he was free for a little conversation before turning in for the night. But not tonight.

Alex noticed the blinking light on her answering machine. The first message was from Allie.

“Hi Alexa. It’s me. The doctor called today. Gram may be showing early signs of Alzheimer’s. We need to move her to a long-term care facility. I’m so sorry. I know you don’t need this right now. Please call me as soon as you can.”

Alex’s heart went out to her grandmother, and to Allie. Allie was carrying the bulk of this burden—stopping by to see Gram every day, taking her to her appointments, making the arrangements. It had to be rough.

Alex dialed Allie’s number, “Oh, thank God it’s you, Alexa.” Allie wasn’t particularly religious, but she wasn’t beyond a prayer or two in a pinch. “You got my message.”

“Yes. Are you okay? I want to help. Tell me what the doctor said. Tell me what you need.”

Allie’s voice broke as she described her conversation with the neurologist. “They’ve pretty much ruled everything else out, Alexa. No one can make a 100% sure diagnosis until after someone dies, but things do not look good. And Gram is definitely losing her grip. At first, she didn’t seem to recognize Michael the other day. It broke my heart.”

Michael was Allie’s oldest boy, Alex’s nephew. He was 10.

“And how did Michael handle it?” Alex asked.

“He was sad, but he seemed okay. Jon and I have been explaining things to the boys all the way along so they’re not surprised. But it’s going to get harder and harder—on all of us—as the disease progresses.”

Alex closed her eyes as Allie spoke. She pictured Gram as she remembered her years ago—laughing at their antics, pulling Alex and Allie into her arms, telling them she was the luckiest grandmother alive . . .

“Do you need help finding a home for her?” Alex asked softly.

“There’s one about two miles from here that looks promising. People start with their own apartments and as they need more care, they move to the residential wing. The staff is well qualified and pleasant. The facilities are in great shape. But I’d like you to come out and take a look.”

“Sure, just say when.”

“Can you come Wednesday afternoon? The day after tomorrow? I know it’s short notice and it’s Halloween, but after the tour, you could join us for dinner. The boys would love for you to see their costumes.”

Alex smiled. “No problem. I would enjoy that. Wednesday works for me. I don’t have anything pressing at the office. I’ll bring some candy for the boys.”

* * *

Alex cleared her calendar and met Allie at the Meadowbrook Center early Wednesday afternoon.

“Who’s watching Michael and Sean?” Alex asked.

“They’re going over to our neighbor’s house after school. Sandra owes me some serious babysitting time,” Allie replied with a smile.

At that moment a thin, stately woman, about their age, entered the lobby. “Mrs. Stanton? Miss Rausch?” She held out her hand. “I’m Rose, the director of the center.”

Alex liked Rose immediately. “Please, call me Alex.”

“And I’m Allie,” her sister chimed in.

“Glad to meet you in person,” Rose said graciously, shaking their hands. “I am very sorry to hear about your grandmother.”

Alex and Allie nodded. Allie was slightly taller, and more round than her slender sister. They shared the same clear complexions and honey almond eyes.

“I understand you would like a tour of the facilities,” Rose continued, “and to learn more about what we do here.”

“Yes,” Allie replied. “And please repeat what you’ve told me over the phone to Alexa. We’re making this decision together.”

Rose’s eyes shone with compassion. “Certainly.”

Rose led the girls to the apartment side of the complex and showed them one of the empty rooms. The residents they met greeted Rose cheerfully. She shook their hands or hugged them with enthusiasm, often inquiring about their children or grandchildren. *Clearly, Alex thought, she cares about the people who live here.*

“We have to constantly pay attention to the friends and couples who live in the apartments,” Rose observed. “When someone starts to slip, they try to cover for each other. It’s very sweet. No one wants to be separated from those they love. It’s a difficult transition to move from the apartments to the residential care facility; the loss of independence is hard to take and people seldom move back. The residents feel each move as if it were their own.”

Alex fought back a tear as she thought about Gram. “Do you think our grandmother could manage living in an apartment?” she asked.

“From what Allie has told me, yes. She would have assistance and will be okay for awhile. We try to help everyone maintain as much independence as they can manage for as long as possible,” Rose explained. “And above all, we help everyone maintain their dignity.”

Alex glanced at Allie. Allie squeezed her hand.

“After talking with Rose last week, I found myself wishing Meadowbrook had a place for families with young children,” Allie confided. “It would be heaven to have someone prepare our meals each day and clean our home. And think of all the bridge and bingo. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself!”

Rose and Alex laughed. The tour continued.

As they explored the residential treatment facility, Alex was struck by kindness of the staff, the warmth and cleanliness of the décor. An elderly woman in a pink flannel nightgown approached Rose. She was beaming. “Isn’t it a glorious day?” she said as she placed a gnarled hand on Rose’s arm. Rose covered the woman’s hand with her own and smiled. “You look terrific, Florence.”

“The sun is so warm and George is coming to visit,” Florence continued, lowering her voice as if confiding some great secret, “We’re going sailing!”

“That’s marvelous!” Rose replied. “You couldn’t have picked a better day, I’m sure you will have a wonderful time!”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Florence replied as she padded down the hall.

Alex and Allie looked at Rose, puzzled. It was cold, gray and drizzling outside. Hardly a good day for sailing.

Rose laughed. "If Florence thinks she is in Florida and the sun is shining, who am I to tell her she's only in Madison and it's raining?"

Alex and Allie both left the visit feeling confident that Meadowbrook was indeed a good home for Gram.

"When are you thinking of moving her?" Alex asked Allie on their way out.

"The Friday after Thanksgiving," Allie said. "Can you help? Alan's completely unreliable." Their older brother cared but was so absorbed in his own world, he had little interest in these details.

"Absolutely." Alex replied.

Allie continued, "Jon will join us, but if you know some men who don't mind heavy lifting, that will help. I've arranged for a storage shed and I've already started sorting through Gram's stuff. I'd like you to walk through the house with me. It's a challenge going from a four bedroom Victorian filled with memories to a small apartment. I don't know how Gram's going to handle it." Allie confided.

"She'll be fine eventually," Alex replied. "And you'll be fine, too." she said, giving her sister a hug.

Allie gave Alex a slight smile. "How about you?"

Chapter 10

The girls stopped for tea and a pastry at the Sweet Sensations Bakery. It had been a long time since they'd spent time alone with each other.

Usually the boys were in and out and it was hard to carry on an uninterrupted conversation.

Alex considered Allie and admired her strength. She had done such a good job creating a home, raising the boys, caring for Gram. She sighed, feeling a bit of envy. Her unmarried state was definitely bothering her. Alex wanted what Allie had—a soul mate, children, a home filled with laughter and love. She was thirty-one, after all. How had so many years slipped by?

“Seriously, Alexa,” Allie said, “I’m worried about you. You seem to have lost your sense of humor and I don’t think its just the situation with Gram.”

Alex paused. She could tell Allie. Of all the people in the world, Allie would understand.

“Remember when we talked about Aunt Mary?” Alex asked. “I seem to have the same problem. I’m losing my hair and expect to be bald within the next year or so.”

“Good heavens,” Allie exclaimed. “That was this past summer. How long have you been carrying this around with you?”

“I found out for sure in August.”

“What does Hollis think of all this?”

“Hollis couldn’t handle it. We broke it off a few weeks ago.”

Allie leaned over and put her arms around Alex, embracing her with heartfelt compassion. “I am so sorry. You should have told me.”

“I’ll be okay,” Alex replied, hugging her back. Why had she waited so long to confide in her sister?

“If it’s any consolation,” Allie said, settling back in her chair, “I can’t see it.”

“No, I still have enough hair to hide it. But eventually, I’ll need to wear a wig.”

“You know, you could get a really nice henna tattoo.” Allie offered.

“You can’t be serious. I would never do anything so permanent.”

“No, silly. The henna wears off eventually. I have a friend who’s going through chemo and can’t wear wigs. The henna looks really nice.”

What could it hurt? Alex wondered.

Allie interrupted her thoughts. “Alexa, how do you tell a guy you’re dating that you’re going bald?”

“I’m not sure,” Alex replied. “Things certainly did not go well with Hollis. The only other person who knows is a guy I chat with on the Internet.”

“Hmmm,” Allie murmured. “You’re visiting chat rooms?”

“No,” Alex corrected her. “It’s not like that. I started receiving notes in the mail each week from someone who signed them Q.F., like a secret pal. He apparently knows me from somewhere, but I can’t figure out where. He refuses to tell me who he is or meet me in person.”

“Why?” Allie asked the obvious question.

“I’m not sure. At the moment, I’m thinking he may have a physical handicap or be disfigured in some way. I’ve told him that makes no difference to me, but he says meeting me in person would create problems.”

“Is he married? Does he have a girlfriend?”

“He says not. I believe him.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“He started sending me notes in February and we’ve been talking on line since July.”

Allie considered Alex’s words. “Well, I suppose there’s no harm. What did he say when you told him about the alopecia?”

Alex actually blushed. “He said I would look just as beautiful without hair as I do with it.”

“What a charmer!” Allie replied. “I wonder what he wants from you!” Allie loved a good mystery and Alex had just given her plenty of material.

They discussed Quentin’s possible identity.

“Suppose you’re calling him Quentin and he’s actually in San Quentin,” Allie observed.

“Prison? You think he can’t meet with me because he’s on death row?”

Alex laughed, “Oh that’s rich.”

“It’s just a possibility. . . . Or maybe he truly is rich, fabulously rich, royalty even, with servants, castles, estates, the whole nine yards . . . He wants to know you love him just for himself. He doesn’t want you to be intimidated.”

“Me? Intimidated?” Alex laughed again. “You are such a romantic!”

“Okay, so maybe that’s a little farfetched. Let me get back to my other question.”

“Which was?”

“How do you tell a guy you have no hair?”

Alex felt an itch and raised her hand to scratch the back of her head. She stopped. *How does one tell someone, anyone?*

“Perhaps it is best to get it out in the open at the beginning,” Allie suggested, “when you exchange phone numbers.”

“Okay. Why don’t you pretend you’re the boyfriend for a moment,” Alex said, “Let me see if I can think of something.”

“Okay,” Allie agreed. “Here’s my best boyfriend voice.” She tried lowering her voice an octave but the result sounded comical, like a child trying to play the part of a superhero. Still, Allie persisted. ‘May I call you sometime?’”

“Sure,” Alex replied, “here’s my number. And just so you know, this is a wig. I’m actually bald.”

“End of conversation,” Allie sighed.

“End of potential relationship,” Alex chuckled.

“So how about on the first date?” Allie considered. “Let me try my boyfriend voice again . . . ‘So, what do you like to do in your spare time?’”

Alex could not take her seriously. “I play ‘connect the bald spots’ on my scalp. Shall I show you?”

Allie nearly spit out her tea. When she stopped giggling, Allie lowered her voice again. “So, tell me something about yourself.”

“I’m going bald.”

Now they both snickered.

“Can you imagine?” Alex finally said. “The poor guy would probably think I was joking and then be mortally embarrassed to find out later it was true!”

“Okay,” Allie conceded. “So what if you waited until the third or fourth date? When things look like they could get serious but you really don’t know each other all that well yet. And what if you tried for something a little more creative?”

“What are you thinking?”

“Imagine lover boy is gazing into your eyes, longingly,” Allie said. “He starts to edge closer. You return his gaze and you say . . . ‘Oh, by the way, there is something I need to tell you. I was abducted by modern day pirates as a child and they scalped me. Fortunately, they weren’t very good at it, so all they got was my hair. I’m really quite bald but it’s nice to be alive.’ And then you can remove your wig for effect.”

Neither Allie nor Alex could contain their mirth. They laughed until the tears flowed. Customers at nearby tables glanced over. Catching her breath, Alex finally admitted, “That would definitely be the end of the relationship.”

Dear God, she thought more seriously to herself. What am I going to do?

Chapter 11

Alex enjoyed seeing her nephews in their Halloween costumes. Eight-year old Sean dressed as a pirate; ten-year old Michael settled for being a ghost. Michael was so much like her, she thought. His costume was the quickest, simplest costume possible. He was more focused on the end goal: to score

as much candy as possible. Alex was thankful she had thought to bring treats. She stuffed the boys' trick-or-treat bags with the first handfuls of their favorite candies. "Whoop Hoo!" the boys shouted as they thanked their aunt. After pizza, the boys and Allie headed to a church Harvest festival while Alex stopped to see her grandmother.

Fortunately, Gram's driveway was long and the house was out of sight. She did not have to worry about trick-or-treaters. Alex rang the doorbell. When Gram finally answered the door, she seemed uncertain.

"Hello?" she said, staring at Alex.

"Hi Gram, trick-or-treat. . . . It's me, Alexa. I wanted to wish you a happy Halloween."

Gram folded her eyebrows. Her dark eyes searched Alexa's face. Then she suddenly smiled, "Yes dear, do come in, please join me."

Gram had dressed somewhat oddly for the weather. Although it was brisk, Gram had on her favorite summer dress with the daffodils on it.

"Gram, aren't you cold?" Alex asked.

"No dear, I'm just fine. It was a lovely day and soon my daffodils will be blooming again, just like the ones on my dress."

Alex didn't have the heart to tell her the daffodils would not be in bloom for another six months.

Gram had lost weight. The skin sagged on her arms; it seemed to hang directly from her bones. She was too frail. Alex's heart constricted. "You look great, Gram," she fibbed.

"You can't keep this old girl down," Gram smiled "Not yet, anyway."

“Alexa, how’s that boyfriend of yours—Henry.”

Alex had dated a guy named Henry years ago. Apparently he had made a memorable impression on Gram; he was the only boyfriend Gram ever referred to.

“Henry’s fine, Gram. He’s out in Colorado with his wife and their three children. We exchange cards at Christmastime.”

Gram looked confused. “I thought he was going to marry you, that rat.”

“He’s not a rat, Gram. I just wasn’t ready to tie the knot.”

“Oh, I see.”

A bit later, Gram’s conversation wandered back to Henry. “I always did like that Henry, Alexa. The two of you are two peas in a pod. You are very good together.”

She said ‘are,’ Alex thought, not ‘were.’ Alex ached, realizing Gram might not remember the explanation Alex had just offered, not more than 20 minutes ago. Alex took the easy path.

“Yes, Gram,” Alex agreed, “Henry and I were very good together. May I help you up to bed?” Alex asked.

“No dear, I’ll be alright. But you should get going. You’ve got a long drive home.”

At least she remembers that much, Alex sighed.

Alex made sure Gram had plenty of food in the house. She was being silly, of course. Her sister checked on Gram every day. There was no need for Alex to duplicate her Allie’s efforts. And yet it gave her the illusion of being

helpful somehow, of being useful. Alex collected her handbag. “It was lovely to see you, Grandmamma.”

“Yes, dear, you too,” Gram replied. “Now you be good and say ‘hello’ to that Henry for me.”

“I will Gram,” Alex said as she faked a smile. There was no point in explaining, again. Gram just wouldn’t remember.

Tears found their way down Alex’s cheeks as she approached her car. She turned to see Gram smiling and waving from the porch. Alex waved and prayed Gram would be okay. She got in her car and left.

Alex cried and prayed the whole way home. How do you hold on to the memories of someone you love while you try to make sense of the person they are now? How do you preserve someone’s independence when it is clear she can no longer make the best decisions for herself? What do you do when there is nothing you can do?

Sleep eluded Alex. She dragged herself out of bed and signed on her computer. It was 11 p.m. Would Quentin be sleeping? *Please, please be there*, she thought, *I need to talk with you.*

“Quentin,” Alex wrote, “are you online? Any chance you are awake?”

A few seconds later, Alex let out a sigh of relief. The familiar “QF is typing” message had appeared on her screen.

“What’s up?”

“Did I wake you? I’m so sorry if I did. I just wanted to talk for a few minutes.”

“I always have time for you.”

“You’re such a flirt, Quentin. Seriously, I went with Allie today to check out a long-term care facility for Gram. And then I visited Gram . . . she’s really slipping, Quentin. It breaks my heart. Have you been through anything like this?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean I can’t listen.”

“Why is this happening? Gram is the sweetest person I know. I don’t understand why God is punishing her.”

“You don’t know that, Alexa. Does that sound like the God you believe in? Would a vindictive God sacrifice His only Son for people who don’t deserve Him? And then lavish His gifts on them?”

“No. . . But I’ve prayed that He would heal Gram and He hasn’t. I know He can. Why doesn’t He heal her? And why did He give me this disease? I’ve prayed about that too and trusted Him with it. Why doesn’t He heal me?”

“I don’t know. But don’t stop praying. You can always count on Him even when you don’t get the answers you want.”

“So how can God reach Gram when she can’t think straight? I don’t know where she stands with her faith. Is it too late? Is it hopeless?”

“I don’t know that either. I do know our Messiah loves us more than He loved His own life. This may sound like a cop out—but it’s not. I am willing trust Him with the problems I cannot solve, knowing who He is and what He accomplished . . . I’m not answering your question, though.”

“In a way you are. The bottom line is that He is completely trustworthy and His power is unlimited. I may not understand why He allows certain things to happen, but I need to keep my eyes on Him . . . He gives us strength . . . and in the end everything will work out for good. . . . And as I’m saying all these words, I’m wondering how much they are truly real to me. Please pray for me, Quentin.”

“Have a hug, Alexa. He is right here, with you, with all of us. I wish there was more I could say or do.”

“You’re doing plenty, Quentin, thank you.”

“By the way,” Alex continued, “I meant to tell you that I went to that environmental symposium last weekend.

“What did you think?”

“It was great! I was really surprised. I ran into Cal and Mark from work and our printer’s rep, Todd. Cal, Mark and I had a terrific talk afterwards about making Fischer Technologies more green. Cal is open to trying it for a year. I’m really excited!”

“That’s good news, Alexa.”

“Quentin, would you be interested in talking with Mark Hanson? He seems to know a lot about what businesses can do to aid the environment. One of our account reps, Todd Kalakis, also seems very knowledgeable. I would be happy to pass along their contact information if you are interested.”

“Sure. I can use all the help I can get.”

“You know, Quentin, I was secretly hoping you would be there. I checked out the people in wheel chairs, wondering if I might discover you somehow.☺”

“I apologize if I misled you, Alexa. I’m not in a wheel chair.”

“Did you see me?”

“Yes,” he replied.

Alex’s heart raced a bit. She had been so close to him!

“Alexa, please stop trying to figure out who I am.”

“I can’t help it! You’ve become one of my closest friends, Quentin. It is so easy to talk with you. I want to know who you are. I want to be a better friend to you, as well.”

“You already are.”

“Except that you can only tell me so much—I feel so limited. We’ve been talking on line for four months, Quentin. Don’t you think it’s a little weird we haven’t met in person? By now we should trust each other enough that we can meet.”

“Alexa, please . . . just a few more months.”

“Will it really be ‘just a few more months?’”

“I will try to expedite things,” Quentin replied. “But when we do meet, I hope you will not be disappointed.”

Disappointed? “How could I be disappointed? I love what I know of you.”

“Alex, please, please be careful. You don’t know me. Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

“What do you mean? Quentin, what’s wrong. Don’t you care about me?”

“More than I could ever express in a chat session,” he admitted.

Alex felt her heart beat faster. She was growing to love this man . . . this stranger! Was she crazy?

“Okay. I can wait to learn who you are.”

“Thank you, Alexa.”

They discussed the symposium a bit more and then signed off for the evening. Alex glowed. Quentin cared about her. He valued her friendship. Everything would eventually be okay.

Chapter 12

Alex tried to adjust her mental image of Quentin, laughing a bit at herself. Whenever she tried to imagine what people looked like from phone conversations, she was seldom close. So how could she conjure up an image of Quentin from their online chats? She’d never even heard his voice. Still, Alex tried. She pictured Quentin as thirty-five-ish with chestnut hair, kind brown eyes and perhaps a bit of softness around the middle. She mentally took him out of the wheel chair, but thought he might still be less than perfect in some way so she added a scar to his face. But the scar was just decoration. Any imperfection was irrelevant. He was Quentin. Her friend. The man she turned to when life made no sense. Alex imagined Quentin had the sort of job that required him to spend a great

deal of time in front of his computer. She wondered about his family, and how his parents changed along with him after his brother died. Did he have any other siblings? What did he do for fun, besides music? Did he play an instrument? Sing? What were his friends like? Alex was still determined to unmask him, for both their sakes. No matter what his secret, she was certain it would make no difference to her.

The next day, nothing could detract from Alex's positive mood. The flat tire on the way to work was nothing. Spilling her coffee only made her laugh. Quentin cared! He had admitted it. She could wait.

Alex reviewed some of the marketing materials for the "E" product line. She had questions about some of the release dates and the actual updates to the software. Normally, Alex would have asked one of her marketing managers to follow up with Mark's staff. But she could just as easily, and more quickly, get the answers from Mark himself.

Alex strode down the hall. Mark's door was open. She paused and looked in.

"Hey, Alex. Come on in. Have a seat," Mark beamed. He had the most gorgeous smile of any man she had ever met. Alex took the chair Mark offered.

"I need to ask you about some of the changes to the E product line," she began. "We need to confirm the release dates and make sure we've accurately portrayed the new features and benefits. Can you take a look at this?"

"No problem," Mark replied. "Show me what you have."

Alex gave Mark the draft promotion pages. He read them through and wrote comments while Alex waited. She enjoyed studying him while he worked; his silken black hair, broad shoulders, his relaxed demeanor. . . .

Mark smiled and slowly looked up, as if he knew she was ogling him. How embarrassing! Alex felt color come to her cheeks. Mark looked thoroughly amused. His silver blue eyes sparkled.

“There are a few minor corrections. They should be self-explanatory,” he said as he handed the pages back to her. “So Alex, how are you?” Mark asked, leaning back in his black leather chair.

“Things are going very well. We’re getting a great response to segmenting our marketing by customer type, the green campaign has been well received, the upcoming trade show . . .” Mark held up his hand and smiled. Alex stopped mid-sentence.

“I wasn’t asking about Marketing,” he observed with a twinkle in his eyes. “I wanted to know how you are doing, personally.”

“Oh.”

Mark chuckled. “Is it really so hard share a non-work related thought?” he asked.

Alex frowned. *Yes. It’s not appropriate.*

“Come on,” Mark teased, “I dare you.”

Alex was annoyed. “You sound condescending, Mark. Do you really think I can’t share something that has nothing to do with work?”

“I know you can. The issue is whether or not you will.”

“What’s in it for me?” Alex asked suddenly.

“My undying devotion and loyalty,” Mark replied dramatically, placing both hands over his heart.

“Mark, can you be serious?” Alex said.

“I am serious, Alex. It’s not a difficult question. How are you?”

Alex sighed. “Truthfully?” she asked.

Mark grew serious. “Yes,” he said gently.

Silence lingered for a few more moments.

Alex looked directly at Mark. “We have to move my grandmother to a long-term care facility—Meadowbrook, if you’ve heard of it. It’s extremely hard to see Gram—who was once so vital and alert—start to lose her faculties. I would give anything to help her get her short-term memory back.”

“Alex, I apologize. Here I am giving you a hard time and you have a serious problem. How can I help? Do you need extra hands for the move? Can I assist you in some way?”

To Mark’s credit, he was no longer breezy or patronizing. He appeared genuinely concerned.

“My sister, Allie, asked me to find some men to help with the lifting. Her husband, Jon, will be there but he can’t do it by himself. I was going to ask some of the guys from church . . .”

“Just say where and when,” Mark replied with a smile.

“The Friday after Thanksgiving if you are in town,” Alex heard herself say. *Was she really asking him? Was he really agreeing to this?* “Are you going away for Thanksgiving?” she asked uncertainly, looking for a way out.

“We’re all going to my crazy Aunt Sophia’s, but I’ll be coming back late on Thursday. Friday is no problem. I will check to see if Cal is free. Send me directions via email.”

“Okay,” Alex hesitated. She was curious about his family, but this conversation had already gone beyond her comfort zone. She would ask him another time . . . perhaps. Alex took the promotion pages, perused the changes, then stood to leave. “Thank you , Mark,” she said softly.

“My pleasure,” he replied. If Mark thought it odd she did not show more curiosity about his family, he did not show it. Alex let the matter rest. She wished Quentin could help with the move instead of Mark and Cal. *Why can’t he just tell me who he is?!* She complained to herself all the way back to her office. Quentin cared about her. Alex had said she would wait. But that didn’t mean she had to like it. Her good mood evaporated.

Chapter 13

A patchy fog rolled in Wednesday morning . . . *but not quite as thick as the fog surrounding Quentin*, Alex thought. Alex carefully drove her Miata through the mist, watching the taillights ahead for any sudden stops or changes in direction. She looked forward to meeting Todd at Starbucks this morning. *What if he is Quentin? How will I figure this out?* Perhaps she could log on to her computer and see if Quentin responded within minutes to her emails as he usually did. If Todd was sitting with her and Quentin did not respond to her email . . .

Even with the fog, Alex arrived early. She splurged on a latte—she had run two miles on the treadmill this morning so she figured she’d already burned the extra calories. Alex settled at a small round table near the

window and watched people pass by as she fired up her laptop. The wireless connection worked flawlessly.

“Hi Quentin,” Alex wrote, “Here is Mark’s and Todd’s contact information. You can reach Mark at our office . . .” She wrote in the phone number and email. “. . . and here is Todd’s info. . . . Are you available to talk later this evening?”

Alex clicked “Send” just as Todd walked in the door. *Ha!* She thought. *Now we’ll see how quickly Quentin gets back to me.* She was rather pleased with herself for devising this test.

Todd caught people’s eyes as he walked in and scanned for Alex. *He may not be tall, Alex considered, but then, neither am I. Todd certainly cuts a nice figure in a raincoat.*

Alex waved. Todd smiled as soon as he noticed her and walked over. He removed his coat and laid it across the back of the extra chair, revealing a well tailored suit that appeared to have been made just for him. “I’m going to order some coffee,” he stated, “Would you like anything more?”

“No thanks,” Alex said.

Todd returned minutes later with a Grande coffee, a few croissants . . . and a cinnamon sticky bun, which he clearly intended to eat himself. *Hmmmm, Alex thought. Would Quentin be so careless? Why would he eat a cinnamon roll in front of me when he told me he had a weakness for them? Did he forget? Or perhaps Todd wasn’t Quentin.*

“I brought a few extra croissants in case talking about the environment makes you hungry,” Todd smiled.

“Thanks,” Alex laughed. She shut off her computer and slipped the machine back into her black leather briefcase. She would be able to see the time of Quentin’s reply, even if she was not on line . . . and even if he was sipping coffee with her at this very moment!

Alex smiled. “Hey Todd, thank you for schlepping here to meet with me in this fog. How was your drive?”

“No problem,” Todd replied. “I kept hearing of accidents on the radio, though. I’m glad you made it okay.”

“I love a challenge,” Alex replied.

Alex proceeded to ask Todd about Donovan’s environmental program. How did they roll it out to customers? To the employees? What are the components of the campaign? Had they encountered any resistance? Any unexpected expenses? More importantly, Alex wanted Todd’s assessment of whether or not the program had been a success. And how did he measure that success?

Todd thoughtfully and thoroughly answered Alex’s questions, feeling a bit as if he were being grilled on a doctoral thesis. This woman was all business. He wondered if she ever slept, ever did anything fun. But then, who was he to talk? He worked. He studied. He worked out. He ate. He slept. He had little room in his life for anything else.

“So what do you think, Alex?” Todd asked when the questions subsided. “Is FT going green?”

Alex laughed. “We will if I have any say in it; Cal has some reservations, mostly around the return on investment.”

“Sounds like Cal,” Todd replied. “So while I have you here,” he continued, “is there anything Donovan can be doing to better meet your printing needs?”

More business questions, Alex thought reluctantly. “We’re considering doing more with variable data,” she noted, wondering how to shift the conversation from business to topics that might help her get to know Todd a little better. *But how can I change the direction of the conversation without it sounding awkward?*

“Alex, you know we can handle anything with direct mail,” Todd remarked. “Send me samples of what you have in mind and we can explore options.”

“Okay,” Alex replied.

Todd changed the subject. “Alex, I’d like your opinion on something. It has nothing to do with business. Do you mind?”

“No,” Alex replied, somewhat relieved. Perhaps Todd was going to help her move this conversation into more personal territory. “Go ahead.”

“I’m working on my MBA in the evenings and have a marketing module this semester. One of the cases involves a company whose chief competitor is eating their market share for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Could you read the case and look over my ideas by Monday? I would really appreciate it.”

“Of course, Todd. I’d enjoy that. I had no idea you are working on your MBA—that’s terrific! How far are you in the program?” Alex asked.

“I’ve got a few more months to go.”

A few more months? Quentin had said he needed a few more months before he could reveal himself. Was there any correlation? “What do you want to do with the MBA?” Alex asked.

Todd paused. “Between you and me?” he replied hesitantly.

“Yes,” Alex answered. “Anything you tell me stays with me.”

Todd apparently decided to trust her. “Donovan is a terrific company with—lots of moving parts, plenty of opportunity. I want to work my way up in management for three to five more years. Then, I’d like to start my own company.”

This was getting interesting, Alex reflected. Just like Quentin. Were there more similarities?

“What kind of business are you thinking of?” Alex inquired.

Todd hesitated. *Ah ha!* Alex thought. *Anything having to do with music and the environment?* She watched as Todd’s dark brown eyes seemed to consider her in a different light. But his face appeared to retreat behind a mask. Alex wondered.

“I’m not certain,” Todd answered. “Hey, I’ve got a 9:30 down the street. I need to leave in 5 minutes. We can continue this conversation tomorrow afternoon when I stop at FT.”

“I would like that,” Alex replied warmly. “If you send over a copy of that case you are working on, I can look at it tonight.”

Todd’s dark, well disciplined features dissolved into a grin. “Thank you,” he replied. “Would you like me to walk you to your car?”

“No, thank you,” Alex answered. “I’ll stay here and work a bit before heading into the office. Enjoy your meeting!”

“Enjoy your work,” Todd replied with a wink. He pulled on his coat and headed toward the door.

Alex felt the thrill of uncertainty as she rebooted her computer. She’d received no response from Quentin while she was meeting with Todd. Was it possible? Could Todd be Quentin? She needed to find out if he was musical . . . if he had lost a brother . . . if he was a believer. At least Todd had opened the door to more questions by having her review his marketing case. Alex could hardly wait!

Later that night, Alex switched off the lamp on her night table and pulled her cozy down comforter around her. She prayed through her day and thought more about Quentin . . . about Todd. She’d received an email response from Quentin before lunch, not long after Todd likely would have finished his second meeting. She and Quentin had chatted briefly this evening, but with no further clues. Todd had sent her the marketing case, but again, he said little.

Something about the idea Todd might be Quentin did not fit, however, and Alex could not put a mental finger on what it was. After all, Todd had enjoyed the cinnamon roll, he planned to start his own business, and he would finish his MBA in a few more months . . . *but there’s no chemistry*, she realized. When Alex was with Todd, she felt nothing unusual. She cared about him as she would any other human being. But there was no spark. No excitement. She felt surprisingly neutral. Alex doubted she and Todd could ever be more than friends. . . . But was it because she didn’t know him all that well? What if he truly was Quentin? What if her feelings for Quentin were all in her mind? . . . But suppose Quentin was not Todd,

and when she finally met Quentin in person, there was no chemistry, no electricity, no romance? Alex felt a chill in spite of the warmth of her comforter. What if she waited all these months for Quentin and then discovered they were better as friends, or simply as on-line correspondents?

It's too bad Quentin isn't Mark, the thought came out of nowhere. With Mark, Alex reluctantly admitted, she felt some chemistry . . . with definite potential for more . . . *How embarrassing! This must be what Scripture calls the 'lust of the flesh,'* Alex thought. She wondered if Mark felt it, too; or, if the attraction was all one-sided. Either way, she was determined not to let it affect her work.

But could Mark actually be Quentin? Alex considered him more seriously. Mark had not known she was a believer until months after Quentin started sending her those "secret pal" notes. Mark and Cal had worked together since the beginning of their careers; she couldn't fathom Mark starting a business without Cal. Besides, Mark hadn't even noticed Alex until she dropped into his office during the disaster with Murphy Enterprises. That was seven months after she began getting notes from Quentin. And what about their little mind-reading session? If Mark were Quentin, he would have already known about her grandmother and the alopecia . . . Alex cringed at the thought. She did not want Mark to know. What would he think of her? She wanted him to always see her at her best, even if it wasn't entirely real. *No, Mark was not Quentin*, Alex reminded herself. Alex sighed, her heart speaking a wordless prayer. In response, a passage from Isaiah came to mind . . . "Do not be afraid, for I am with you. Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." "Thank you, Lord," Alex murmured as she finally drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 14

How had Thanksgiving gone by so quickly? Just yesterday, Alex had been at Gram's . . . for the last holiday meal they would ever have in Gram and Papa's house . . . with Allie, Jon, Michael and Sean. Allie always prepared a huge turkey, far more than the six of them needed. "I love the leftovers," she would say, generously sharing them with Alex. Gram only had a few mental slips. They played board games and laughed all afternoon.

Alex dragged herself out of bed. She considered her reflection. Today was moving day. Both Mark and Cal planned to help. Was she nuts? Alex never let her professional life spill over into her personal affairs to this extent. Unbelievably, Mark had somehow managed to impose himself on this move. Not only Mark, but Cal as well. Her employer. Her boss! What a disaster. With her luck, her grandmother would wear her undergarments outside her clothes or repeat the same comments endlessly.

But it was far worse.

Alex arrived early in the morning to help Allie and Jon get things organized. The boys were staying with a neighbor. Allie, Jon and Gram were standing in the front yard of the old house, making plans. The last of the red maple leaves swirled about them as a gentle breeze picked them up and scattered them about the lawn..

Alex studied the house. The pale yellow paint and white trim had recently been redone but it looked the same as it always had in the morning light. The brick walk led to an inviting wrap-around porch. The bay window and the second floor turret gave the house character, style. Alex sighed. It was hard to let the house go. "Hi Allie, Jon, Gram," Alex said as she gave Allie and Gram a hug.

“Good to see you, Alex,” Jon said as he surrounded his sister-in-law with another hug. Alex always thought of Jon as a huge grizzly bear in human form. He was tall, solid, with a bit of his bulk shifting to the middle as the years went by, but still attractive. Jon had played football in college. Alex couldn’t imagine anyone getting past Jon, it would be like running into a wall of concrete. When Jon and her sister Allie had met, fairy tale magic seemed to surround them. They immediately fell for each other and married as soon as Allie graduated. Even after all these years, Alex envied their rapport.

“Al,” Jon said, looking at his wife, “what do you want me to do with all the paint, tile and wallpaper rolls in the basement?”

“You can leave it for the new owner,” Allie replied.

“Okay,” he said, “I’ll start moving that bookcase and some of the smaller stuff out to the van.”

“Thanks, sweetie,” Allie smiled.

Jon kissed the top of her head, smiled, and nodded to Gram and Alex. He headed back toward the house.

Allie and Alex had walked through the house weeks ago, deciding what should be sold, what could move to the apartment, what they would each keep and what should be moved into storage. Allie had spent hours sorting through the memories and selling the non-essentials. Their brother Alan said he didn’t want anything except Grandpa’s pocket watch and he already had that. He’d rather just keep the memories. Gram alternated between wondering what had happened to her furniture, being upset about the move, looking forward to being in her apartment, and being confused about what was happening.

The morning of the move, Gram was upset. Allie gently explained, “Remember the apartment, Gram. We put daffodil wallpaper in the living room and painted it just the way you like it. You have new friends right next door—the Masons, Caroline and Ed, remember? You can play bridge every day. You won’t have so much to take care of and I will come visit you.”

“I will come at least once a week,” Alex offered, feeling a twinge of guilt.

“But Harold will be so mad we moved his things!” Gram objected. “And my sweet, sweet Emily . . . she loves this house! You emptied her room. Where will she sleep?”

Allie and Alex exchanged a sad glance. Their grandfather had passed away ten years ago. Their mother, Emily, had died in a car crash along with their father when Alex was in college.

“Harold and Emily understand, Gram,” Allie said gently as she hugged her. “I’m sure they are excited about the move and very happy for you.”

Gram looked at Allie and Alex, seeming not to comprehend. Then she stared at the ground.

Alex offered reassurance and another hug, “It will be okay, Gram. Really, it will.”

Just then, Cal and Mark drove up in Cal’s BMW convertible. They were joking and laughing about something when they got out of the car. Gram took one look at them and her wrinkled face melted into an ear-to-ear grin. “Henry!” she called as she scurried over and threw her arms around Mark. Alex cringed. A puzzled look flashed across Mark’s face. He quickly recovered and returned Gram’s hug.

“It’s great to see you!” he said, as if they were quite familiar with each other.

“I’m so glad you’re here!” Gram said. “Shame on you, Alexa, you never told me Henry was coming.”

Cal gave Alex a sympathetic nod while Alex wished she were in China. Anywhere but here.

“Gram, this is my boss, Cal Fischer,” Alex said with a practiced smile. “Cal, I’d like you to meet my Grandmother, Esther Madeira.”

Cal held out his hand. Gram enveloped him with a hug. “You must be a friend of Henry’s.”

“Yes, we’ve known each other for years,” Cal replied with an amused look in his eye.

Alex looked at Mark and started to explain, “Gram, this is . . .”

Mark grinned and interrupted. “Henry,” he said, holding his hand out to her. “But Mrs. Madeira already knows that.”

“Oh Henry,” she said, taking his hand. “You must call me Gram, just like the girls.”

Jon reappeared. As soon as Alex introduced both Jon and Allie, Gram waltzed into the house, looking deliriously happy.

“Mark, I apologize . . .” Alex started.

Mark shrugged. “There’s no need, Alex. I don’t mind. . . . So who is Henry?”

Allie smiled mischievously. “Henry was Alexa’s boyfriend in high school,” she explained. “You don’t look anything like him, but thank you for playing along.”

Alex shook her head and sighed. *This is why you should never mix business and personal*, she thought to herself. “Henry was one of Gram’s favorites,” Alex observed.

“Works for me,” Mark said brightly. Jon took Cal and Mark into the house to help load Gram’s furniture for the apartment.

Alex was thankful there was so much to do and little time to think. She had wonderful memories of this house . . . Thanksgivings—like yesterday—and Christmases and Easters . . . the smell of cookies baking in the oven . . . the daffodils blooming each spring . . . the time Alan made noises in the attic and tried to convince his sisters there was a ghost . . . Alex sighed and pushed her thoughts aside.

For the moment, Gram was upbeat about the move, which made things easier. Gram appeared with a plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies every half hour or so, grinning each time as if she had just pulled the cookies fresh out of the oven. Cal, Mark and Jon handled her lapses so well. After the first two times, they would take the whole plate of cookies, thank her enthusiastically and then slip the plate back into the kitchen when Gram was busy elsewhere.

Within a few hours, most everything was packed for the apartment. It was agreed that Jon and Allie would drive the van over. Cal would follow in his car. Mark, who was now firmly established as Henry, would ride with Alex and Gram. Gram seemed more relaxed with “Henry” close by. Alex was thankful for Mark’s willingness to play the part.

Without saying anything, Alex slipped upstairs to her old room to say ‘good-bye’ while the men packed the remaining items into the van. She ran her hand over the wallpaper, yellow rosebuds climbing pale green vines, faded in places where the sun had warmed them over many years. Alex studied the wood-planked floor, remembering where her bed had been, her dresser, her toy chest. She glanced at the closet shelf; Gram had kept a special doll for her there—Emeline—almost the same name as her mother. Alexa only played with Emeline when she stayed with Gram. Emeline was special. Her china face. Her lace covered dress. Her high buttoned shoes. Alex remembered how her hair smelled—musty with a hint of lilacs and lavender. Now Emeline was wrapped in tissue, hidden in a round hatbox deep in one of her closets at the town home.

Alex heard the floor creak behind her.

“Can I help with anything?”

She turned to see Mark and smiled. “I’m just reminiscing,” Alex explained. “This was my room whenever we stayed with Gram and Papa.” She touched the wallpaper again, memorizing the pattern for the last time.

“What are you remembering?” Mark asked softly.

Alex smiled. “I used to dream that each of these little rosebuds hid a tiny fairy. Late at night, while we slept, I was certain the fairies came alive and danced around the room. I thought they woke me up sometimes, but I never saw them.” She moved to the window. “See the old apple tree in the yard?” Alex pointed.

Mark joined her, looking through the window. “I was convinced the rosebud fairies consorted with the apple tree fairies and worked all kinds of mischief. Whenever I couldn’t find something or I knocked something

over, it was all the fairies' fault." Alex laughed. "Life was so much simpler then."

Mark nodded. He seemed to understand.

Then a wave of feelings rushed over her—the memories she had pushed aside, the worrying about Gram, images of her parents, the sound of their laughter, the realization she would never be in this house again . . . this place of refuge . . . Alex shuddered and stared straight ahead, her eyes filling with tears.

Mark's arm went around her, warm and consoling. "It's okay," he said gently. "Go ahead. Cry. It's okay."

Without thinking, Alex put her arms around his waist and buried her head against his chest. He smelled of perspiration and something masculine. Something comforting. Alex quietly let the tears run as Mark held her close. She remembered how Grandpa used to hold her . . . and her Dad . . . and Mom . . . and somehow, they all seemed to be present, hugging her in this hug, letting her know they still loved her, that everything was going to come out right in the end. The arms that held her were so warm, so strong, and yet not entirely familiar . . .

Suddenly, Alex realized where she was. She jumped back. "Oh my gosh, Mark," she said, "I'm so sorry. That was totally inappropriate. How embarrassing!" She wiped the last tear from her cheek with the back of her hand.

Mark frowned. "There is nothing wrong with comforting someone . . . or with accepting a hug," he said.

"But I never cry . . . not in front of people I work with. How unprofessional. I hardly know you! Look at your shirt—it's damp."

“Alex.” Mark’s voice was quiet, but firm. “Don’t apologize. People who work together can still be human. Neither one of us will let a hug between friends influence our work. If I had any doubts on that score, I wouldn’t be here.”

Alex relaxed a bit. Mark had said she was a friend. Did he really mean that?

“Hey,” Mark shrugged. “You needed a hug. I happened to be available. It’s not a problem.”

Alex stepped closer and gave his arm a grateful squeeze. “Thank you, Mark . . . I mean Henry,” She teased. Then she moved away. “Shall we join the others?” Alex paused. “Mark, can you tell I’ve been crying? Do I look okay?”

“You’re eyes are red and smudged, but if you smile, no one will notice.”

“Let’s go,” Alex grinned.

Chapter 15

Gram received quite a welcome at her new apartment. Rose stopped by with a lovely bouquet of chrysanthemums. The Masons brought over a houseplant and wanted to meet Gram’s family. Another neighbor baked a “first night” chicken casserole. Surprisingly, Gram seemed quite pleased and content.

In less than an hour, the men had unloaded the van and moved the furniture items into place. Allie ordered pizza and they all indulged before carrying the remaining boxes into the apartment.

After Cal and Mark left, Gram decided to rearrange the pictures in the living room, just the way she wanted them.

Allie cornered Alex in the kitchen as they unpacked the dishes. "I think Mark is interested in you," Allie said quietly. "Has he ever asked you out?" She clearly had been contemplating this question for some time during the day.

Alex glanced at her sister, but kept putting dishes on the shelf. "No. We seem to understand each other, but it's nothing more than that."

"Why not?" Allie asked. "What would it hurt to go out with Mark and give the relationship a chance?"

"Allie, there is NO relationship," Alex responded. "I don't get close to the men I work with."

"You can't be serious," Allie retorted. "Mark is kind, thoughtful, charming . . . He clearly went out of his way to help you today. He cares about you. He's got a great sense of humor and he looks like he just walked off a magazine cover. And you're not interested?"

"Don't be absurd, Allie, I work with him. It's a business, not a marriage market."

Allie sighed. "Not all men are like Hollis, Alexa."

"I know," Alex sighed, wondering if Allie might have a point. She mentally filed the thought away to contemplate another time.

"So tell me," Allie continued, "what do you want long-term, Alexa? Are you going to snuggle up to your computer for the rest of your life? Will the circuitry bring you fulfillment? Will your work keep you warm?"

“Stop it, Allie,” Alex managed to reply graciously, even though she felt annoyed. “You know I am waiting for Quentin.”

“Quentin is virtual, Alexa. Mark is real. I’m not trying to be mean. I just think you will always regret it if you don’t give Mark a chance.”

Allie was entirely too presumptuous, Alex thought. She tried a more practical line of reasoning. “Even if I wanted to, Allie, I can’t go out with Mark. It’s against company policy.”

Allie let the matter rest, but somehow, Alex knew she had not heard the end of it. Just then, Gram reappeared and began helping them set the kitchen in order. Relieved, Alex tackled the last box of pots and pans.

* * * * *

Mark was right. His help with the move and the “hug” made no difference at the office, except they seemed to encounter each other more frequently. Perhaps it was the “Go Green!” campaign. Perhaps it was the preparation for the trade show in March. Even though most of the implementation for these projects fell to the Marketing team, Mark had plenty of ideas and Alex enjoyed hearing his thoughts.

Meanwhile, online, Quentin was his usual self. Wondering what he would say, Alex asked him one evening if he had ever gotten in touch with Todd or with Mark.

“Not yet,” came Quentin’s reply. “But I will when I’m ready.”

Alex doubted Quentin would ever be ready. He seemed to be a perfectionist, always preparing, but never taking the risk of a step forward in faith. She sighed. How much longer could she hold on to her patience? But what if she pushed Quentin . . . and then he panicked . . . and he cut off

communication? Waiting to learn his identity may not be fun, but losing her connection with him would be far worse.

Alex's thoughts shifted to Todd. Even in their discussion of his marketing case, nothing further had linked Todd to Quentin. And nothing had disproved Todd's similarities to Quentin. Beyond that one discussion over coffee, Alex's relationship with Todd remained business. All business. She still needed to learn more about him.

Alex thought again about Allie's comment. Had her experience with Hollis left a shadow? Scars? She winced. She could still see Hollis' face when he admitted he was having a hard time with her "condition." Her heart ached. How was she going to be more discerning next time? How could she tell if the attraction was superficial, or if the relationship had substance? *You are not going to discern anything unless you get to know Todd better*, she chided herself.

Alex decided to ask Todd to Fischer Technology's holiday party the following Saturday night at the Regency. It would be good for Todd meet more people at Fischer. Other departments also had printing needs. And if Alex attended the company celebration with Todd, she might find an opportunity to delve more closely into a possible Todd-Quentin connection.

* * * * *

On the Monday before the company party, Mark stopped by Alex's office to drop off some "sneak preview" DVDs for her department's feedback.

"Did you see the comments on the Go Green! Campaign from Sales?" Mark asked.

“Yes,” Alex replied. “Brian seems to have embraced the campaign. Almost everyone has . . . The only negative feedback I’ve received so far was actually from a Christian customer. This gentleman feels the environmental cause is somehow connected with the New Age movement. So I read some articles on line—he is not the only believer who feels this way. Many thought it was all propaganda. This bothers me. Shouldn’t Christians be the ones who are at the forefront in taking care of God’s creation?”

“Don’t be too hard on them, Alex,” Mark noted. “From what I’ve seen, the best solution is to pray and try to lead by example.”

“But why do you think there is resistance among Christians?” Alex asked.

Mark responded thoughtfully, “I know some are concerned about falling into the trap of a Pantheistic viewpoint—treating nature as if it were God, or part of God, instead of created by Him.”

“Like the tree huggers,” Alex commented.

“Exactly,” Mark smiled. “There are others who believe we are in the end times and the deterioration of the environment is one of the signs leading to Christ’s return. Some even view it as a good thing: The sooner this world falls apart, the sooner He will come back.”

“What is your take on all this, Mark?” Alex asked. In the back of her mind, Alex realized she had stepped far off the “work” grid with this conversation, but she needed to know what Mark thought.

“I firmly believe we are accountable to God for how we treat this planet. The earth is on loan to us. We are His stewards. I’m thinking of Genesis 1 and the parable of the talents in the book of Matthew. Nothing has

changed that I can see. There are some classic books by Schaeffer and DeWitt you may be interested in reading. I'd be happy to loan you mine."

"Thank you, Mark. I'm interested, but I'll buy my own." Alex explained, "I'm notorious for highlighting and writing comments in margins when I get excited about an idea—what if I forget and mark up your copies?"

Mark laughed. "It wouldn't bother me in the least."

"Seriously," Alex said, "please email me the titles. I'd like to order them."

"No problem," Mark replied.

"Thank you. . . ." Alex redirected the discussion: "The good news is we are making progress here at FT. I greatly appreciate your help, Mark. Your ideas have made the green campaign come alive."

"You mean—*our* ideas," Mark reminded her with a gleam in his eyes.

"Ha!" Alex chuckled, "and think of where we can go from here!"

Mark's casual expression remained the same, but Alex sensed greater seriousness behind the warmth of his voice. "I do think about it, Alex," he said softly. . . . And I'd like to talk with you . . . away from the office. May I take you to dinner this evening?"

Alex chilled. *Please don't ruin things, Mark. Keep your distance.*

Her face crinkled. "I don't think that's a good idea, Mark."

"Why not?"

"It's not just the FT rules; it's my own policy—I don't go to dinner, alone, with any man I work with. It's nothing against you, Mark. I just don't think it's good business. We have a mission to accomplish here. The fewer

distractions, the better.” *Great.* Alex thought. She had just implied he was a potential distraction for her. *Not good.* Would he pick up on it?

Mark’s eyes sparkled. Alex knew he had missed nothing.

“What if I did not work here?” Mark asked, his perfectly framed eyes casually testing her resolve.

Alex closed her own eyes for a second, shutting out his presence. She made another attempt to move the conversation to safer territory.

“You can’t be serious, Mark,” Alex countered. “You and Cal make an unbeatable team. You have always worked together. Cal would be lost without you.”

Mark did not seem to hear her. “But would you go out with me?” He still sounded casual; although Alex could feel the underlying intensity.

“I . . .,” Alex hesitated. The truth was, she wouldn’t mind an evening alone with him . . . but what if spending time with Mark led somewhere she never intended to go? And, more importantly, what about Quentin?

“I couldn’t, Mark,” Alex heard herself say. “I’m sort of seeing someone.”

“Sort of?”

“Okay, more accurately, I’m waiting for someone.”

Mark raised a questioning eyebrow.

“I know this sounds crazy, but it’s not what you might think, Mark . . .” Alex explained. “This ‘someone’ and I—we’re great friends. He’s not involved with anyone else; the timing just isn’t right. He needs to take care of some business before we can explore something more.” *How lame this sounds,* Alex admitted to herself.

“And he knows this? The two of you have discussed it?”

“We have an understanding,” she replied, wondering if Quentin had any idea she harbored hopes for a more romantic relationship.

Mark frowned. “But as of this exact moment, today, you have no official commitment, correct?”

Alex nodded.

“So—as a friend, or a business associate—whatever is more comfortable for you, there’s no reason why you couldn’t spend half an hour with me outside work, correct? . . . And under these conditions, will you join me for a harmless cup of coffee at the bistro across the street?”

Alex felt her insides do handstands. Thankfully, she had learned to conceal her feelings behind a smooth, professional exterior. “Harmless, Mark?” she said with a half-smile. “You don’t give up, do you.”

“Not when it involves you,” Mark grinned.

Alex felt the pull of his smile. She felt her resolve slipping. She wanted, more than anything, to accept his invitation, to enjoy a few non-work moments with this amazingly attractive, kind and insightful man. *What would it hurt?* She wondered. But her professional self sharply reminded her: *You’ve worked so hard to get where you are. Don’t complicate things. Don’t give in to this temptation. Keep your close friends and relationships away from the office.* Her career instincts remained in control.

“Thank you for asking, Mark,” Alex replied warmly. “I’m genuinely flattered. And the answer is still ‘no.’”

“No problem, Alex,” Mark said with a sigh, rising to his feet. “Please let me know if anything changes.”

And with that he left, quietly closing the door behind him.

Alex felt the vacuum created by his absence. She tensed. Had she made a mistake? Was her ‘personal policy’ worth losing a chance to know this man? Did he still consider her a friend? How would she feel if Mark started dating . . . or even married . . . someone else?

Alex shuddered. A sense of dread swallowed her. What was it about Mark that drew her in and held her entranced? How could she shake herself free of his spell?

Stop it, Alex commanded herself. Put him out of your mind! If God intended for them to be friends . . . or more than friends. . . He would make it happen. But what about Quentin? How could she possibly entertain thoughts of Mark when she was waiting for the loyal and compassionate man who had been her sanity, her friend, her Internet companion for the past six months?

Alex sighed and sank back into her chair. *Enough of this nonsense, she told herself. Get back to work.*

Alex did get back to work. She met with her staff to discuss plans for the upcoming tradeshow. She researched the competitive climate and made projections for the next fiscal year. She spent hours working with their public relations firm and customer service to help address some consistent user-error issues. Fortunately—from Alex’s perspective—she only saw Mark in passing over the next four days. As always, Mark was friendly, helpful, professional—nothing had changed between them. Alex felt relief, although something nagged and poked at her. At the far edge of her

consciousness, she knew she was avoiding something she did not wish to acknowledge. Something uncomfortable. To help maintain her perspective, Alex turned, as usual, to Quentin.

“Hi Quentin,” Alex typed Wednesday evening. “How is your week going?”

“Not great,” he responded. “And yours?”

“Before I answer . . . What happened with you?” Alex asked.

“I’m usually good at solving problems,” Quentin wrote back, “but I’ve come up against one I can’t find an answer for. It’s hard to let it go and get some sleep.”

“Is it work-related? Personal? Technical?” Alex typed.

“You hit two out of three,” Quentin returned. “Not bad.”

“But can I help?”

“I wish,” Quentin answered. “Unfortunately—or fortunately, I’m going to have to slug this one out on my knees.”

“I’ll pray for you,” Alex wrote. She sighed. How long until he felt comfortable sharing more with her? How long until she could learn more about his offline life?

“Thank you, Alexa. . . . How is your week going?”

“Okay. Busy. But okay. I ordered some books on the environment from a Christian perspective.”

“Which ones?” Quentin asked.

Alex filled Quentin in on her experiences thus far and the books Mark had recommended. Quentin agreed with Mark and made a few more suggestions. He emailed some articles for her to read as well.

Throughout their conversation, Alex knew she was procrastinating . . . what she really wanted to talk with Quentin about was their relationship . . . and where they might be headed . . . but she was worried about his response. *Maybe tomorrow night*, she told herself.

Thursday evening came, then Friday, and still, Alex couldn't bring up the relationship questions. What if she scared Quentin off? What if they didn't share the same thoughts about "next steps?" What if Quentin planned to dilly-dally for another year or more before he revealed himself? Alex wasn't sure she could take much more of this. But she was still more afraid of losing Quentin than she was of having to wait . . . *Maybe next week*, she told herself. But even she did not believe her own words.

Chapter 16

Saturday morning, the day of the holiday party, Alex decided the time had come to switch to the wigs. She still had enough hair to hide the bald spots, but perhaps it would ease some of her anxiety if she finally accepted the inevitable . . . if she simply shaved her head and adjusted to the lookalike hair. At the current moment, her own hair and the wigs were the exact same length, color and style. She tentatively placed one of the wigs on her head, reassuring herself that no one would notice.

On a positive note, Alex thought, *I won't have to worry about any more 'bad hair' days.*

Alex put on an old t-shirt. She spread newspaper across the bathroom counter and placed some on the floor. Next, she pulled out her scissors and

the cordless clippers she had purchased for the occasion. She removed the wig application kit from under the sink.

Alex decided to cut her hair gradually, trying some funky styles as she went. First she trimmed her hair so it was longer in front and shorter in back. She gave herself bangs. *Not bad!* She ignored the uneven spots. Next, she cut her hair short and rubbed in mousse so sections of her hair stood out from her head. *Very hip. Very cool.* So why not play with her makeup while she was at it? She would never have another opportunity like this one!

Alex applied some eyeliner and laughed at the result. She put on her black leather jacket, got out her camera and used the self timer to take some pictures to send to Allie. *Allie will get a kick out of this.* Next, she started using the clippers. Dark straight hair already littered the newspaper; now it was time to finish the job. The clippers vibrated in her hand. Alex thought she might be trembling as well, but the clippers hid her nervousness. Alex buzzed a small section toward the front of her scalp. *Oh dear!* She looked as though she'd just survived brain surgery. She closed her eyes. Another 10 minutes and this would be all over. She could do it. *Just don't think about anything. Keep buzzing.*

The clippers hummed. The remaining remnants of her dark, almost black hair fell slowly in clumps to the counter and the floor. When she finished, Alex examined her scalp. The red, irritated patches were more visible now. She stepped back, considered the overall result and gasped. Alex ran to her bed, threw herself on her mattress and sobbed. Even Quentin would see no beauty in this. Her scalp was naked, splotchy, and ugly.

When her tears subsided, Alex stepped back in the bathroom, read the wig application instructions one more time, applied the cap, tape, the adhesive

and the wig to cover her bare head. She glanced at the result—she looked normal, but she couldn't help feeling miserable—it wasn't natural—it wasn't her real hair. Alex cried some more. Heart-broken, she pulled out her Bible and flipped through the New Testament. A passage from 1st Peter, Chapter One caught her eye. “. . . though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

“For a little while,” she reminded herself, “that's all. You can do this.”

Alex looked at herself again in the mirror. She had a few hours in which to lose the puffiness around her eyes. The wig fit well. It just felt funny . . . different. So tonight would be her first test. And it was only for an evening.”

Even though it was cold, Alex put on her running tights, sweatshirt, gloves, hat and went for a quick jog. Todd had said he would meet her in the lobby of the Regency at 7 p.m. She still had plenty of time.

* * * * *

Later that afternoon, Alex slid her elegant black party dress from it's padded hanger. The sleek lines and silky texture always made her feel special, like a princess. She removed her mother's ruby and diamond necklace with the teardrop earrings from their case and fastened them on.

Next she refreshed her makeup, slipped on her black satin shoes with the four inch heels, and studied herself in the mirror.

You look okay! Alex thought. She was going to pull this off. The wig worked. The substitute hair looked healthier than her own. And she no longer had to worry about losing her own hair—the clippers had taken care of that little problem.

Alex called a cab and snuggled into the back seat, sinking into her black cashmere coat. She smiled. She was determined to have a great time this evening, no matter how strange her bare scalp felt beneath the wig. Eventually, she would get used to it.

As the cab driver made his way through traffic to the Regency, Alex contemplated her favorite dilemma: Quentin. Alex did not appear to be any closer to discovering his identity than she had been six months ago, although Todd might have potential. She had noticed a small, tasteful Christian bumper sticker on the back of his car, something about exercising faith. But did Todd know she was a believer? He had never said anything. Maybe the bumper sticker belonged to a previous owner? Alex contemplated what might happen if she and Todd got to know each other better.

Alex also wondered if there were any other males who could be Quentin whom she hadn't considered yet. The problem was, she worked so much, her opportunities for getting to know anyone were limited. She'd stopped going to Bible Study when she broke things off with Hollis. No one at church or the rec center had caught her attention. Could Quentin still be among them?

Alex's thoughts drifted to Mark . . . She had a hard time putting him out of her mind. Mark wanted to spend time with her . . . outside work . . . or at

least he did until their conversation on Monday. Did Mark really meant what he said about leaving Fischer? Alex was skeptical. And how could she tell if her interest in Mark was from the Lord? What if it was actually superficial and shallow, as it had been with Hollis? And what if she decided to cross over the professional line with Mark . . . would she be kissing her career good-bye? And how awkward would that make things at the office?!

The cab pulled into the circular drive in front of the hotel. Alex paid the driver his fare and headed for the warmth inside.

* * * * *

Todd was early. He was waiting in the lobby and greeted her warmly. His dark eyes were warm and inviting. Todd looked terrific in his dark suit and burgundy tie, complimenting his tan, well manicured appearance. But Alex felt nothing unusual when she saw him, nothing compelling. She returned Todd's smile and thanked him for joining her.

"Thank you, Alex," Todd replied. "I'm looking forward to meeting some of the other department heads. It was kind of you to offer."

"My pleasure," Alex replied.

Alex and Todd crossed the plush oriental carpet to the elevator. As Alex focused on her companion, she had the vague sense of being surrounded by high ceilings, mirrors, crystal chandeliers, marble and brass—all speaking of the elegance of their surroundings. But she had other issues on her mind . . .

"So Todd," Alex asked, "how are your classes? Did you get any feedback on the marketing case study?"

Todd answered as they boarded the elevator, but the answer did not stay in Alex's head. She was distracted by the arrival of another couple—a couple she noticed briefly as the elevator doors started to close . . . was that Mark? Mark—the one next to the tall, gorgeous redhead?

The elevator doors sealed shut. Alex's pulse raced. Her shoulders tensed. Mark had been in her office, asking her out, only five days ago. Had she misunderstood him? Did he have a girlfriend? How was that possible?

Todd kept talking, yet Alex could not make out his words. Apparently, she was nodding and saying “hmmm” in all the right places; he did not seem to notice her discomfort.

They reached the fourth floor and found the ballroom. Todd offered to get Alex a drink. “Seltzer would be nice,” Alex suggested, “or whatever they have.” She excused herself to go to the ladies' room. Alex wondered if the heat was turned up too high, or if it was just her. She splashed cold water on her wrists, reassured herself that the wig looked normal, and slipped into one of the stalls to hide for a few minutes and pray.

But when Alex tried to pray, she could only think of one word—“Please, dear God,” she whispered, “Please, please, please.” Alex paused and leaned back against the cold metal stall, her heart swelled with emotion. *This is so not me*, she thought. *Why does it matter if Mark is with someone? Why do I care? I hardly know him. Please, dear God, please*, she pleaded.

No Scripture came to mind at first, and yet Alex began to feel more calm. *I can do this*, she thought. *I can do all things through Him who strengthens me*. She prayed for the rest of the evening . . . for Todd . . . for Mark . . . for the redhead . . . for everyone who came to mind. She asked that the entire evening would be for God's glory somehow and asked God to please help her get through it. She visualized herself as a child, holding the Lord's

hand. That helped. Alex took three deep breaths and took herself back to the ballroom. She squeezed her hand tight, reminding herself the Lord was with her.

Alex paused at the entrance to the ballroom, studying the crowd. The ladies looked lovely in their party dresses and heels—some were hard to recognize at first, without their usual office attire. The men looked dashing in their suits and ties. Fischer certainly employed a handsome group of employees. Beth waved, motioning for Alex to come over. Beth introduced her husband. Ed was using crutches, but greeted her with enthusiasm. Alex was pleased to meet him.

When Todd found her, he had a glass in each hand. “There you are,” he remarked, handing her the seltzer. “You missed the opening remarks from Cal. He summarized FT’s success, congratulated everyone and told us to live it up this evening—on Fischer Technologies. Everyone cheered.”

Alex smiled, “Thank you, Todd. I’m sorry to miss Cal’s opening; but at least I haven’t missed a good glass of seltzer . . . and even better company.” Alex could schmooze with the best of them. She took refuge behind her professional persona. “Look, there’s Miranda—in the burgundy dress—she handles employee communications. Let me introduce you.”

Alex proceeded to introduce Todd to as many people as she could who might benefit from his services. A few of the guys in Brian’s department were talking football—which teams were likely to go to the Super Bowl, which players should have been traded, what each of them would do in so-and-so’s place . . . Todd jumped right in. After a few minutes, Alex excused herself. She was glad to escape and found herself searching the room for a glimpse of Mark.

There he was. On the far side . . . with that pretty, curvy redhead clinging to his arm. *Oh bother*, Alex thought as her stomach clenched. *Get over this!* She wanted a relationship with Quentin, not Mark. So why did it annoy her to see Mark with this model-like creature standing so close to him. Who was she?

Alex half-hid in the shadows behind a marble column where she could observe Mark more closely without drawing attention to herself. Mark was smiling, attentive, but did not look as though he was quite enjoying himself. In fact, when he glanced away from the 'creature' he looked as though he was in pain. Alex smiled to herself. Perhaps the woman annoyed him as well. She felt some relief at the thought.

Alex subtly watched as Brian joined the little group surrounding the red head. A few moments later, Mark moved away. He crossed to the double French doors on the right, out to the balcony. Alex's heart skipped a beat. What would happen if she joined him there? Would she be welcome?

There's only one way to find out. Alex gathered her courage, casually strolled across the ballroom, greeted various colleagues and then slipped outside, stepping through the same doors Mark had used minutes ago. Alex quickly spotted Mark at the far end of the balcony, looking out over the rail into the starry night. He seemed to be in another world. He had not heard her. The December air was cold, but Alex did not mind. She silently approached him from behind.

Chapter 17

“Hi Mark.” Alex said softly.

Mark stiffened and turned. His rock-like expression melted into a smile when he saw her. “Thank God it’s you, Alex,” he said, his face filled with relief.

Alex’s fears melted. Mark seemed genuinely glad to see her. Maybe Miss Redhead was an obligation of some kind. Or maybe something else was bothering him.

“What about your date?” Alex asked.

“Glynnis?”

“The redhead,” Alex nodded.

Mark sighed. “She could talk a monkey out of a banana plantation. . . . My mother set me up. She owes me for this one,” he said firmly, arching an eyebrow.

Alex’s concerns vanished. She laughed.

Mark eyed her curiously. “What about your date?”

Hmmm. So Mark had noticed?

“Todd? He’s an acquaintance,” Alex explained. “He works with Donovan Printing. I thought it would be helpful for him to meet some of the other department heads at FT.”

Mark smiled. “That was thoughtful of you, Alex.”

Alex soaked in the warmth of his smile. So this Glynnis person was nothing special to Mark. *Praise God!* Alex felt relieved, lighthearted . . . willing to let the walls down for a few minutes.

“Do you think anyone would notice if we escaped to the top floor for 20 minutes to enjoy the view?” Mark asked lightly, but looked hopeful. “There’s a rotating restaurant at the top.”

Alex yielded. She would like to see it. *What could possibly go wrong in 20 minutes?*

“Sure,” she answered. “Todd’s talking football; he won’t miss me. . . . But what about Glynnis?”

“She’s bending Brian’s ear about this evening’s wine selection,” Mark mused. “Brian actually seemed to be enjoying it. I doubt I’ll be missed.”

“Then let’s go!” Alex beamed.

Mark looked surprised. Had Alex actually agreed? Alex giggled. She felt like a school girl, playing hooky. Mark promptly guided her to another door off the balcony, one that led to a hallway behind the ballroom. He checked the hallway, then motioned for Alex to follow. They escaped to the elevator just as its heavy brass doors slid open.

“After you,” Mark said, bowing gallantly. No one was inside. Alex was thrilled to be alone with Mark. But then again, perhaps this wasn’t wise.

“Are you having second thoughts?” Mark asked; he must have seen a change in her expression. “You can go back.”

No. For once in her life, Alex wasn’t going to do the safest thing. For once in her life, she was going to take a 20 minute time out, alone, with a colleague she enjoyed—who happened to work at the same company—and

whom she would like to know better. She mentally shoved her professional self aside and stepped into the elevator.

“So how did your mom rope you into taking Glynnis?” Alex asked.

Mark rolled his eyes. “I was trapped,” he explained. “My mother invited me over for lasagna and discovered I hadn’t asked anyone to the FT party. She excused herself for a moment to check on the dog. Twenty minutes later, Glynnis miraculously shows up, asking to borrow some ‘yarn.’ Mom did not seem surprised to see her—not at all. That should have been my first clue. Mom told Glynnis how unfortunate it was I did not have a date for the company party. At that moment, I knew I was doomed.”

Alex could not help smiling. “So what happened?”

“My mother asked Glynnis if she was free Saturday night and then asked if Glynnis would be willing to accompany me.”

Alex’s mouth dropped open. “Right in front of you?!” Alex put her hand over her mouth, suppressing a laugh at his mother’s audacity.

The elevator door opened and they stepped out. Mark rolled his eyes. “What could I do? How could I tell Glynnis I’d much rather have a tooth pulled than bring her with me? The woman squealed at Mom’s invitation as if she’d just found a winning lottery ticket.”

“She had,” Alex teased. “You!”

Mark shook his head in apparent agony, “It is a sad state of affairs when a mother feels the need to arrange a date for her thirty-four year old son. I could not believe it.”

Alex laughed out loud.

“I’m in pain and you’re laughing?” Mark quipped with a twinkle in his eye.

“I can’t imagine anyone backing you into a corner unless you were willing,” Alex giggled. “I suspect you are humoring your mother and tolerating Glynnis out of kindness.”

“Perhaps,” he replied, an amused look in his eyes.

“But why would your mother want to arrange a date for you, Mark? Is she usually so . . .”

“Obnoxious? Interfering? Controlling?” Mark laughed. “No. My mother is very sweet natured, very accommodating. However, when she sees a problem, she won’t rest until she finds an answer. Apparently, I am her latest problem. Imagine her sense of failure—her youngest son is not married! Erica and Jane, my sisters, kept the heat off for years by producing five great kids . . . but now I’ve become Mom’s focus . . . so, tomorrow evening, Mom and I are going to have a little talk.”

Alex smiled. She suspected this would be his mother’s last matchmaking attempt. . . . Or at least the last one she got away with.

Mark and Alex found a table next to stunning floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. The lights below echoed the sparkling stars above in the crisp, clear winter air. The full moon shone like a spotlight, accenting the city’s tall, multi-level skyscrapers against the night sky.

“Mark, it’s beautiful!” Alex exclaimed. “Thank you for suggesting this.” She could hear the hum of piano music as the restaurant platform rotated, slowly changing the view.

“My pleasure,” Mark replied. Mark looked even more handsome than usual this evening, Alex thought. He wore a luxurious dark suit over his

broad shoulders and well proportioned form. The color nearly matched the blackness of his thick, wavy hair. His pale shirt and graduated blue tie brought out the depths of his eyes. Alex suddenly realized Mark was looking more at her than the display of lights outside.

Mark smiled. "I know I'm not supposed to say this, Alex, but please humor me," he spoke quietly. "Do you have any idea how beautiful you are? You sparkle . . . the city lights have nothing on you."

Alex drank in his words, "Thank you, Mark . . . And in case you are wondering, you look beautiful, too!" she teased.

"Well done," Mark smiled, then paused. "So Alex, did you intend to invite Todd? Or do you also have an interfering relative somewhere?"

"No relative," Alex smiled, "And I did invite him . . . although Todd is not my first choice."

"Who is your first choice?" Mark asked casually.

Alex sighed. "If I tell you, Mark, will you promise to keep this strictly between us? I would rather die than have this get out."

"I can keep a secret," Mark said, "but you don't have to tell me."

"No, for some strange reason, I want to share this with you. Can you believe it?" "Me," Alex giggled, "the person who is religious about keeping her professional life walled off from her personal life."

Mark smiled. "But I don't want to be responsible for too much knowledge, Alex. "

“I’m sure you can handle it,” Alex grinned. She grew serious and ran a finger nervously along the rim of her glass. “Remember when I mentioned I was waiting for someone?”

“Your friend? Yes.”

“Well, I’ve never actually met him.”

Mark frowned. “What do you mean?”

“We send emails and chat online. He sends me notes through the mail, like a secret pal. I don’t know his name. I’ve never heard his voice. I don’t know what he looks like. But I’m crazy about him. How embarrassing is that?”

“It sounds safe.” Mark stated simply. “You can have the illusion of a relationship without any of the complications. What do you think would happen if you actually met him in person?”

Alex paused. She thought about Mark’s words. *Safe? It sounds safe?* “I don’t know,” she replied.

Mark’s tone was gentle, but his words probed mercilessly, “What if you’ve built him up to be something he’s not, Alex? Has he given you any indication of when you will be able to meet? How long has this been going on?”

“Ten months. Actually, six. I started receiving the notes in February, but we didn’t talk on line until July.”

“Ten months? Alex, don’t you think if he wanted to meet you in person, he would have arranged it by now?”

Alex tried to explain, but Mark continued to challenge her answers, poking holes through every rationalization.

“From what you’ve said, Alex, you hardly know this man. How can you think toward a future with him when you don’t even know how he butters his toast or what he likes to do for fun?”

“He’s a musician.”

“What instrument? Or is he a vocalist? Does he play with an orchestra? In a band? Does he travel from venue to venue? Do you have any idea what his lifestyle is like?”

Frowning, a beleaguered Alex finally asked him, “Mark, why do you care? Why does this matter to you?”

Mark’s answer caught Alex completely off guard.

“Alex, I don’t mind a little competition,” Mark said, “but how can I compete with an imaginary person? Are you certain this stranger is all you envision him to be?”

Mark studied Alex intently. His casual demeanor had evaporated. Alex felt a bit like a hamster under the scrutiny of a hawk. Mark continued, “He needs to behave like a man, Alex, and stop hiding behind his computer screen. And if he can’t, well, you have your answer.”

“But Mark, he’s blocked by his circumstances—and mine—somehow,” Alex countered, once again defending Quentin, and ignoring the full implication of Mark’s words.

“Or so he would have you believe, Alex. . . . Please . . . listen to what I am saying. Ten months is too long to stay hidden. I admire your loyalty to him. But has he asked you not to date or see anyone?”

“No.”

“So how do you know he doesn’t just see you as a friend?”

Alex squirmed. She’d had enough. “Mark, why don’t we enjoy the view we came for?”

Mark frowned. They finished their drinks. An eerie quietness settled over their table. And yet, strangely, there was no other place Alex would rather be.

“Let’s stroll the perimeter,” Mark suggested cautiously, “unless you would rather head back.”

Absolutely not, Alex thought. “I’m in no hurry,” she said.

Mark pulled out her chair. He offered his arm. Alex savored his closeness as they walked the perimeter, side by side.

They reached a “closed off” section of the restaurant. No one was in sight. Mark turned toward the window. Alex stood quietly next to him and studied the view, glancing at him as she spoke. ““Mark, I apologize,” she said. “We came up here to relax and this has turned into a conversation about me.” She looked into Mark’s face, “I’d like to learn more about you, Mark, if you don’t mind.”

“There’s not much to tell,” Mark said. He looked discouraged, then lifted his deep, thoughtful eyes to hers. “Have I been too candid?” he asked.

“No,” Alex replied, tightening her grip on the railing. “I needed to hear it, Mark. I’m letting myself buy into some teenage fantasy about a mystery man I’ve never met. You’re helping me see another perspective. Although I won’t deny it bothers me. It’s uncomfortable. Quentin is a terrific friend.”

Mark's face was unreadable. *Like a concrete wall*, she thought. He seemed to have retreated to some faraway place. Alex paused and sought reassurance.

"Mark, I hope you don't think any less of me," she said softly.

"Heavens, Alex; that's simply not possible." The next instant Mark pulled her close, his steel blue eyes inches from her face.

Alex was startled, but mesmerized. Mark was captivating. Magnificent. He wanted to kiss her. And she wanted his kiss. More than anything. Just one kiss. She closed her eyes. . . . But nothing happened.

Mark gently edged away. A fearful, distant look overtook his expression. "Forgive me, Alex," he said quietly.

"I wouldn't mind if you kissed me, Mark," Alex whispered. Part of her couldn't believe she'd just said that.

"Believe me, I want to," Mark replied. "But you will hate me on Monday. Think of sitting in all those staff meetings together. I'll have to try even harder to pretend there is nothing I feel for you when I want so much to take you in my arms and be with you every minute of the day . . . Dear God, please help me." And with that, Mark turned and left.

Alex felt stunned. Her face warmed. Her heart pounded. Mark wanted to be with her? And she wanted him to kiss her? But what about Quentin? How could she be so disloyal? There was something between her and Mark; something real; something physical, something sinful . . . But what if he was right? What if Quentin never saw his way clear to meet her? She closed her eyes and prayed. For forgiveness. For strength. For wisdom. For Mark. For Quentin. For sanity.

By the time Alex had collected herself and returned to the ballroom, Mark was nowhere to be found. Apparently, Brian had offered to take Glynnis home. Alex smiled. She was certain Mark had not minded a bit. Todd found her and beamed. “What a terrific evening, Alex! I can’t thank you enough for inviting me.”

Alex was in a completely different place mentally, but Todd failed to notice. “Are you ready to leave, Todd?” she asked. “Or do you want me to call a cab?”

“No, I’ll take you home,” Todd said. “My car is in valet parking.”

Todd continued to talk as they waited for his car. He rambled on and on about everyone he had spoken with, about the business potential for Donovan. *I could grow fur and start hopping like a kangaroo and he would not notice*, Alex thought reluctantly. She had accepted his earlier offer to take her home, thinking it would give them time to talk. But the only one talking was Todd. And Alex did not feel much like listening.

Chapter 18

Alex breathed in deeply when she was finally inside her front door. What a strange, strange night. She wondered if Todd had even noticed when she stepped out of the car. It was not hard to imagine him still talking, even with no one there. Alex laughed. Todd could not possibly be Quentin; he lacked Quentin’s awareness. Even from what she typed, Quentin could usually tell what sort of mood she was in. But Todd was clueless. Unless it was an act? Alex dismissed the thought. She had no desire to spend any more non-work moments with Todd.

But Mark . . . Alex closed her eyes . . . she swallowed hard. She could still feel his presence . . . she could see his face . . . so close to her own . . . so

warm . . . so caring. Her insides tightened. What a mess. Where was he now? Was Mark okay? What would happen the next time they saw each other? . . . Her eyebrows knitted together. . . And how could she so easily set aside her resolve to wait for Quentin? . . . Quentin, the thoughtful one. Quentin, who was always there for her. Quentin, who steadily prayed for her. Waves of guilt washed over her.

Alex felt wretched. But what if Mark was right? What if Quentin expected nothing more than friendship? *What if I am inflicting all this guilt on myself for nothing!*

Alex flew to her keyboard.

“Hey Quentin. . . . are you awake? Can we talk?”

She waited a few minutes, checked her FT mail, went back to the chat page, but there was no response. Alex’s heart sank. *Don’t be silly; he’s probably sleeping. . . . But what if he can’t sign on? What if he’s hurt? Suppose he’s been in a car crash or is lying in a hospital somewhere—I would never know it. How could I help him?* Alex reined in her fears, checked the news and was just about to sign off when a text message flashed on her screen . . .

“Hi Alexa . . . it’s 1 am. Are you okay?”

“Thank you, Quentin. I hope I didn’t wake you. I just needed to connect with you . . . to know you are still there. It was such a strange night . . .”

“What happened?”

“Nothing life-threatening. I just . . . Quentin, what are you looking for in our relationship? What are you hoping for?”

“Alexa, is this something we can talk about tomorrow? I’m not in the best frame of mind at the moment.”

“Quentin, are *you* okay?”

“I’m still breathing,” he replied.

“What does that mean?”

“I’m fine.”

“Quentin, is there anything more I can do?”

“Not right now, Alexa. I just need some sleep. Are you free around 2 pm tomorrow afternoon?”

“Sure.”

“Great. Let’s talk then.”

And with that, Quentin signed off. Alex frowned. Quentin didn’t sound like his usual self. *Probably because I woke him.* It was another strange conversation in an already strange night. Alex prayed her way through her fears and eventually drifted off to sleep.

* * * *

After church and brunch with friends, Alex eagerly turned on her computer and waited. This was it. She and Quentin were finally going to talk. Alex had hardly been able to concentrate on the sermon that morning—she was nervous, scared, excited, eager for clarity.

Her watch crept closer to two o’clock.

“Hi Quentin.”

“Hi. How was church this morning?”

“Good. I’m very glad you are willing to talk about our . . . friendship,” she began.

“I’m not certain I am up for this discussion today, Alexa. Perhaps you can tell me what is prompting the urgency.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Quentin. Are you okay? What happened?”

“I made a huge mistake.”

“Are you sure? Sometimes things seem worse than they really are.”

“Alex, someone I care about is going to get hurt. I can see it coming. It’s my fault and I can’t think of a single thing I can do about it.”

“This sounds like another one of those problems where you can only tell me so much, right?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. Sorrier than you will ever know.”

“Quentin, if this isn’t a good time to talk, I can wait. Seriously. Please do what you need to do.”

“If I could think of something to do, I would be doing it. I’d much rather talk with you right now.”

“Thanks.”

“So tell me what is driving the relationship questions so I have some context to work with.”

“Okay. FT held their company party last night at the Regency. A friend—Mark Hanson—asked questions about you I couldn’t answer. It made me realize how little I know about you, Quentin.

And yet on an emotional and spiritual level, I feel so connected with you . . . it would seem like I'd lost an arm if I ever lost you . . . but I'm not certain how you feel, Quentin . . . about our relationship . . . about me . . . about where this is going or not going. I'm hoping you can be candid with me and just let me know."

"That's fair. From the beginning, I've wanted to be your friend, Alexa. I've wanted to support you, be here for you, get to know you better. . . . But don't let our friendship hold you back if you want to go out with someone . . . or if you want to explore something more permanent with someone else."

What??? *Doesn't he care more than that?!* Alex's heart sank. And yet Quentin's remarks did not add up. Alex summarized, "So you don't see us as having any commitment to each other except one of friendship. You are free to date. I am free to date. And you and I will just hang out on line every now and then when the mood strikes?"

"Basically, yes."

Alex's lips tightened into a thin line. No way was Quentin getting away with this.

"I'm not buying this, Quentin. Do you have friendships like this with other women—online relationships that don't involve any commitment or promises? Relationships where you've never seen each other?"

"Alex, please. Do I have to answer this? I couldn't possibly maintain online relationships like this with anyone else. I'd never sleep. You are the only one. Trust me."

“Quentin, offline, are you still single? Or have you met anyone you would like to go out with since we started talking months ago?”

“No, I haven’t met anyone. . . . And yes, I’m still single . . .”

“Okay. So let me highlight some of the things you’ve communicated over the past six months . . . and see if you’d like to retract or clarify anything. . . . 1) you initially “felt a connection” with me; 2) you’ve taken the trouble to send me notes nearly every Friday—for ten months; 3) you almost always answer my emails immediately, no matter what time of day or night; 4) you consistently pray for me; 5) you are not seeing or dating anyone else; 6) you have a sixth sense what is going on with me even without body language or vocal cues; 7) you said you cared about me more than you could ever express in an online chat session . . . Do I have this right?”

“Am I on trial here? What is your point?”

“Quentin, does this sound to you like a man who is interested in nothing more than a casual friendship?”

Her question met with silence.

“Quentin, I need you to honestly tell me three things: 1. Tell me you desire nothing more from our relationship than what we currently have. 2. Tell me you see no long-term potential for us. . . . and 3. I need to know how you feel about me.”

“Alex, please. It’s not fair to you for me to keep you from anyone else. You can’t put your life on hold while I sort things out.”

“Yes I can, Quentin. Please answer my questions.”

“Alex, if I answer these, I’m afraid I will put you, and myself, in a no-win situation. Why don’t we just enjoy the friendship without any promises to each other for now, trust God, and let things be?”

“Quentin, I can’t. I need to know.”

“Why?”

“I’m bothered by Mark’s comments. I want to know I’m not living in a fantasy world. I want to know that you . . . and the connection I feel with you . . . are real.”

“What happened at the party, Alexa? What are you not saying?”

“Quentin . . . I can’t tell you. . . I’m afraid you will hate me for this.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Mark and I were talking, we stopped to enjoy the view . . . and he almost kissed me . . . and far worse, I wanted him to kiss me. Quentin, I feel so guilty. My stomach is in knots. I’m waiting for you, not him . . . I am so sorry.”

“Alex, please don’t be so hard on yourself. We have no hold on each other, no promises, no commitments. It’s okay.”

“Do you really feel that way? It doesn’t bother you?”

“That’s not what I said. . . .”

“Quentin, please. Answer my questions.”

Quentin was silent for long awhile.

“You are not going to let this go, are you.”

“No.”

“Do I desire anything more? Yes. Do I see potential for a long-term relationship? Eventually, Lord willing . . .”

Alex sensed his hesitation . . . “And how do you feel about me, Quentin, with no hedging.”

“At this moment? I would like to toss you into a nice cold pool of water.”

“That doesn’t cut it, Quentin. Please answer the question.”

“I will answer only if you promise you will feel no obligation to wait for me, no matter what I say. Will you agree to this, Alexa?”

“What are you, a martyr? Wouldn’t it bother you if I started dating someone who wasn’t you?”

“Please answer my question.”

“Quentin, I can’t promise that . . . and I still would like your answer.”

There was another long pause.

“Okay, Alexa, you win. . . I am crazy about you. This is killing me. I cannot picture myself with anyone else, ever.”

Alex closed her eyes and leaned back in her chair. Relieved. She was bound to this man, and she did not wish to be free, not until she knew who he was. But for now, she would enjoy what they had.

“Quentin, thank you. I wish I could hug you. You have no idea what a relief it is to know how you feel. Please forgive me for pressuring you, but I had to know. This won’t change anything.”

“Don’t believe that for a moment, Alexa. It changes everything.”

* * * * *

Inside his home office on the other side of town, Quentin pushed back from his computer screen and stared at the rich burgundy carpet, his forearms resting on top of his legs. “What have I done?” he asked himself. If he revealed who he was, she would be hurt and angry. He would disrupt her career plans. If he continued as Quentin, he was cheating her out of a real relationship. If he cut Quentin off, he might break her heart. Sweet, sweet Alexa. Quentin buried his face in his hands and fought back the tears.

Chapter 19

Alex renewed her determination. Her relationship with Quentin was not a fantasy. Regardless of how long it took, regardless of the incident at the company party with Mark, Alex would wait for Quentin. Now she needed to set the record straight with Mark. She wasn’t looking forward to the conversation, but it had to be done.

Mark was out of the office. *How convenient.* He had on-site customer trainings, vacation and then the holidays. Alex would not see him until after the New Year. What she had in mind was not the sort of conversation one conducted over the phone or via email. She would wait. *No worries,* she tried to convince herself. Alex threw herself into the planning for next year and preparations for the holidays. She mentally set Mark aside.

Alex and Gram would spend Christmas at Allie's this year. To take some of the pressure off her sister, Alex offered to roast the turkey, make the stuffing and bring them with her. How difficult could it be? Allie reluctantly agreed. She had plenty to do although she was skeptical about Alex's culinary skills. Without telling Alex, Allie roasted a chicken and put the meat in the freezer as a backup.

Meanwhile, life was quiet at the office. Alex found plenty of time to put the finishing touches on the marketing plan and competitive analysis for the upcoming year. She held a holiday party for her own staff and gave them the Friday off before Christmas. She was still amazed at the difference in the camaraderie and morale since she had started praying and paying more attention to the people she worked with. *God is so good!* she smiled to herself.

Four days before Christmas, Alex shopped for some last minute presents for Gram and the boys. Distracted by the bookstore, she wandered in and noticed two new books on social marketing in the business section. Without thinking, Alex picked up two copies of each volume—one for herself and one for Quentin. She laughed to herself on the way home . . . Now, how am I going to get these to him?

That evening, she shared her dilemma.

“Hi Quentin,” Alex typed. “You won't believe what I did today.”

“Nothing would surprise me. What happened?”

“I found some books I thought we would both enjoy and automatically picked up two copies, one for you and one for me. If you are interested, we can read a few chapters each week and discuss them. . . . Except that on the way home, I realized I had no

way to get the books to you. Too funny! I can save them until we meet someday, or, if you have any other ideas, I'm open. I would like to hear your ideas as we read through the chapters."

"I'm flexible. What if you leave a package for me at the rec center? You can leave it at the front desk, addressed to Quentin, and I can stop by and pick it up."

"Quentin, how do you know I won't be lurking in the shadows, waiting to discover who you are?!"

"You'll have to promise me; that's all. Otherwise, we can wait."

"You are so mean! Just kidding. I'll drop them off tomorrow. Merry Christmas, Quentin!"

"Merry Christmas to you, too, Alexa. And thank you for the books."

Alex carefully wrapped her gift to Quentin and enclosed a note. She was nervous, excited. This was her second "almost" encounter with Quentin. How thrilling to think within the next few days, he would be flipping through the same books she held in her hands. *I am so glad he did not want to wait!*

Alex made her way over to the rec center that afternoon, with her Christmas package. Although she'd promised not to "hide and wait," there were other alternatives.

Alex had known Shelly, the associate on duty, since she joined the club. Although they only engaged in occasional superficial conversations, Alex felt she could trust Shelly. Shelly had been working the front desk at the center ever since it had opened. Her well toned body made her look

younger than her years, although her face and graying hair—where the blonde dye did not quite cover—told a different story.

“Shelly, would you mind if I left package here at the front desk for a friend? His name is Quentin,” Alex added.

“No problem,” Shelly replied, “as long as it isn’t contraband—drugs, tobacco, counterfeit money—anything you cannot sell on the eBay or the home shopping network. . . .”

Alex laughed. “No, it’s just books. But I’m wondering if you can do me a favor, Shelly.”

“What’s that?”

Alex leaned forward and spoke just above a whisper. “This friend . . . well, I’ve never actually met him in person. We send emails and chat on line. I’m dying to know what he looks like.”

Shelly smiled, enjoying where this is going.

Alex continued, “I’m wondering if you could take note of his appearance and then describe him to me later.”

Shelly leaned forward and spoke in a low voice, “Do you want me to try and get a picture with my cell phone?”

“No, that’s too risky,” Alex replied, suddenly feeling as if she were playing a role in a bad detective movie.

“Okay, hon,” Shelly winked. “I’ll make sure I get a real good look at him and let you know. I always wanted to be an undercover agent.”

“Now’s your chance,” Alex confided. “Here’s my business card; just call that number after he stops by and let me know.”

“Will do,” Shelly smiled. “He’ll never know.”

The call from Shelly came two days later.

“Alex Rausch?” A woman’s voice said tentatively when Alex picked up her phone.

“Yes,” Alex replied. “Shelly, is that you?”

“Yes.”

“Just a minute, let me close my office door,” Alex replied. Alex put Shelly on hold and quickly crossed the room. She felt like skipping on the way back to her desk but restrained herself.

“So Shelly, did Quentin stop by?”

“Yes. He just left a few minutes ago. I peeked out the window to make sure he drove off before I called you so he wouldn’t suspect anything.”

“Thank you, Shelly,” Alex replied, full of curiosity. “So what did he look like?”

“That man’s a sweetheart, Alex. He’s about six feet tall with reddish blond hair and big brown puppy eyes. He’s a little scrawny, but nice to look at if you know what I mean.”

Alex made mental notes—*six feet tall, reddish blond hair, brown eyes*—who did she know who fit that description?

“Anything else?” Alex asked.

“I’m just getting started,” Shelly said. “He looked like he was in his early 30s, or maybe a little older, but I doubt he’s over 35. He had on jeans, a

flannel shirt and one of those nice red and black Marmot jackets . . . you know, the Gortex ones.”

“What did he say?”

“He started talking to Tina, that perky kid who works with me on Thursdays. He said a friend had left a package at the front desk for him, and did she have anything for Quentin. . . . As soon as I heard that name, I hopped right over. ‘What did you say the name was?’ I asked him. ‘Quentin,’ he repeated. ‘I’m hoping you have a package for me.’”

“I’ll tell you what, Alex. I could have sat and listened to that man talk all day and all night. He had one of those English accents . . . or maybe South African . . . I’m not sure which. But his voice! It was so deep, so rich and so lovely to listen to. That man can read me a bedtime story any time.”

“Did he have any scars? Did he limp? Was there anything physically wrong with him?”

“Not that I could see. He looked more than fine to me. Very fine.”

Alex smiled to herself. “So was there anything else?” she asked.

“Yeah. His car. He was driving a red Lotus—one of those expensive sporty numbers—in this weather! Can you believe it? But man, it sure looked nice. You need to meet this guy so he can tell you stories with that voice of his while you ride in that beautiful car . . . and then you can take me for a long ride for doing all this detective work for you.”

“Shelly, I owe you!” Alex laughed. “You have outdone yourself.”

“I was just joking about the ride, Alex. You don’t owe me anything. This was fun. . . . So why doesn’t he want you to know what he looks like?”

“I have no idea, Shelly; but I intend to find out. Thank you so much for your help!”

* * * * *

Alex contemplated Shelly’s description, but it completely baffled her. She knew no one who looked like that, let alone spoke with an accent and drove a Lotus. The mystery surrounding Quentin just grew a little deeper.

Alex found a small package in her in box on Friday morning with the initials “Q.F.” for the return address. *A gift! From Quentin!!* Alex tore open the envelope and removed a translucent ribbon from around a small silver box. She hesitated before opening it. Should she wait and open it when they were online together? What if she didn’t like it? *Better to know now.* Alex removed the ribbon and slowly opened the box. Nestled inside were a delicate, yet funky pair of fire opal dangle earrings with a twist of white gold. *Gorgeous!* Alex wondered how Quentin knew she would like earrings like this; they were so her taste. She removed her existing earrings and put the fire opals on. Alex loved the look. She mentally assessed her wardrobe and pondered what would display the earrings to their best advantage. Alex thought of the puppy-eyed man with the marvelous voice at the rec center. Could that really be Quentin? *Who is he???*

* * * * *

Alex found a “thank you” e-card with a lip-synched Elvis impersonation that made her laugh. She sent it to Quentin. “The earrings are gorgeous!” she wrote, “I love wearing them. Thank you, thank you very much!”

Quentin seemed to appreciate the books. They began discussing some of the chapters and potential applications to Quentin’s business plan as well as the marketing strategies at FT. Alex continued to be amazed at

Quentin's grasp of what she was dealing with in the office and his understanding of her work.

"Some days, I think you must live at FT in order to follow all this," she wrote. *But the only employee with reddish blonde hair has gray eyes, not brown, he's short, and he recently graduated from college. He can't be you!* She thought.

"Some days, I do feel I live there," Quentin typed back. "You have a knack for describing scenarios and drawing people in."

"As do you," Alex returned.

She knew questions about where Quentin currently worked would be fruitless so she turned to another subject.

"What are you doing for Christmas?" Alex asked.

"Visiting family," Quentin replied.

"What are your family gatherings like?" She asked.

"LOL – literally. We will have about forty people this year, including plenty of eccentrics and interesting personalities. We share stories, play games, sing carols . . . I think you would enjoy them. "

Quentin asked about Alex's holiday plans and inquired about her grandmother.

As Alex drifted off to sleep later that night, she smiled, thanking God for her friend, whoever he was.

* * * * *

For the hundredth time, Quentin contemplated revealing himself to Alexa . . . without hurting her. How could he move their relationship from the computer screen to the real world? Full disclosure was the only viable solution. He couldn't stand the subterfuge, hiding who he was. The strain of seeing her and pretending he knew nothing about her life ate away at him. But Alex would never accept him as he was. Unless he had completely misjudged her, she would feel hurt, angry and betrayed. Quentin had no doubt she would cut him off. Was it better to keep up the pretense—enjoying a shadow of what they could have—so they could at least share something together? Or was it better to tell her the truth and risk losing her, perhaps forever?

Chapter 20

Alex found coming back to the office after a week off and the New Year's holiday felt strange; *a bit like re-entering the earth's orbit*. The holidays had been uneventful. Gram had adjusted well to Meadowbrook. Alex had enjoyed time to herself and with friends and her family. . . . Now it was time to face Mark. Alex dreaded the encounter. Should she try to find him before the staff meeting? Wait until afterwards? Set up an appointment to meet him? Ask him to stop by her office? *Sheeesh*. She was not usually so indecisive. Much to her discomfort, Mark saved her the trouble.

Shortly before 9 am, Alex was going through her email when she heard a tap at her door. Mark leaned in.

“Hey Alex, do you have a minute?” His smile was warm, easy, inviting.

Alex felt as though she'd been slammed by a solar flare. *Not fair!* Surely three weeks had been long enough to get passed that moment . . . his eyes . . . his voice . . . the “almost” kiss.

Her face flushed. Somehow, Alex managed a smile. “Hey Mark, come on in. Have a seat. So how was your New Year’s?”

Mark took the chair in front of her desk. He seemed so calm, so relaxed, as if nothing had ever passed between them. Inwardly, Alex felt annoyed.

This is so not fair!

“New Year’s was great. I wanted to catch you before the staff meeting,” Mark explained.

His tone turned serious. “I apologize for my behavior at the holiday party,” Mark said. “We both have too much at stake. It won’t happen again.”

“It wasn’t all you, Mark,” Alex admitted honestly. “If you had stayed another minute, I would be apologizing to you right now.”

Mark raised an eyebrow. A knowing half-smile greeted her; his eyes sparkled with amusement.

“But Mark,” Alex cautioned, “I feel even more strongly about not going near anyone who works at the same company I do.” She tried to sound firm, but the effort fell short. She wondered if Mark noticed.

“No worries,” he replied. “Fischer is going to have an even better year this year. Let’s put all that aside and get back to the game.”

At the staff meeting and for weeks afterwards, Mark was as good as his word. Irritatingly friendly. Endlessly professional. Mind-numbingly appropriate. Alex couldn’t help feeling she’d lost more than she’d gained. Her insides still flip-flopped at the sight of him, but she committed her inappropriate reactions and thoughts to the Lord. Alex constantly sought solace in Scripture she’d memorized. She tried to look to the Lord for strength.

And yet the facade—pretending she felt nothing more toward Mark than she would any professional colleague—began to take its toll. She consciously stopped herself from “dropping by” his office at least three times each week. She sent members of her staff to talk to members of his staff. *You are being ridiculous*, she chided herself. After all, she just wanted his opinion. She simply wanted to discuss strategies. She merely wanted his feedback on the next steps in the green campaign . . . *Okay, who am I kidding?* She wanted to be close to him. She even dreamt about him, only in her dreams, the kiss was real. *How unacceptable!*

Alex continued her conversations with Quentin, feeling tremendous guilt. Her shoulders tensed; she suffered headaches; her food looked especially unappealing.

Quentin seemed oblivious. They had no further conversations about their relationship. Nor did she want to talk about it. *Keep things light*, she told herself repeatedly. She was marking time until he was free to meet her in person. *I just need to meet him*, she kept thinking, *then all this strangeness with Mark will disappear.*

When one of her marketing managers could not attend the trade show in Chicago, Alex jumped at the chance. “I will fill in for Sheniah,” Alex told her staff. She lost herself in the preparations. She set up product demonstrations and a focus group, working with Evan, Mark’s product manager, to find out what Development wanted to know. She was certain Mark knew she was avoiding him, but he never questioned her, stopped by, or offered to help. *Whatever*, Alex thought, secretly disappointed and more than a little annoyed. *Remember, you did this to yourself, Alexa.*

The morning Alex left for the Trade Show was a flurry of last minute activity. She met with Tucker and Jon, the other members of her team who were attending, and ran through the checklist and goals one more time. When they finally got on the plane, Alex sank into her seat and closed her eyes. It felt so good to get away, to leave the office behind for a few days. She sighed and fell into a deep sleep, lasting the duration of the flight.

Before she flew to Chicago, Alex had made arrangements to visit one of her former college professors, Dr. Marilyn Reinhardt. She had a few hours between helping Tucker, Jon and Brian's people set up the exhibit and the opening reception.

As Alex walked down the hallway at her alma mater, memories drew her to another place and time. She smiled as she stepped through Dr. Reinhardt's open office door.

"Alex, it is so good to see you!" Dr. Reinhardt exclaimed. "What are you doing with yourself? How are things at Fischer? How is your career? Thank you so much for staying in touch. I love that you took the trouble to visit me."

Alex had always enjoyed Professor Reinhardt's Quantitative Marketing Courses. Anyone who could make numbers and statistics interesting deserved a place of honor in her book. Physically, Dr. Reinhardt could not have been more different from Alex. Dr. Reinhardt was tall, stocky, and fair. Her once blonde hair had turned to dishwater but it was pulled back in a comfortable bun with wispy strands escaping the sides, the same way she'd worn it for years. Her wire framed glasses perched low on her aquiline nose and she tended to peer over the top of them whenever she addressed someone.

“Life is good,” Alex began. “Fischer has doubled their revenue since I came on board. It certainly is a team effort; but because of the timing, people give me more credit than I deserve,” Alex said with a twinkle in her eye.

“I doubt that,” Professor Reinhardt responded. “You were always a bright one.”

“So what are you doing now?” Alex asked as she glanced around the musty office. It was hard to see past the piles of paper to admire the woodwork.

Professor Reinhart laughed. “I started to get bored,” she confessed, “so I started a Market Research company on the side called Internet Marketing Ventures. We focus on helping companies reach the ‘under 35’ crowd with social marketing and technology in ways most have never dreamed possible. It’s great fun.”

Alex asked more questions about what they were doing and watched for parallels with her work at Fischer. It would be terrific if Fischer could work with Professor Reinhardt somehow.

“Alex,” Dr. Reinhardt paused. “Is there any chance you would consider leaving Fischer?” Dr. Reinhardt’s gray eyes focused intently on Alex.

“Why are you asking?”

“I could use someone like you on our management team,” Dr. Reinhardt revealed. “Most of us are academics. It would help to have someone with more real world marketing experience. I don’t have a specific position in mind; we can craft something that would work both for you and for the company. What I do know is that we are on the verge of landing three major contracts and I need someone I trust to help secure and manage the relationships. Would you be willing to explore that possibility with me?”

“I am flattered,” Alex replied sincerely. “I’m not looking for a job; I came to see you.”

“But will you consider it?”

Alex paused. Perhaps the Lord was directing her toward something new. Perhaps leaving would solve the “Mark” problem. Perhaps the distance would make no difference to Quentin. But what about the work at Fischer? She wanted to take the Go Green campaign to the next level. Her team had just picked up an Interactive Marketing award and ‘best practice’ recognition in an article posted by the American Marketing Association . This next year promised more double digit growth.

“Let me think about it,” Alex replied.

“That’s all I can ask,” Professor Reinhardt replied. “Why don’t we stay in touch and I can provide more details over the next few weeks.”

“Okay,” Alex replied with a smile. “It would be a pleasure to work with you, even though I’m not ready to leave Fischer.”

“The feeling is mutual, Alex. Just keep thinking about it.”

On the plane trip home, Alex finally had a few minutes to contemplate leaving Fischer. Her heart wrenched. She did not want to go. She loved her work. She liked being on the front lines. Would Reinhardt’s company put her in background? Would it involve too much analysis and research? She decided there was no rush . . . except to try and resolve her confusion over Mark. But what about Quentin? Alex decided to discuss the possibility with him and gauge his reaction. She looked forward to their next chat.

“Hey Quentin, I’m back. How are you?”

“Great. How was Chicago? How was the trade show?”

“Terrific! We met our goals, have a stack of business cards for new customers, the focus group went well . . . I’m exhausted, but it was really, really good.”

“Congratulations.”

“Hey Quentin, while I was there, I looked up an old professor from college, Dr. Marilyn Reinhardt.”

“Isn’t she a coauthor on one of those books we’ve been reading?”

“Yes. A contributor. She specializes in the quantitative side of marketing. Anyway, she started a new company and asked if I would consider leaving Fischer and join them.”

“And you said?”

“I need to think about it.”

“What would be the advantages?”

“I’m not certain. I would enjoy working with her, but we’re already having a great year at Fischer and I hate to leave before the movie is over. Plus, I really like being in the trenches. If I went with Reinhardt’s group, I suspect I will be more on the sidelines—you know—advising instead of doing. That’s not my favorite place to be. I love my staff at Fischer and the culture. Cal has his moments, but overall he’s terrific. In many ways, it’s my dream job.”

“So why would you consider leaving?”

“I’m thinking God may be opening this door. Even though things are going well, it may be time to move on.”

“What about your family?”

“That would be another reason to stay where I am.”

“Alexa,” Quentin observed, “we’re not very far into this conversation and already you’ve offered more reasons to stay and no good reason to leave. What am I missing?”

Mark, came the unwelcome thought. This is all about Mark. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't even consider making a move. But how can I share this with you, Quentin?

“Alex, are you still there? Why so quiet?”

“How would it impact our friendship if I moved?” she asked.

“It wouldn’t. You could be in Hong Kong and we could still connect online.”

“How about getting together?”

“That would be more difficult, but not impossible. . . Alexa, I’m more concerned you may be running from something instead of moving toward something. Is there something wrong at Fischer?”

“No, Quentin, it’s just a personal struggle. No one knows. And if I leave Fischer, I won’t have to deal with it.”

“Are you sure, Alexa? Unresolved problems have a way of sticking to us and casting shadows wherever we go. Whatever ‘it’ is, I’m guessing you will be better off if you face it head-on.”

“Stop, Quentin. Could you just stop being so right for once? I was perfectly happy with my own little plan to avoid the problem.”

“Were you?”

“What?”

“Perfectly happy.”

“No! I’m making a point.”

The stillness on her computer screen drove Alex crazy. She knew she wasn’t making sense. She wasn’t being reasonable. Avoidance was not the answer. She wanted to put her fist through something.

“It’s not fair, Quentin. You know far more about me than I know about you. You never contact me unless I contact you first. It’s been six more weeks since we last talked about meeting and I’m still waiting . . . and waiting . . . and waiting. How much longer is this going to continue? When do we get to try a real relationship?”

“Alexa, I’m not tracking here. How does your meeting me have anything to do with your decision to leave Fischer?”

“If I could just meet you, Quentin . . .”

“If you could just meet me . . . what?”

“I’m certain we would feel a closer connection. I’m sure it would help me keep my thoughts in line.”

“What thoughts?”

Alex sighed. Could Quentin handle this? She was so tired of hiding. So tired of denial. “It’s about Mark, Quentin. Can you forgive me? I

struggle with idiotic, inappropriate feelings. No, I wouldn't even call them feelings; they're more like sensations. I'm sure it's nothing."

Her monitor remained still.

"Quentin, please. Say something. Do you hate me? Are you still there?"

"Yes. . . . And I could never hate you. What feelings, Alexa?"

"Like I said . . . it's nothing. If you and I could meet . . . or if I took another job . . . I'm sure the feelings would resolve themselves."
Please, please, please don't pull away from me.

"Alexa, you don't leave a dream job and your family to relocate because of minor feelings. What is going on?"

"Absolutely nothing." *That's part of the problem.* "Mark is the perfect gentleman; he treats me as he treats any other professional colleague."

"And that bothers you?"

"Yes . . . I mean no . . . I mean . . . I have no idea, Quentin. Could we please get together? Could we talk about something else?"

"Alexa, you have more backbone than this. Stop dodging the issue and get to the point."

"Quentin, please. Are you angry? I couldn't stand it if I hurt you or upset you."

“Alex, we need to work this through. Together. I’m frustrated, but I’m not angry with you. Not at all. You know you can be honest with me. Please.”

“Quentin, I really do not know what I feel toward Mark. I try not to think about it. When he walks into a meeting, the room can be filled with people, but I know he’s there—I can sense it—even before I see him. If we accidentally brush against each other, as we did leaving the conference room this morning, I get goose bumps. Worse, some days I just want to be close to him, to hear his voice, to be in the same room together. I used to find work reasons to talk with him; now, I purposely avoid him. How juvenile is that? But if I left Fischer, I could get away from him. From this stupid pull I feel toward him. I could put all this behind me.”

“Alexa, over Christmas break . . . and the week you just spent in Chicago . . . did it make any difference? Were you able to put him out of your mind?”

Alex sighed. “No. I tried. But it wasn’t long enough. He even invaded my dreams. It makes no sense, Quentin. There’s nothing there. But when I saw him today—for the first time in weeks—I felt that tug again. I’d put this on the level of raw, primal attraction, on my part anyway. Nothing will ever happen between us. And if I can get away from seeing him, over time, these ridiculous sensations will fade.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because superficial attraction – chemistry alone – doesn’t last. That’s what I had with Hollis and look how empty that relationship turned out to be. . .”

“Alex, you need to talk with Mark. You need to tell him what you just told me.”

“Good grief! That’s impossible. I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because after the holidays, we agreed we would put that little incident at the company party behind us and focus on ‘the game,’ as Mark put it. He doesn’t even acknowledge my existence any more. It was much too easy for him to get over whatever he felt for me. I am nothing to him.”

“Don’t count on it.”

“Why?”

“People do what they need to do, Alexa. He may have buried his feelings for you. You owe it to yourself to find out where he is coming from.”

“Quentin, how can you say this? More importantly, where does that leave us? You said you couldn’t imagine yourself with anyone else, ever. And now you’re encouraging me to talk with Mark over some silly feelings? Some primitive chemistry? I’m not getting this.”

“Alexa, if what you and I have is real, if it’s from the Lord, it will withstand any challenge. I’m not comfortable thinking toward the future if you have unresolved issues in the present.”

“So why don’t we meet for coffee, Quentin? It would really help me resolve any issues to talk with you face to face.”

“Not now, Alexa. Please, talk with Mark.”

Alex changed the subject. This time, Quentin let her get away with it. . . . But there was no way was she talking with Mark. Her internet buddy had no clue what he was asking. Alex resolved to think more about Quentin's observations regarding the job offer, but nothing would change her mind about keeping her professional relationships untinged by human emotions.

Chapter 21

The rest of the week was not good. Gram fell during her movement class at Meadowbrook and was taken by ambulance to the hospital. She broke two ribs and bruised her liver, but she was going to heal. She would be okay. At least physically.

"Gram seems so depressed, Alexa," Allie confided during their phone conversation on Thursday. "She remembered and was pleased you drove out to see her, but she's just not herself."

"Do you think it's the pain medication?"

"Maybe. But I'm worried it's more than that."

"I will keep praying. Keep me posted."

* * * * *

Friday evening, Quentin sent her a text message while she was at the market. He'd never initiated contact before. Alex hurried home. Was something wrong? She signed on as soon as the foods requiring refrigeration were safely tucked away.

"Hi Quentin," Alex typed. "What's up?"

"We need to talk," Quentin began.

Alex sensed something terrible behind his words. She felt darkness closing in. “Okay.”

“Alexa, I have no way of breaking the news to you gently so I will simply get to the point. We need to stop talking with each other on line.”

Alex froze. “Why, Quentin? . . . Did I offend you? Have I hurt you? Is it because of Mark?”

“Did you speak with him?”

“No. I can’t.”

“Yes you can. And you need to, before you make any career decisions. What’s the worst thing that can happen?”

“He could look at me like I have lost my mind . . . at which point I may as well sink into the carpet and die.”

“And if that happens, you will know where you stand and you can leave Fischer without any shadows.”

“It won’t happen. I’m not going to compromise my professional standing with anyone at the office.”

“Alexa, he’s only one person. Do you really think he would tell anyone? Even if your feelings were not reciprocated, wouldn’t it stay just between the two of you?”

“Probably. But I can’t take that chance. If word got out, it could ruin my career.”

“I think you’re exaggerating.”

“No, I’m not. People are ruthless. They watch for any sign of weakness, especially in a woman, and then exploit it.” Alex thought of Brian in particular.

“Alexa, I have to ask this . . . is your career so important that you would pass over a chance to be in a relationship with someone who truly cares about you, who would do anything in the world for you, who may want to walk through life with you?”

Alex closed her eyes, trying to sense the direction of Quentin’s thoughts. “Quentin, are you thinking of Mark? Or are you speaking for yourself?”

“Does it matter? The question is the priority of a committed relationship vs. your career. If you had to make a choice, Alexa, which would you choose?”

“Quentin, this makes no sense! Of course I want a special relationship . . . a real one . . . with you . . . AND I want a career. Why do I have to choose? I want to make a difference in the business world. I want to make a name for myself. I love the challenge, the competition. My career is finally gaining momentum. I’ve worked so hard to get where I am, Quentin. Why do I need to set all this aside to have a relationship?”

“You don’t. I was just curious. . . .”

Alex felt Quentin was holding something back . . . she had the uncomfortable feeling her words didn’t sit well with him . . . but she didn’t pursue it. She didn’t want to know.

“Alexa,” Quentin continued, “Even though we won’t be talking online, please do not forget how much I care for you. I’m still crazy

about you. But we need to end this for now. I can't give you a date when we can meet. It's not fair for me to keep dragging this out."

Alex's stomach clenched. "Quentin, how can you say that? You know me better than anyone. How can you say you're crazy about me and then rip yourself out of my life like this?"

"Alexa, I can't keep this up. We've had too many close encounters – the symposium, other places . . . I've misled you . . . no, I've outright lied to you . . . please forgive me. If and when you put everything together, I'm afraid you will feel deceived, betrayed. You may even hate me. . . . although I never meant for things to go this far. I would do anything to avoid hurting you. And yet, the longer I continue this 'Quentin' façade, the more hurting you becomes inevitable."

"What are you saying, Mr. Whoever-You-Are, how much do I see you in real life?"

"More than you realize."

"That's not an answer." Alex felt desperate. "Do you go to the Bible Study on Wednesdays? Do you work at Fischer Technologies? Do we go to the same church? Do you play tennis at the rec center? Do we actually speak to each other? Do you live in this area? In this country? Please, Quentin, give me some clue. How will I find you if we aren't corresponding on line? How will I know how you are doing? What to pray for? How your business is coming? And we never finished those books . . ."

"Please, Alexa, don't worry. When the timing is better, I will find you. Don't wait for me. If we are meant to be together, God will

make it happen. Trust Him. I will keep praying for you and I am still here for you, even though Quentin no longer exists. . . . And Alex, when you do figure this out . . . please go easy on me. Come talk with me. Give us a chance. I will always care about you. I just can't be Quentin anymore. It's not right. It's not honoring to the Lord."

And with that, Quentin signed off. He was gone.

Alex panicked. What sort of man says he's crazy about you and then cuts off the only avenue of communication? What sort of man says he can't imagine being with anyone else and then encourages you to explore another relationship? Was Quentin mentally unstable? Alex didn't care. She wanted answers. She wanted Quentin. *Please dear God, please help me find him!*

The next day, Alex tried QF's email. The address was no longer valid. The comics and notes stopped coming on Fridays. Alex felt an emptiness inside she could not describe. She felt violated. She had poured out her heart, her life to Quentin and he betrayed her trust.

Life went on, but it was life without color. Alex went through the motions, the routine, but her heart was not in it. Not in anything. Even though it was February, she bundled up in her winter gear and snow-shoed up Jordan Ridge. She asked God to please mend the hole in her heart, to fill the chasm in her life.

In addition to her own grief, Gram was not doing well. She had gone back to her apartment after three days in the hospital. A visiting nurse stopped by regularly to check on her. But as the weeks went by, Gram's color continued to fade. She seemed listless, bored, unengaged. Allie played some of her favorite movies and Gram just sat there. Alex came over to

visit and she barely responded. *Is she even hearing me?* Gram stared vacantly, her eyes seemed not to see.

Alex filled her life with work, with activity, with visits to Gram; anything to dull the ache inside. *I am such an idiot*, she told herself. *I should have never told Quentin about Mark. Never!* She was furious with Quentin, annoyed with Mark, angry with herself.

Late one afternoon, Alex sat on the couch next to Gram in her apartment at Meadowbrook, trying desperately to make a connection. She shared a funny story she'd heard on the news about a moose who showed up in a park downtown; reminisced about the daffodils blooming at Gram's old house; asked about Gram's neighbors and friends . . . But the conversation was one-sided. Gram did not speak. Alex saw little behind her eyes; it was as if Gram had checked out, as if she were only half there.

After a long pause, Alex finally said, "I think I may know how you feel, Gram. . . . some days life just doesn't make sense. You pray and nothing happens. You hope for someone who will understand and no one gets it; no one comprehends what you are feeling. Then people you love and trust just walk out of your life and leave you behind . . ." Alex stopped her monologue and glanced up. Gram was actually looking at her this time, with dark, watery eyes, but no tears. Alex squeezed Gram's hand . . . and Gram actually squeezed hers in return. Alex reached over and embraced Gram's frail form. They simply held each other. Moments later, Allie walked in and found them.

"Is everything okay?" Allie asked.

"Yeah, we're fine," Alex replied. Gram stared ahead with no response, their connection broken.

“Alexa, may I talk with you for a moment?” Allie asked.

“Sure,” Alex said as she patted Gram’s hand. She stood to follow Allie into the second bedroom. Allie closed the door.

“You know she’s more aware than she lets on,” Alex observed.

“I’m not so sure, Lexa. It’s been over a month since she fell. Her ribs are healing. The doctors can’t find anything wrong with her. She has no interest in food. She’s lost more weight. I am at my wit’s end trying to think of something to engage her, some reason she can grasp to keep going. I called Alan this afternoon to see if he could come visit but the little one, Georgie, has measles and Alan is in the middle of some big construction project. He can’t break away . . . ”

“How can I help, Allie?”

“I had an idea I wanted to run by you, Lexa. . . . It’s a shot in the dark, but it might help . . .” Allie studied her sister’s expression as she spoke . . . “You know how Gram was always so fond of Henry . . .”

Alex nodded and felt a chill. She sensed where Allie was headed.

“I think we should ask Mark if he would come visit.”

“No.”

“Why not? Gram thought Mark was Henry last November. Remember how she lit up when she saw him? Her whole attitude toward the move changed. Why not now?”

“Allie, I work with the guy. It’s not appropriate.”

“Not appropriate? Gram’s depressed and it’s not appropriate to ask someone who could possibly help her?”

“It’s more than that, Allie. Mark and I don’t . . . I mean we’re not . . . Well, it would be awkward, uncomfortable.”

“Alex, whatever is going on with the two of you, don’t you think you could set it aside for Gram’s sake? Just for one visit?”

“No. There’s nothing going on. And Mark’s coming won’t make any difference. I won’t allow it.”

“Tell me you are joking, Alexa. Tell me you aren’t so focused on yourself and your career that you can’t see how Mark’s presence might help Gram.”

“I am not joking,” Alex replied firmly. “Do not call him.”

“Doggone it, Alexa. This isn’t about you,” Allie snapped. “There’s more to life than your career. You just don’t get it, do you. You can’t see past your suits and your strategies and your spreadsheets to realize that someday, they just won’t matter. Someday, you’re going to be old and wrinkled like Gram and who will be there for you? What will you have to live for then, Alexa? What memories and laughter are you going to share with an outdated hard drive and an old file cabinet?”

“Enough,” Alex raged. “You have no idea what you are talking about.” She opened the bedroom door, bit back her temper long enough to say a quick good-bye to Gram and strode out of the apartment.

* * * * *

Alex seethed the entire way home. What right did Allie have to judge her? How dare she suggest that Mark visit Gram. It wouldn’t help. It was none of his business. Allie was completely out of line.

Chapter 22

In spite of the prior evening's disaster, good news greeted Alex at the office the following morning. Dr. Reinhardt had called and left a message. Alex closed her office door and wasted no time getting back to her former mentor.

"Alex, I'm so glad you called," Professor Reinhardt began. "We landed two of the contracts I'd mentioned and the third is still pending. I need more brain power. Is this a good time to talk? Or would you rather I called you at home this evening."

"I have fifteen minutes before I need to head to a meeting with our ad agency," Alex replied. "What did you have in mind?"

"I can at least give you an overview. The position I have in mind to start is a bit like a Swiss army knife. You would serve as an account manager, in-house advisor, researcher and on site consultant. There is a bit of travel involved—one of the companies is headquartered in France. How would you feel about that?"

"The travel? I would love it. What sort of business is the company involved in?"

"They manufacture medical equipment, and their market share has been dwindling. The other two accounts are in the technology arena. As far as support staff, we are a bit lean at the moment. You would have some secretarial assistance, but little else. We would need to talk about salary; I'm guessing I can at least meet what you are making now. How am I doing so far? Are you interested?"

"Yes," Alex replied. What did she have to hold her back? Her relationship with Quentin had evaporated; she could escape Mark; the position would broaden her experience . . . And yet Alex wasn't quite comfortable leaving.

She still had Gram to consider, and Allie, even if she wanted to throttle her sister at the moment. No matter what had happened, how could she abandon Allie and leave her alone to care for Gram?

Alex qualified her answer, "I'm interested, but I still have commitments holding me here. I am in no hurry to leave."

"Understood," Dr. Reinhardt replied. "Can we talk in more detail this evening?"

"Yes," Alex answered. "Please call me at home after 9 p.m."

"Will do. Have a terrific day, Alex," Reinhardt offered as she signed off.

Alex left the conversation feeling a bit lighter, a bit more hopeful. At least someone wanted her. At least there was one relationship in her life that didn't require triage. Alex looked forward to talking with Dr. Reinhardt that evening, after her visit with Gram.

Immediately after work, Alex left for her grandmother's apartment. She hadn't told Allie she was coming. Alex secretly hoped for some time alone with Gram, for once, without her sister's interference. Her wish was far from granted.

When Alex pulled into the parking lot at Meadowbrook, the visitor spaces were full. She vaguely noticed a Saab that looked familiar, but did not give it much thought. Alex parked a good distance away from the main building; a long walk in the cool March breeze soothed her spirit.

Alex knocked on Gram's door briefly, before using her key and stepping into the entryway. What she saw stopped her in her tracks. Mark was here. He was sitting next to Gram, holding her hand. Unbelievably, Gram was actually looking at him, smiling. *Allie is so going to fry for this, Alex*

reacted. Mark glanced up when he heard her footsteps. He froze when he saw her face. Allie intercepted, seeming to come out of nowhere. She grabbed Alex's arm so hard it hurt. "Don't make a scene," she whispered fiercely as she yanked her sister outside. Allie closed the front door.

Alex kept her voice low, but she was furious. "You invited Mark? Against my wishes?"

"Yes, I did, Alexa. Keep your voice down."

"You had no business calling him, Allie. I am so angry with you I can hardly speak."

"Good. Then you can shut up and listen."

"What?"

"You heard me. This isn't about you, Alexa. I called Mark after you left last night."

"Even after I said 'no?' How did you get his number? I don't even have it."

"He's in the phonebook, genius. No matter what you said, I couldn't shake the sense that Gram would be glad to see him, that he could help. And I was right. Did you see her face? Did you see how she was looking at him? She is back in the present, Alexa, paying attention, interacting with someone. I don't give a rat's behind if you are angry with me. Mark is reaching her in a way that neither of us could so you need to get over whatever is warping your judgment and let Mark know you appreciate his coming here. He needs to know that regardless of your reaction just now, you are glad to see him. And if you can't pull yourself together and at least fake a smile, you need to turn right around and head back home. Don't make Mark feel like a schmuck because you are angry with me."

Alex looked down, covered her face with her hands and took a deep breath. Allie's words burned. They touched some other part of her, something far away, something buried. She could picture the light in Gram's eyes just now as she looked at Mark; she felt Gram's happiness. If there was a schmuck here, she had to admit it was her. What must Mark be thinking? Alex blinked back her tears.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Allie scooped her baby sister into her arms. Alex's arms when around her in return. She rested her head on Allie's shoulder.

"I am so sorry."

"Shhhhsh. It's okay. I'm sorry too. Things will work out; you'll see."

Alex took a step back and looked at Allie, not quite believing her.

"What did Mark say when you asked him?" Alex asked softly.

"He wanted to know if you were okay with this," Allie sighed. "I told him I had spoken with you . . . so I didn't exactly lie . . . but I didn't tell him you were against his coming."

Alex drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "So he has no idea why I looked so shocked . . . and angry."

"No. . . . I'm sorry, Lexa."

"The fault is mine, Allie. If I hadn't been so pigheaded . . ."

"Hush. We need to head back in there. Can you do this?"

"Of course," Alex replied. Allie turned to open the door but Alex stopped her with a touch on her forearm.

“Allie,” she said gently. “Thank you. You did the right thing.”

“You are welcome,” Allie smiled, giving her sister a squeeze. They opened the door and slipped in quietly.

Gram was actually speaking, telling Mark a story about the old Farnsworth place next door. Mark was paying attention but he looked distracted, tense. He glanced at Alex, clearly concerned.

Alex gave him a warm smile. “I’m glad you’re here,” she mouthed silently.

Mark let out a long breath, obviously relieved. He turned his full attention back to Gram.

“You wouldn’t believe Mr. Farnsworth’s shock when he saw those two girls standing on the roof of his barn!” Gram was saying.

Alex pretended everything was fine. She joined in. “It was the only place we could think of to escape Alan and that nasty friend of his, Gram. Remember Sylvester?”

Allie giggled. “I still can’t believe you talked me into climbing up there, Lexa. I think that’s where I developed my fear of heights.”

Gram shook her head, “You two were always getting yourself into scrapes, one right after the other. You were worse than the boys.”

Part of Alex was so relieved, she could hardly sit still. It was wonderful to see Gram smiling and talking. How had Mark done it? He was truly amazing. And yet Alex felt disoriented, off balance. Mark, once again, was smack in the middle of her personal life. It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t right. Alex’s professional self was appalled, but determined to see this through. The problem was, as the evening progressed, Alex kept forgetting Mark

didn't belong there. She was swept up in the thrill of seeing Gram enjoy herself.

Somehow, time seemed to shift to an earlier decade as the four of them sat and talked. The girls lost their years. Mark fit in as if he had grown up with them. Gram still called him "Henry," but no one minded. Alex wondered how Gram recalled some things, but others failed to stick in her mind. What accounted for the difference? Meanwhile, Allie warmed some chicken casserole and they moved to the kitchen table, laughing at the old stories and enjoying the meal.

At one point, Gram looked at Mark, smiled and seemed to wink with both her eyes. Mark gave her a broad grin and returned the gesture. Allie stopped in mid-sentence. "What was that, Gram?" Allie asked.

"That," Gram told her, blinking again, "was an eye-hug."

"An eye-what?" Alex laughed.

"An eye-hug," Gram repeated. "Henry, go on. You explain it."

Mark looked a bit embarrassed, cleared his throat and proceeded. "My niece—we call her Boo—taught me this over Christmas. She's four. According to Boo, you use an eye-hug is when you want to hug someone, but you can't. You use it when you have to sit at the dinner table or you have to be still in church but you want more than anything—her words—to run right over and hug somebody. So, you take all the happiness in your heart and you send it to the other person through your eyes, like this." Mark smiled and blinked his eyes in Gram's direction, simultaneously nodding his head.

"I felt that," Gram beamed.

“Let me try if,” Allie chimed in. She looked at Mark, smiled, nodded and blinked.

Mark laughed. “I felt that one, too,” he joked, sending Allie an eye-hug in return.

“Here’s another one for you, Gram,” Alex said, giving it her best shot.

In a moment, they were all blinking, nodding and laughing.

“Now don’t you all feel loved?” Gram teased, “because that’s what I’m feeling.”

Alex looked away, her eyes filling with tears. This was Gram. Gram who for the past four weeks had been listless, uninvolved, unreachable. Gram was back. Mark had brought her home. Alex risked a glance at him. Mark looked in her direction. She felt his question. *Is everything okay?* Alex grinned. She sent Mark the biggest, most heart-felt eye-hug she could imagine. He beamed and immediately sent her one in return. Alex did feel it, as if he’d literally embraced her. How was that possible? Her professional self cautioned her: *Don’t forget yourself. Remember who he is. Remember your goals, what you need to accomplish.*

The thought prompted Alex to glance at her watch. Was it really 8:15? How had that happened? She was supposed to talk with Dr. Reinhardt in less than an hour. She barely had time to make the drive home.

Alex stood. “I am so sorry I have to leave,” she explained. “I hate to miss dessert.” Everyone stood. Alex hugged Gram and Allie. She nodded to Mark, wishing she could physically hug him, too. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said solemnly, wondering what that would be like. Mark gave her one of his signature grins and nodded. Once again, Alex felt warmed from her

toes to the top of the scalp beneath the wig. She would always be grateful to this man. She could never thank him enough.

* * * * *

Alex relived the evening the entire drive home . . . she thanked God for Allie and her amazing intuition . . . for Gram and how she hardly slipped at all this evening . . . for Mark and his amazing eye-hugs. She refused to dissect the moments and analyze the life out of them. This was one evening she wanted to cherish for the rest of her life. Her professional self would just have to get over it.

The phone was ringing as Alex let herself in the front door. She rushed across the kitchen and caught it on the last ring before the answering machine picked up.

“Hello, this is Alex.”

“Alex, Dr. Reinhardt here.”

“You are exactly on time,” Alex remarked, scurrying to find a pad of paper and a pencil while she tried to sound calm. “Thank you for calling.”

After some friendly chit-chat, Dr. Reinhardt took the lead. “Did you have a chance to think more about the opportunity, Alex? Do you have any questions?”

“No questions. But I did give our earlier conversation a lot of thought,” Alex said. “The opportunity sounds fantastic and it would be terrific to work with you. There is no doubt in my mind taking this position would be a wise career move. At the same time, I have ties to Fischer and to this area I’m not ready to break. I don’t want to waste your time, Dr. Reinhardt. I’m not ready to make a move, no matter how perfect it is.”

Dr. Reinhardt sighed. “I was afraid you would say something like this, Alex. And I won’t lie to you and say I am not disappointed. Will you please stay in touch and keep me apprised of how things are going? I would like to be the first one to know when you are free. I’m hoping something will open up in the future and we will eventually work together.”

“I would like that,” Alex replied sincerely.

The women talked a bit more, then said their good-byes. Alex felt secure in knowing she had a backup, a safety net, some place she could go if the situation at Fischer ever changed for the worse. But for now, for this moment any way, she was reasonably content.

Chapter 23

Regardless of her resolve and earlier peace of mind, Alex’s dreams betrayed her. She could not sleep. The emptiness left by Quentin’s disappearance ached more in the darkness. Out of habit, Alex went to her keyboard. But Quentin wasn’t there. She couldn’t tell him about Gram. She couldn’t send him an eye-hug. It had almost been five weeks. She missed him deeply. She longed to talk with him, to tell him about this night, to let him know what she’d decided about Chicago. But Quentin was as elusive as the signals transmitting web images to her computer screen. Where was he? Did Quentin still care? Had she seen him this past week, or even spoken with him over the phone, and not known it?

Maybe she should get away, Alex thought. Jon, Tucker, Beth—they could all manage the work for a few days without her. Alex decided to take a long weekend. She would make arrangements tomorrow to head up north and rent a cottage by the lake. April was always chilly. There might be snow, but that also meant there would be fewer people. Alex wanted to use the

time to pray, to think, to plan. She wondered what it would be like to spend an entire weekend seeking the presence and wisdom of the Lord.

On her way to the office the next morning, Alex acknowledged how little she was looking forward to this morning's "exec" meeting. It would be strange to see Mark after the time at her grandmother's last night. Would being in the same room together feel awkward? Weird? Uncomfortable?

Although Mark had not gone out of his way to see her since they spoke after New Years, he stopped by her office shortly before the meeting.

"Hi Alex. I hope you were okay with my seeing your grandmother yesterday. I apologize. I should have checked with you."

"Don't worry, Mark. It's more than okay. I was angry with Allie at first, but when I saw the light in Gram's eyes and the smile on her face, I realized I was wrong. Did Allie tell you how distant and unresponsive Gram has been lately? Last night was a miracle, Mark. Allie was right to ask you. And you were very kind to stop by. We all truly appreciate it, including me."

Mark looked visibly relieved. "And would it be alright if I stopped to see your grandmother again? Maybe once a week?"

Alex paused. "You would do that? You wouldn't mind?"

"I like your grandmother; I want to help."

There was no getting around Mark's invasion into her personal affairs . . . and the benefit to Gram of having him there.

Alex smiled, "That would be fine Mark . . . but no eye-hugs during staff meetings."

Mark laughed. "I can't promise you that," he said with a wink.

For once, Alex did not mind.

* * * * *

Cal had no problem with Alex taking a short, last-minute vacation. “Take both Friday and Monday,” he replied. “You deserve it.”

Alex was thrilled. It had been a long time since she’d had an opportunity to escape to the woods for a few days. Early Friday morning, Alex enthusiastically threw on her jeans and her boots, found her back country skis, packed her duffle bag, and headed out the door.

She paused before starting the car, rested her head on the steering wheel and prayed. More than anything, she wanted to spend the next four days listening to the Lord, praying, thinking, studying Scripture. . . . Alex popped in an old CD of instrumental worship music and began the drive. The weather was sunny, clear and crisp. The air promised Spring. As she drove, Alex noticed new blooms welcoming the season . . . forsythia, azaleas, tulips, the daffodils . . . Gram’s favorite.

Alex thought of Gram . . . her failing memory . . . her move to Meadowbrook . . . Alex thought of herself . . . the alopecia . . . her success at Fischer . . . Quentin’s support . . . Hollis’ betrayal . . . Todd . . . Mark . . . Dr. Reinhart . . . Allie . . . and it suddenly hit her. *Allie was right. My life is all about me—my condition, my career, my convenience, my relationships, my schedule, my staff, my goals.* Alex’s insides twisted.

What was it she had said to Quentin?—“*I want to make a name for myself?*” Alex cringed. Would it have made any difference to Quentin if her concerns were more about him, about the two of them, and less about herself? Had she driven him away?

Alex wondered if anyone observing her life from the outside could even tell she was a believer. Besides praying more about work and people at work, and being a bit more considerate, had she really committed her time and her energies to Him? *No*, she had to admit. Her prayers were mostly long lists of requests, as if she were handing God a ‘to do’ list. The direction of her life was still very much her own.

And yet, Alex bristled at the idea of turning her career over to the Lord. What would He do with her life? Did he want her to set her goals all aside? Become a homebody? Alex’s stomach clenched. She couldn’t do it. That wasn’t her.

Alex thought about Sunday School a few weeks ago—the verses from Romans she told herself she would think about later . . . *“Present your bodies, a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. . . .”*

What does that look like? What does it feel like? What does it mean?

Quentin would have interesting observations about this, Alex thought. She wished more than anything she could talk with Quentin right now. . . . Quentin . . . she felt the mist rising in her eyes. She missed him. She missed him so much.

All the pent up emotions rushed back as she drove. Alex let herself cry—for Quentin, for Gram, for herself. By the time she reached the North Shore cottage, Alex had no tears left. Only a hollow, empty feeling.

The cottage was much the way Alex remembered it. The cape cod style structure, wrapped in cedar shingles, was tucked off the side road, perched on a rise with a view of the lake. At least five inches of snow crunched beneath her boots as she unloaded her car—the groceries, the duffle bag,

her skins . . . Alex filled the wood stove and lit a fire; soon the tiny living room came to life with warmth and comfort.

One of the features Alex liked about this particular retreat was the computer access. With her wireless connection, she could still hop online even though she was off in the woods. And Alex wanted to talk to someone. She wanted to talk with Quentin. Quentin understood her. He cared about her. *Why did he leave???*

Since moping about Quentin was not going to change anything, Alex wondered what it would be like to talk with the Lord instead. What if she started a journal, "Conversations" she could call it, and typed her thoughts and concerns to God instead of Quentin. Alex opened a new file in her word processor and gave it a shot.

Her thoughts flowed. Her concerns. Her problems. Then she thought of the Jesus' life. His love. His promises.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jeremiah 29:11

"Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." Psalm 139: 7-10

By the time Alex finished typing and praying, she felt hopeful, refreshed. The One who made her knew her desires and her heart. What would happen if she left her career and her dreams in His hands?

Alex thought of the story of Martha and Mary . . . how Martha was so concerned about getting everything done. She had her goals. She was determined to reach them. And she was annoyed with her sister for simply sitting around—at Jesus’ feet—and failing to help. And yet Jesus’ rebuked Martha, not Mary . . . *“but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”*

Alexa wanted what was better; she wanted to sit at His feet. Bowing her head, she determined to give the Lord everything—her alopecia, her career, missing Quentin,—and instead try to focus on Him and Him alone.

Alex chuckled to herself . . . One good thing about relying on the Lord instead of a guy was that you could always count on God to be there, *“for in Him we live and move and have our being”* . . . And she didn’t have to worry about how to tell Him she had no hair.

Alex fixed herself a sandwich, donned her boots and outerwear, and grabbed her skis with the metal edges. She loved that she could just click into her skis and go from the backyard without requiring groomed trails. The air was crisp and clean; the snow crunched and flowed under her skis. Alex saw a fox and a mother deer with a fawn. She enjoyed the sights and sounds of the woods and returned to the cottage, tired, but at peace.

On Sunday, Alex visited a little church in the village. She lost herself in the hymns and praise choruses. After the service, she noticed a man standing to the side a few rows back. How ironic. He was tall, with reddish blond hair and dark eyes—could they be brown? Alex’s heart pulled a little. *Wouldn’t it be strange if I met Quentin here, of all places?* Just then, a round, auburn haired woman and a little girl stepped in close and embraced him. “Daddy!” the little one cried. Alex laughed to herself. Someday, Lord willing, she would meet Quentin, but not today.

* * * * *

It was a different Alex who returned home on Monday. She felt cleansed, focused, at peace. She stopped at Gram's on the way back.

"Hi Gram. How are you doing?" Alex asked as she hugged her grandmother.

"I have a secret," Gram giggled. "And I promised Henry I wouldn't tell you."

"You can tell me, Gram," Alex said. "I can keep a secret."

"Oh no, Lexa, not this one," Gram teased. "I gave my word to Henry and I never break a promise. Ask Henry to tell you."

It was so good to see the "Henry" effect had not worn off. Gram was in the present. She asked the same questions, a number of times, but she was more aware and seemed to be enjoying herself. Alex wondered what secret Mark had told her. And she wondered how that particular memory was not forgotten.

* * * * *

Over the next few weeks, Alex's perspective completely shifted. She was more relaxed, more open, more interested in the people around her. She returned to Bible Study. It wouldn't bother her if Hollis was there, not any more. Strangely, Alex felt much more 'herself' than ever before. Each day, she was curious to see what God had in store. She couldn't wait to meet with the Lord through Scripture and prayer before the day began. She still missed Quentin and thought of him often, but without the same sense of desperation. The Lord was with her. Alex felt alive.

Once in awhile, Alex and Mark would visit Gram on the same day. Those were her favorite visits. She found it odd that for two people who cared about global warming, neither one had suggested they should drive to see Gram together. Alex smiled to herself. She knew they each had their reasons. When the timing was right, she would know.

One Thursday evening in mid-April, visitor parking was full and Alex had to park further away. Mark offered to escort her back to her car.

“You really don’t need to, Mark, although I would welcome your company,” Alex admitted.

Mark looked surprised at her invitation. Alex laughed. They gathered their jackets and stepped outside.

“So what is this secret Gram keeps talking about?” Alex asked him as they walked.

“It won’t be a secret if I tell you,” Mark observed casually.

“Oh come on; it’s just me, Mark. You can tell me.”

“Not now, Alex; maybe someday.”

“Is there anything I could say to change your mind?”

“Nope.”

“Okay. I can wait.”

Mark eyed her curiously. “You’re letting this go? You’re not trying twenty more strategies to pry it out of me?”

“Yeah, I know. Who is this and what have you done with Alex, right?”

“Something like that. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“More than okay, Mark,” Alex grinned.

Mark was quiet for the remainder of the walk to her car. He seemed uncertain; as if someone had suddenly changed the rules of the game. Alex didn’t want him to be uncomfortable; he was too great a friend.

“Mark,” she offered, “I’m not sure I can explain this, but I’m in a different place than I was a month ago. I’m afraid this is going to sound corny or trite, but it’s not. I’m trying to walk more in the light of God’s promises, trusting Him with everything, even my professional life. I don’t have to worry so much about me and my turf and my goals; I’m free to care more for others . . . and more free to express it.”

“And is there . . . Are you . . .” Mark paused.

Alex suddenly realized what was on his mind. She smiled. “No, Mark, I haven’t met anyone. I’m not dating anyone. And, in fact, remember the guy I was corresponding with online? You were right. He evaporated. Quentin’s gone. He cut off the relationship.”

“And you’re okay with that.”

Alex recognized the underlying question. “Yeah, I’m alright. I still miss him like crazy, but every day is a little easier. God is filling in the gap.”

Mark looked relieved. “I’m glad to hear it.” He raised an eyebrow. “And if I were to ask you again to join me for that cup of coffee?”

Alex grew serious as she absorbed his gaze and contemplated possible outcomes. “I don’t know, Mark. May I think about it?”

“Certainly,” he said, as he sent her a serious eye-hug.

Alex laughed and blinked in return, then paused. “Eye hugs are great, Mark, but I’d rather give you a real hug,” she said quietly.

Mark said nothing, but held out his arms.

Alex stepped in close and threw her arms around him, burying her head in his jacket.

“Alex,” Mark said softly as he held her close. She felt his warmth, his caring, his tenderness. How could she have doubted how he felt? She knew in an instant that his distance and casual demeanor were an act. He still wanted to be with her. Alex felt as though she had come home. She only wished the closeness did not have to end.

“Are you going to be okay with this tomorrow?” Mark murmured into her hair.

Alex stiffened. *What if he felt the wig? What if it didn’t feel like real hair? This close, could he tell?*

Mark felt her tense, dropped his arms and stepped back. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled. He looked sad, disappointed. He had completely misinterpreted her response.

Alex frowned. “Mark, it’s not what you think,” she started to explain. “I’m okay with the hug. Seriously. It’s just that . . .”

Mark studied her eyes, trying to read her expression.

Alex could not tell him. This was the moment, and she could not do it. No man would want a woman who was bald. Except Quentin. But Quentin had never seen her without her hair. No one had. *Or perhaps her hair was the real reason Quentin had disappeared?* Alex suddenly felt like weeping. She blinked back her tears.

Mark's face softened. He reached and gently stroked the side of her face as she drank in his compassion. "Hey, it's okay," he said. "Whatever it is, it's okay."

"I can't tell you," she choked out hoarsely.

Alex turned her back to Mark and opened the door to her car. She jumped inside. She had to get out of here. She had to leave. With trembling fingers, she fumbled her key into the ignition, started the car and sped off. She knew Mark had stepped back and was watching, but she couldn't bear to look at him. She had to get home.

Chapter 24

Alex went back to avoiding Mark at the office. During meetings, she looked at him only when necessary. She worked with his department through her staff. She wasn't sure what she would do if she saw his car at Gram's, but she did not see it.

Mark still visited Gram; both Allie and Gram spoke of it. Alex wondered how he timed his visits so he did not run into her. She was certain Mark's interest in her would fade the moment he learned of her condition. *How could any man want a woman who was bald?*

But what if Alex told Mark about her wig, and by some miracle, he was okay with it? What if they decided to explore a closer relationship? What about Cal's policy? Even if Alex let her walls down a bit, would she and Mark have to sneak around to enjoy dinner or a movie together? The "sneaking around" idea held no appeal for her. Alex wanted everything in her life to be out in the open. She wanted to live without apologies. . . .

even for the alopecia. Alex knew she had to tell Mark. The questions were how . . . and when.

The following Saturday evening while Alex was at home, her phone rang.

“Hey Bubbles, how are you doing?” a woman spoke.

Alex cringed, but recognized the voice.

“Hey Spike. I’m fine. What are you up to?”

The woman paused.

“Okay, Al. I won’t call you Bubbles if you won’t call me Spike. Deal?”

“Deal!” Alex replied. They both laughed.

“So Vi, how are you?” Vi had been one of her roommates in college. It had been a year since they’d spoken.

“I’m great, actually,” Vi replied. “Barb and I were wondering if you would like to get together next Friday night for old time’s sake.”

“Barb? How is she?”

“She’s doing well. She’s seven months pregnant—her fourth, by the way—and her husband agreed we could come to the city next Friday night for a last fling before the baby comes. Are you free?”

Alex mentally reviewed her calendar. She was fairly certain Friday was open. If she’d forgotten anything, she would reschedule it. “Yes. That would be terrific. What did you have in mind?”

“We wanted to hang with you and visit some of the pubs down town.”

“Club hopping?” Alex clarified.

“Yes. Wouldn’t that be fun? Just like the old days, except we’re going for the music, not the men.”

Alex laughed. “That would be terrific.”

Alex agreed to meet them at Izzy’s at 8 p.m. on Friday and go from there. It would be a late night, but she could sleep it off on Saturday. Alex looked forward to reconnecting with her friends.

* * * * *

The late April night was cool, but comfortable. Alex pulled on a deep purple sweater that sparkled in the moonlight. She found a place to park down town, only a few blocks from the club. This section of town—the CityWalk—came alive at night. Pubs, restaurants, clubs, theater, street musicians, neon signs—the CityWalk offered it all.

Alex strode to the next corner and turned to the right. There they were. She could have spotted Vi miles away. Vi looked exactly the same—and wherever Vi was, she expected the world to take notice. Vi sported a funky haircut that always looked a bit as if she had done it herself. Combined with her dangle earrings, raspy voice, black leather jacket and tight jeans, she made a memorable impression.

Alex turned her attention to Barb as she walked the last block toward them. Barb was half a head taller than Vi. She had a sweet, moon shaped face with lively hazel eyes. Soft blonde curls cascaded around her face. Like Alex, Barb had chosen to wear a comfortable sweater and jeans, but her sweater was not quite baggy enough to disguise her last month of pregnancy. Nor would Barb want it that way. She loved being pregnant. *Bless her!* Alex thought. Alex had never been able to imagine herself carrying a child.

Barb and Vi finally noticed her, grinned broadly and waved. Alex quickened her pace and the next moment the three of them were laughing and hugging. It had been a long time. Too long!

“You both look wonderful,” Alex exclaimed.

“So do you,” Barb noted, admiring Alex’s slim, petite figure. Vi said nothing. She had never been one to offer compliments.

“Shall we?” Vi asked, motioning toward the glass doors at Izzy’s.

Izzy’s was packed. “Must be a good band,” Barb observed. Bu it was too stuffy and crowded to enjoy the music. “How about if we try next door,” Vi yelled over the crowd and the noise.

The girls made their way back outside and then walked across the street to The Blue Moon, a jazz and blues venue. The darkness inside was broken by hundreds of clear Christmas tree lights. They hung from the ceiling, sparkled through wooded planters, highlighted screens. The effect was warm and inviting. The pub was still crowded, but not as dense as Izzy’s.

Vi noticed a couple rising from one of the small tables to the side, about five tables back from the front. She quickly approached and spoke with them, then motioned for Alex and Barb to join her as the couple gathered their jackets and left.

“How lucky was that?!” Vi commented. “Am I good or what?”

“You’re very good,” Alex laughed. “We could have been standing back at the bar most of the night.”

A waiter stopped almost immediately and took their drink orders. Meanwhile, the girls began catching up on some of the details of their lives.

“So I dumped Derek,” Vi commented. “And now I’m dating this new guy, Stephen. He’s total eye candy, sweet, considerate. We’re having a good time.”

“How long have you been dating?” Alex asked.

“A week,” Vi admitted.

Alex and Barb started laughing. “And how long did things last with Derek?” Alex inquired.

Vi was not laughing. “Six weeks.”

“Oh Vi, you kill me,” Barb grinned. “We’ll know you’re serious when you have a relationship that actually lasts more than three months.”

“That’s not fair,” Vi objected. “I’ve had plenty of longer relationships.”

“Name one,” Alex challenged her.

Vi started to speak, then paused and smiled broadly. “Okay, so maybe you have a point. What about you, Alex? How’s Hollis?”

The band had started playing again so they leaned in closer to hear each other. Alex felt a strange, warm sensation, but ignored it.

“Hollis didn’t last either,” Alex answered. “I broke it off last October.” She thought briefly about mentioning the alopecia, but she wasn’t ready for full disclosure.

“Ah! A kindred spirit,” Vi remarked. “And how are things with Ryan and the kiddos?” Vi asked Barb. But Barb was distracted, she had the most direct view of the band, while Alex had her back to the group.

“I really like their sound,” Barb remarked, swaying a bit with the music.

“Hey,” Vi said, “check out the sax player.”

Alex turned, noticed the musician and froze. Her eyes went wide. Mark? Mark played the saxophone? He played in a band? Or did he have a twin?

A moment later, Mark—or his double—glanced in their direction as his eyes swept the room. His focus stopped at their table. He stopped playing for a moment as the other musicians picked up the tune. Mark gave Alexa a broad smile and blinked, then picked up the melody again. Alex felt it. An eye-hug. From across a crowded room, Mark had found her and welcomed her.

“Oh my gosh, did you see that?” Vi asked. “He winked at me.”

Barb laughed. “No, you egomaniac. He winked at Alex. I saw the whole thing.”

“Are you sure?” Vi turned to Alex. “Do you know him?”

“Umm, yeah,” she hesitated. “His name is Mark Hanson. He works at the same company I do.”

“He works with you and you never told us?” Vi asked.

“There’s nothing to tell, Vi,” Alex explained. “We hardly know each other. I had no idea he even played an instrument.”

Barb gave Alex a thoughtful look, “Your words are saying something different from you eyes, Alex.”

Alex blushed.

Vi nudged Barb, “See that. I think you’re on to something.”

Alex laughed. “Then you know something I don’t know,” she quickly recovered. “So how are you, Ryan and the kids are doing?” Alex repeated Vi’s question, turning her attention to Barb.

Barb smiled, easing the spotlight away from Alex. “Ryan is a director now. He’s traveling more, but we’re managing okay. The kids can’t wait for their new little brother. They are so funny and keep us thoroughly entertained, especially the little one—Lily.”

Barb shared some stories. Barb described some of her challenges teaching high school English. Vi related updates from her work as a climatologist. She was currently working with a group at the university to help revise climate change models. After awhile, the women stopped talking to enjoy the band.

Alex lost herself in the music as she watched Mark play. He was so good! She had no idea. During the next break, Mark set his sax on its stand and made his way to Alex’s table. Her heart beat a bit faster as she realized his intent. Vi commented, “He’s on his way over here, Alex. Would you mind if I asked him out?”

“You wouldn’t.” Alex glared.

Vi laughed. “No silly, I just wanted to see your reaction.”

People stopped Mark along the way; it took him more than a few minutes to make his way to their corner.

“Hello Alex,” he grinned, “Ladies . . .”

“Hi Mark, I’d like you to meet my friends, Vi Avadian and Barb Harrison. We went to college together.”

Mark smiled and charmed them as he made small talk with her friends. Alex wished he would tone it down a little. Less charm. More dullness. That would be perfect.

Their conversation was interrupted by a tap at the microphone. “Hey Mark,” someone was saying, “break’s over.”

Mark waved and then leaned in close to Alex’s ear. Alex’s skin tingled.

“We have two more sets,” he said softly. “Can you stay?”

“I’m not sure,” Alex replied. “We were going to visit some of the other clubs.”

“No problem,” Mark smiled. “I can catch up with you another time.”

Alex sighed, more disappointed than she wished to admit. Mark made his way back to the platform that served as a stage.

“What did he say?” Barb wanted to know.

“He told me they had two more sets and asked if we would stay.”

“And you said, ‘I’m not sure?’ Alex, sweetie, have you lost your mind?” Vi asked.

“Remember, we were planning to do some club hopping here.”

“I’m sorry, darlin’, but when Mr. Dream Eyes asks if you’ll stay, you should stay,” Vi observed. “We don’t mind.”

“Okay,” Alex laughed. “I wouldn’t mind either.”

“Great!” Barb said.

* * * * *

Mark held Alex's attention as he played. He exhibited a freedom of expression and passion that contrasted with his usual demeanor in the office. Alex lost herself in the music. She lost herself in watching him. Every now and then when the sax was not required, Mark would pause and glance in her direction. Alex sent him one or two subtle eye-hugs; Mark grinned at her in return. She had completely forgotten about the office . . . about the alopecia.

After the last set, Mark stowed his sax and his music, talked with some of the band members as they moved off stage, and then disappeared somewhere in back. A few minutes later, he appeared and pulled up a chair as the next band began to play.

"So Mark," Vi asked, "has anything embarrassing ever happened while you were performing?"

"More times than I can count," Mark grinned. Alex liked how his eyes sparkled when he smiled.

"My favorite was when a cymbal stand collapsed during a set and one of the cymbals starting rolling toward the edge of the stage. We kept playing—trying to cover—as the drummer scrambled after the cymbal. He tripped and barely retrieved it before it rolled into the front row. Everyone cheered him on and applauded when he finally caught it."

"How long have you been playing?" Alex asked.

"Since high school. I was part of an off-key but enthusiastic marching band."

Alex smiled to herself at the mental picture of Mark tromping across a muddy field in a band uniform, lugging his saxophone.

“And what is the name of your band?” Barb wanted to know.

“Stardust,” Mark answered. “But I’m only subbing in for a friend. He and his wife just had twins. Emma wasn’t too crazy about Nick’s gigs this weekend so I offered to help him out.”

Their conversation was light, entertaining, and fun. Alex learned more about Mark’s personal life during the next half hour than she had during the past two years of working together. And the more she heard, the more she felt at home with this man.

Barb eventually looked at Vi, rubbed her hand over her stomach and said, “I’m getting tired, lady. I think we should call it a night.”

“Okay,” Vi and Alex said in unison.

Vi glanced in Alex’s direction. “You don’t have to leave, Alex. We drove separately.”

Alex felt a little awkward. She turned to Mark, wondering what his plans were, not daring to ask.

Mark gave her a cautious half-smile. “We could catch a bite to eat at Jacob’s—if you are interested.”

“Sure,” Alex replied, setting aside her plan to avoid him. *Perhaps now is the time to tell him about the alopecia?* The thought nagged at her.

Alex was glad Mark could not see her hands tremble as the foursome gathered their belongings and stepped outside. Vi, Barb and Alex gave each other big hugs and parted with smiles all around.

“We shouldn’t wait so long to do this again,” Vi noted.

“As soon as I’m back on my feet,” Barb said, patting her belly.

“Just call me,” Alex smiled.

Vi and Barb made their way down the street as Alex turned toward her companion.

“You were fantastic, Mark,” she said. “I had no idea you played.”

“I am a man of many mysteries,” he teased, although she caught something serious behind his eyes.

They walked the two blocks to Jacob’s, an all-night diner with a fun, fifties flavor. The little restaurant was half full. Mark and Alex were soon seated in a booth toward the back as the jukebox played “Rock around the Clock” underneath the old neon clock across the room.

Mark ordered a mushroom-swiss burger with a salad, chocolate shake and extra fries. Alex ordered a side salad.

“How can you eat like that?!” Alex joked. “I would have to exercise non-stop.”

“I do,” Mark commented. “I work with you.”

Alex laughed. “And am I so demanding?”

“You have no idea the mental exertion that’s required,” he teased. “It’s more taxing than running a marathon in ninety degree weather up a steep grade.”

Alex paused. “You’re not entirely joking, are you?”

Mark smiled. “More joking than serious,” he replied. *You are worth it.*

Alex felt his unspoken words. *I’m worth it? But he doesn’t know the truth. And how can I possibly tell him?*

“Mark . . .” Alex hesitated, unconsciously tapping the fingers of one hand on the table. “I need to tell you something . . . but I’m having a hard time working up the courage.”

Mark easily reached across the narrow table and took her hand, stilling her fingers. “Hey, it’s okay, Alex; there’s no rush. You don’t have to tell me anything right now.”

The warmth of his touch brought back the feel of his arms around her. Alex sighed. She loved being close to him. She wished he would hold her.

Mark continued, “Alex, is there something I can do to make you more comfortable at the office. . . .” A slow smile crept across his face. “I preferred the old days when I could at least stop by, talk and see you once in awhile. Avoidance isn’t much fun.”

Alex laughed, a bit nervously. “Yeah. I figured you had noticed.”

“So what do I need to do?”

“It’s not you, Mark. It’s me. I just need more time.” Alex sighed. She decided to cut directly to the ‘hard’ questions. “Do you remember what you said the night of the company party? When we went up to the restaurant? . . . Has anything changed?”

Mark did not break his focus. He studied her intently. “No,” he said softly.

“You’re an amazing actor,” Alex observed. “I thought you had truly put anything you felt toward me behind you and moved on. . . . I wondered how you did it.”

“People do what they need to do,” Mark commented. His words sounded vaguely familiar, but Alex couldn’t quite place them.

Silence filled the next few moments. Mark gently stroked the top of her hand with his thumb. She could hardly think straight. In the background the jukebox sang “Save the Last Dance for Me.”

Alex stared at the table top, feeling the delicious sensations emanating from his touch. Praying. Wanting to be close, and yet wondering what it would cost her professionally. But her life wasn’t supposed to be about her any more . . . Alex closed her eyes, took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

This isn’t about telling Mark I have alopecia. It’s about taking down the walls and trusting someone . . . trusting him. It’s about giving up complete control; realizing I can never control every detail, every outcome. . . . So what is the worst thing that can happen if I let Mark in? . . . As a friend? . . . As something more?

Alex scrunched up her face and looked back at Mark. His focus on her was steady, caring, unchanged. She squeezed his hand.

“It’s okay if you want to stop by my office,” Alex said. “I’m through with the avoidance thing.” Mark smiled. She paused. “And it’s okay if we have one of those harmless cups of coffee sometime next week.”

Mark’s smile broadened. Alex smiled in return. “And it would even be okay if we commuted together to see Gram,” Alex noted, “even though you have not asked.” Her heart was pounding. Part of her could not believe she was permitting this.

“And what was it you needed to tell me?” Mark asked.

Alex winced. Everything she was thinking and feeling was pointless if Mark could not handle the news of her condition. She placed both her hands around his and looked into his deep, kind eyes.

“Mark, I’d like to think about this a bit more Would it be okay if we talked tomorrow, or Sunday?”

“I have gigs this entire weekend, Alex. How about Monday evening?”

Alex nodded.

“Dinner?”

Alex grinned. “Sure, that would be fine.”

Mark studied her closely. “I need to share something with you as well,” he admitted.

“Another mystery?” Alex teased.

Mark’s eyes sparkled. “Yes,” he replied.

* * * * *

Mark and Alex walked arm in arm to her car. She leaned her head against his shoulder; enjoying his company. Monday would be it. Monday, she would tell him about her hair. Monday, she would test the limits of Mark’s affection.

Chapter 25

Later that night, Alex had another bizarre dream. She was in that ridiculous rowboat again. Alone. The wind howled and another storm came up suddenly. This time, the waves were higher, darker, more intense. The ice-cold, watery hands materialized and dragged her down once more, sucking her under, pressing the air from her lungs. Alex panicked. She thrashed her arms and legs, struggling to get away, trying to get to the

surface. But instead of watching a clueless Hollis row away, a nameless, faceless creature came to her aid. Alex sensed Quentin in him as he held her close; sharing his warmth and strength as he brought her to the surface and gave her breath. When she had a chance, she examined her rescuer and found he was faceless only on one side. As he turned, she saw Mark . . .

Alex bolted awake and flipped on her light. Her heart raced. . . . Mark. Quentin. How had she missed it? Could they be the same? Mark the musician. Mark who was interested in global warming. . . . Mark who questioned her relationship with Quentin. And Quentin who said he cared for her but encouraged her go out with Mark. But if Mark was Quentin, who was the man with the reddish blonde hair who had picked up the present? And why had Mark deceived her? Was it because of Cal's policy? Was it her determination not to date someone she worked with? If he really cared, why had he let those things get in the way? But Mark had said some rather unkind things about Quentin at the company party . . . did it make sense that his anger was directed at himself?

Alex jumped out of bed and paced back and forth across her bedroom carpet. The more Alex contemplated the possibility, the more she sensed it was true. And the more anger infused her thoughts. She remembered Mark's words "People do what they need to do" . . . exactly what Quentin had said during one of their last conversations. Alex decided she also would do what she needed to do. She thought about looking up his number and calling him. . . . confronting him now. No. What if he denied it? She needed to see his face.

The weekend crawled by. Alex visited her grandmother. She had dinner at Allie's. She went to church. She played tennis with friends, but it was all

simply to pass the time. All of it. Her thoughts were focused on the office . . . on Monday morning . . . on her confrontation with Mark.

* * * * *

When Monday finally arrived, Alex showered, dressed and was in the office by 7 am. She tried to study the E-Value focus group results but could not concentrate. She walked by Mark's office at least six times, wondering when he was going to arrive. She had to talk with him. She had to confirm what she already knew . . .

Finally, just before 9 am, Alex strolled by and saw Mark focused on his computer screen, intently studying some code. Alex stepped inside the open office door. A cinnamon sticky bun sat on his desk. Alex's stomach tightened. "Quentin," she said softly. Mark froze. He abruptly turned to face her; bracing for the oncoming storm. "Alexa," he said softly, "please sit down."

Alex closed the door, barely restraining herself from slamming it. She walked to his desk to face him, eye to eye. No way was she sitting down.

"Don't Alexa me, you jerk," she said, tears filling her eyes. "You deceived me. You led me on. You weaseled your way into my life, pretended to be my friend, robbed me of my personal secrets and then you abandoned me."

The storm was gaining momentum. The color drained from Mark's face.

"I have a truckload of words from my non-Christian days for you, Mark Hanson, but I'm going to let you imagine what they are. You said you were crazy about me. And then you sign off? You shut down your email account? And you're gone? What kind of friend is that, for crying out loud?"

The winds were raging. Her mind was sea of emotions, whipped into a frenzy.

“You are out of the Alexa club, Mark Hanson. You are lower than pond scum. How dare you treat me like this.” Alex suddenly realized the volume of her voice had grown loud enough for those in the immediate vicinity to hear through the thin office walls. She had to leave before she completely melted down. Alex started toward the door. Mark tried to calm her.

“Alex, you are right,” he said softly, pleading. “I was completely out of line. Please forgive me. Please, don’t leave. We need to talk.” Mark moved from behind his desk and took a step toward her.

“Stay away from me, Mark Hanson!” she yelled, not realizing she already had his door part way open. Alex bolted from Mark’s office, slamming the door behind her. So much for her professionalism. She had just slammed the life out of it. The carefully constructed walls between her personal and her professional life splintered and crashed to the floor.

Alex found the nearest restroom. It was no use. She couldn’t stop the tears. She made her best attempt at makeup repairs. Take three deep breaths, she told herself, just as her mother had always said, and quickly clipped back to her office.

People were staring. This was it. Her career was in shambles. Her personal life had collapsed. She called Cal. He wasn’t in his office. She grabbed her keys, told Beth to cancel all her appointments. Then Alex ran to the front door. What a disaster. What a heartbreak. On her way out, she ran into Cal and Brian in the front lobby. What rotten luck. Alex tried to calmly explain that she had a personal emergency and would be out the remainder of the day. Cal started to say something but Alex scooted out the door without acknowledging his words.

Alex sped to Jordan Ridge. She parked her car and jogged up the path in her pants suit and heels. One of the spikes broke off so she grabbed the other shoe and ripped that one off as well, flinging it into the woods. Alex climbed up the rocks, sat on the rock ledge and cried. Dear God, how had this happened. Why did Quentin and Mark have to be so wonderful? Why had Mark deceived her? She had never felt so alone and miserable in her entire life.

* * * * *

Mark felt sick. He shouldn't have let things go this far. He shouldn't have waited so long. Please, God. Forgive me. Show me. Guide me. Mark called Cal. Cal wasn't in his office. Mark grabbed his jacket. He told Helen to cancel all his appointments.

"Mark, I heard Alex yelling this morning . . . we all did," Helen said quietly. "Is there anything I can do in the way of damage control?" Mark smiled weakly. Helen was more like a second mom than an assistant. "Thank you, Helen. I trust you'll think of something. I need to go." Helen nodded. He knew she would do her best to protect his reputation and squelch any rumors.

On his way out, Mark stumbled into Cal and Brian in the front lobby.

"I'm sorry, Cal," Mark explained hurriedly, "I'm going to miss the meeting this morning. Something's come up and I need to take a personal day."

"Hold on," Cal said, his immense frame looming near the entrance.

"What's going on, Mark? Alex just stormed out of here like a category 5 hurricane. Is there something between the two of you I should know about?"

“You will be the first person to know after I do,” Mark confessed. “I need to make sure she’s okay. I will call you.”

Mark saw Brian smirk. He stopped in his tracks, realizing Brian was already plotting to use this morning’s indiscretion against them. Mark took a step back. He didn’t want to see Alex get hurt. “Please don’t blame any of this on Alex, Cal. This is completely my fault.” Cal frowned. Mark bolted.

Chapter 26

Alex hardly felt the cold stone beneath her. She was still shaking. And so alone. She tried to think, but no thoughts formed.

* * * * *

Mark whispered thanks at how easy it was to find her. He’d noticed her car, found the trail head and ran the length until he saw the great walls of ledge. A short scramble up, and there she was. Upset. Crying. And it was his fault. Mark felt desperate. *How can I fix this?* She was so absorbed in her grief, she didn’t hear him approach.

“Alex,” Mark’s voice interrupted from behind her. “Please. I would never intentionally hurt you.”

“Doggone it, Mark! How did you find me? Aaarrrrghhhh. But of course. Because I told you. Because you know everything about me. Leave me alone, Mark Hanson. You are not welcome here!”

“Alex, please,” he sighed. “I know I’ve been a jerk. . . . lower than pond scum . . . I agree with you. Can we please call a truce and talk for 10 minutes—that’s all. Then, I promise, I’ll leave if that’s what you want.”

Alex wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at her watch. “Okay, Mr. Hanson, you have 10 minutes. Make the most of it.”

Mark sighed. “I never meant to hurt you, Alex. Can we start there? I meant what I said that night – what Quentin said – I’m crazy about you. In fact, I’m hopelessly in love with you. This isn’t superficial; it’s not just chemistry or some ‘raw primal attraction,’ not for me anyway.”

Alex rolled her eyes and glared at him, startled at hearing her words to Quentin spoken by Mark. “So why did you deceive me, Mark? Why did you abandon me? Why couldn’t you just come clean?”

“At first, I wanted to get to know you better Alex; to be a friend. You know Cal’s policy about inter-office relationships—his 6th commandment as he calls it. And what if I did ask you out? I tried. Until this past Friday, you told me to take a hike when I simply asked you to join me for a cup of coffee. Even after our brief interlude at the company party, you made it clear you don’t go near anyone you work with.”

“But you lied to me, Mark. You played me. I tell Quentin how I feel about you; and I was actually telling you! Quentin encourages me to talk with you—but it was really you, encouraging me to talk with yourself. How low is that! And what was that deal with the mind reading, Mark—you faker. Ha! You pretend to be a kindred spirit and all the while you already knew what I was going through. Of course you knew I had secrets, because I’d told you. You deceived me. Was any of it real, Mark? Any of it?”

She sounded so distraught. So overcome. Mark’s heart wrenched. He stared at the ground, wishing he could beat himself into it. He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. When Mark steeled himself to look in her face again, his eyes were deep with moisture. Alex knew the tears were there, even though he did not let them escape.

“That was rotten of me,” Mark said in a low voice. “I am so sorry, Alex; so very, very sorry. . . . but it wasn’t all pretense. I’ve never felt a connection like this with anyone, ever. . . . I never would have given you an email address if I hadn’t sensed something was wrong, remember? And remember our first conversation about the green campaign with Cal? There was no way to fake how we understood each other. I can give you plenty of examples that have nothing to do with what you told Quentin . . . with what you told me online.”

Alex sighed. She couldn’t stand to see him suffer, even though he deserved every minute of it. Something inside her wanted to rush into his arms. But she wasn’t finished. Not yet.

“Okay, Mark. You have a point. But how did you even know I was a believer. No one at work knew.”

“Do you remember Nick? The musician friend of mine. He met you at the missions conference – when was that – about a year and a half ago? We were talking afterwards and he realized I might know you. He said if he wasn’t already committed, he would ask you out in a heartbeat.”

“So that was what prompted the ‘secret pal’ notes? Competition? You’re suddenly interested because some other guy thought about asking me out?”

Mark chuckled. “Heavens, no. I’d never met anyone like you, Alex. I felt drawn to you the first moment I saw you. But I kept my distance. You were a professional colleague. I had no idea who you were or what you believed. You had so many walls up—barricades—you put Fort Knox to shame.”

“Yeah,” Alex admitted sheepishly. “I know.”

Alex softened but was not willing to let him off the hook yet. “Who picked up the gift at the rec center, Mark? Who was that?”

“Nate. He’s a producer friend who was visiting from the U.K. . . . So you were watching?” He asked sternly.

“No. I asked Shelly at the front desk to take notes for me.”

Mark half smiled. “I knew the temptation would be hard to resist.”

“You really threw me with that one,” Alex admitted.

Then she flushed, remembering. “So when I wrote Quentin, Mark, you let me go on and on about how I am attracted to you, and I had no idea it was you. You let me think you had no clue who Mark Hanson was. . . . sheesh, How could I be so stupid? I feel so embarrassed.” Alex hid her face in her hands.

Mark sighed.

“Alex, please. Don’t be embarrassed. And please forgive me.” Mark continued, taking a chance and sitting beside her . . . “Alex, I let this go on too long. I should have been honest with you; I should have talked to Cal. I’ve made a horrendous mistake.”

Mark gently lifted her chin. She didn’t fight him. He studied her expression, searching her bright almond eyes, looking for a hint of forgiveness. “Please tell me what I need to do to make things right, Alex. Please tell me I haven’t lost you.”

Alex pulled away. “So where have you been the past 3 months, Mark? If you cared about me, how could you cut me off like that? If I hadn’t figured this out, would you have ever told me?”

Alex was trembling. She broke eye contact and stared straight ahead, hugging her knees. It was hard to think clearly with Mark sitting so close.

“Yes,” he said gently. “I’ve been trying to set things in order so I can leave Fischer; I need to make sure my staff is taken care of. I need to try to leave in a way that will minimize the impact on Cal and all of you.” Mark sighed. “Once that was accomplished, I planned to talk with you . . . to see if we still had a chance.”

“You really would leave Fischer Technologies for me?” Alex asked skeptically. “But you and Cal have worked together forever.”

Mark shrugged. “I know, Alex. If you don’t believe me, I can show you copies of the inquiries I’ve made; I can put you in touch with the head hunter I’m working with. I’ve been looking since last October.”

“October?”

“Since you broke up with Hollis. . . . It’s hard to find another position where I won’t be in competition with FT. I’m not ready to launch that consulting business. And I’m certainly not leaving this city as long as there is any chance with you.”

Alex sighed, “I wish you could have just told me this, Mark. I don’t want you to leave Fischer Technologies. Why don’t you stay and I’ll go? . . . Or, we can talk to Cal and see if he can adjust the policy. . . although after my little scene this morning, that may be impossible.” Alex rolled her eyes.

Mark gently stroked her arm with his thumb. “Does this mean you forgive me?” he asked, a world of hope in his voice. Electricity coursed through her.

“Stop it, Mark,” she said, glaring at him. “Don’t touch me. You know the effect you have on me. You’re not playing fair.”

Mark reached for her shoulders and gently turned her toward him, staring at her with passion that warmed her from head to toe. “I will use everything I have to win you over, Alex.” He leaned forward and kissed her, gently at first, then with increasing intensity. She kissed him in return, longing to express how much she cared for him. *What am I doing*, Alex suddenly realized.

She broke the kiss and pushed him away. “Mark, please . . .” she pleaded.

He smiled with a twinkle in his eye. “No problem;” he said. “I can leave.”

Alex sighed, exasperated. “I didn’t ask you to leave; just give me a minute to think without sitting so close to me.”

Mark moved away, about six inches. “Is that far enough?” he asked mischievously.

Alex held back a smile. “Try again, Romeo.”

He moved back another foot. “How’s that?” he teased.

“Better,” she replied. “Another twelve moves should do it.”

“But I’ll fall off the ledge,” Mark objected.

“Maybe that will cool you off,” Alex countered.

Mark smiled. He moved back a few more feet, leaned against the rock wall and enjoyed the view. He could see why Alex liked to come here.

“Thank you,” she said sincerely. Alex rested her head on her arms and was quiet for quite awhile. Mark wondered what she was thinking. He prayed

she would give him a chance . . . *give us a chance*. Then she stood, walked over and sat down next to him. “I forgive you, Mark. But I’m not certain you’re the one who should be asking for forgiveness.”

Mark accepted her confession with an audible sigh of relief. She frowned, looking intently at his face.

“I don’t know what else you could have done,” she said quietly. “I wouldn’t let you in . . . I wasn’t honest with you . . . or with myself . . .” She raised her face to his. “You were going to tell me, weren’t you . . . when you asked me to dinner in December . . .”

“Yes.”

“And then . . . tonight?”

“Yes.”

“I’m such an idiot. My little melt down in the office was so unnecessary. Can you forgive me, Mark?” Alex asked.

“For what?” Mark asked.

“For shutting you out . . . For putting up so many obstacles . . . For yelling at you and behaving so . . . so unprofessionally.” She shook her head, “I just created the stupidest, most idiotic scene imaginable and I dragged you into it. I am so sorry, Mark.”

Mark gave her a half smile. “We both made quite an exit. Helen asked me what she could do to help with damage control and I couldn’t think of anything.”

Alex moaned. Mark put his arm around her. “But I still love you,” he said softly.

“Oh Mark, how can you keep saying that?”

“Because it’s true.”

“But what about my hair?” Alex asked, scowling. “You say all the right things, but the truth is, you’ve never seen me without my wig.”

“Then show me,” Mark challenged, daring her with his eyes to remove her covering.

Alex glared back, “Mark, I can’t just remove the wig out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Why not?”

“It’s delicate. Fragile. I need . . . oh my gosh . . . I don’t believe this.”

“What?”

“Here, in my pocket,” Alex reached in and pulled out a narrow white tube. “It’s solvent—a sample from the salon. I need it to dissolve the adhesive. I nearly stepped on it this morning in the kitchen—it must have fallen off the counter . . . so I dropped it in my pocket. . . . I need it to remove the wig. Do you know how bizarre this is?”

Mark chuckled. “It’s a sign,” he said. “See, you’re supposed to show me.”

Alex rolled her eyes. She frowned. “But I need a mirror . . . I need a towel.”

Mark pulled out a handkerchief. “Can you use this?”

Alex chuckled. Amusement lit her eyes. “You carry a handkerchief? Don’t you need a license for that? I thought you had to be over 60.”

Mark shook his head. “That’s the problem with our generation. We’ve lost our appreciation for the finer things in life. Gram would get this. Do you have any idea how handy these things are?”

Alex laughed, “Okay. I guess that will work. Let me try taking this thing off—blind—and see how I do. Step over there. Hide your eyes.”

“I’d like to see how this is done.”

“Wig removal? Are you kidding me?”

“No, seriously, show me.”

Alex hesitated. She placed a hand on her forehead and shook her head. “I don’t believe this.”

“What?”

“Here I am, with you, the man of my dreams . . . with my perfect hair . . . and I’m about to ruin the moment with a new definition of ugly.”

“Hush,” Mark said softly as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. “It’s only me. . . . And I’m not Hollis. For your own peace of mind, Alex, you need to show me. Your hair does not matter to me.”

“I’d rather just stay here,” Alex mumbled against his chest. “Do I have to move?”

“Yes. . . . I’ve never known you to back away from a challenge.”

That did it. Alex pushed Mark away and glared at him. Mark’s eyes sparkled. “I love it when you’re annoyed,” he teased.

Alex took off her jacket. She grabbed the handkerchief and put it in her pocket, where she could reach it. She smoothed the hair back into a pony tail. "Rats, I need a hair tie."

"Here, I'll hold it," Mark said. He gently held back her hair so she could use both hands to feel the front edge of the wig and apply the solvent.

Alex focused on the task at hand, dabbing on the solvent, rubbing it in, gently rolling back the edge, looking up as if to see her hairline . . . when some of the solvent dripped on her forehead, Mark quickly removed the handkerchief and caught the drop.

"Thanks," Alex said.

Mark watched as she worked, the corners of his mouth turned up slightly, enjoying the sight.

"You missed a spot," he said.

"Where?"

"Right here," he said, touching the area with his free hand. "Here, you hold your hair; let me do it."

Alex did not argue. She grabbed the pony tail and handed him the solvent.

"Be gentle," she warned. "I'm wearing the equivalent of a year's worth of car payments on my head."

Mark laughed. "Must be a nice car."

He carefully applied the solvent and worked it in, as Alex has done. He gently rolled back the remainder of the front edge.

"Tilt your head forward so I can get the back," he said.

Alex complied. She reveled in the feel of his fingers on her scalp, gently dabbing, softly rolling. “Are you sure you haven’t done this before?” she asked.

“Never,” Mark replied, without breaking his concentration.

When he finished, she moved her hands to her head, slowly removed the wig and then wrapped it in as best she could in the handkerchief. “Do you have a safe place for this?” she asked, holding it out to Mark. He took the parcel and carefully tucked it into the large inside pocket of his jacket. Then Alex removed her cap, her eyes never straying from his face. She wanted to catch every nuance in his reaction.

Mark’s face melted into a broad smile as her bare scalp was revealed. “It’s true,” he said. “You are just as beautiful without hair as you are with it.” He leaned forward and kissed the soft skin of her scalp. “The tattoo is a nice touch,” he added. “Very appealing.”

Tears filled Alex’s dark eyes. She hugged him with all her strength. “Thank you,” she whispered. “The henna will wash off in a few months. I needed to do something to cut down the glare.”

“You really are beautiful,” Mark replied, pulling her close and resting his cheek on the top of her head. “Your hair makes no difference to me, Alex. You should know that.”

Relief warmed Alex’s soul. Mark really meant it. She felt it. She knew it. His acceptance brought release.

She pulled back, reached and smoothed his face with her fingers. “I love you, too,” she whispered. *And I think I have for a long, long time.*

“So can we start over?” he asked. “A clean slate? Can we simply thank God and enjoy the gift of finally being together?”

“I like the sound of that, Mark. It’s more than fine with me.” Then Alex’s face clouded, “So how bad are things at the office?”

“You can probably guess,” Mark reported. “When I left, Cal looked as though I had intentionally run over his favorite hunting dog. Brian was scheming. Ira, no doubt, has calculated the financial impact of five different scenarios, depending on whether one or both of us stay or leave. Everyone else is buzzing about how two members of the executive team were involved in a relationship against company policy and no one noticed.”

“This *is* bad,” Alex remarked. “How can you sound so cavalier?”

“There’s not much we can do at this point, Alex,” Mark observed. “I did promise Cal I would call him once I knew you were okay.”

Alex leaned against him. His arm felt so good around her. “Mark, have you considered telling Cal about this business idea you are planning? You may find it helpful to include him . . . I’m sure he would appreciate it.”

“Unlike I did with you . . .” Mark gave her a squeeze and thought for a moment. “I am truly sorry, Alex. You are right . . . maybe Cal can join us for our dinner tonight, if that’s okay with you.”

“Yes,” Alex agreed. “I heard Marie is visiting her sister; he might welcome the company. Then we can explain everything, away from prying eyes and ears.”

“We can have dinner at my place instead of going out,” Mark offered. “I know a great Italian restaurant with ‘take-out.’”

Alex smiled and nodded.

Mark called Cal from his cell phone. “Alex is fine, Cal. I’m sorry about the scene this morning. Like I said, it was entirely my fault.” . . . “No, we weren’t carrying on behind your back. At this point, I’d say this relationship is about 20 minutes old.” He squeezed her hand. . . . “Yes, we want to talk with you. Can you join us for dinner at my place this evening?” . . . “How about 6:30, will that work?” . . . “Great Cal, we’ll see you then.”

Mark snapped his phone shut. “Done,” he said. “And now the rest of the day is ours . . . lunch, tennis, swimming . . . whatever you wish . . . unless you have other plans?”

Alex laughed. “None that don’t involve you,” she grinned. “Can we visit Gram? She will be thrilled.”

“Yes!” Mark agreed.

“And if we play tennis, would I have an advantage since you usually play racquetball?”

“Try me,” Mark replied with a gleam in his eyes.

Then Mark raised an eyebrow as he observed the condition of her shoes. “Can you walk in those things?” he asked. “Or would you like a piggy back ride to your car?”

“A ride would be welcome at this point,” Alex agreed, acknowledging her blisters for the first time.

She stepped up on one of the rocks and Mark helped her climb on his back. She seemed to weigh next to nothing.

“While you’re up there,” Mark observed, “I’m wondering if you could check the back of my head. I felt a draft the other day. I think my hair may be thinning.”

Was he nuts? Alex ran her fingers through his luxurious black hair with one hand while she held on with the other. Mark started down the trail. “You are delusional.” Alex stated. “You have plenty of hair here.”

“Rats,” Mark replied. “I was thinking if I went bald, people might think we are twins.”

Alex laughed. “What?! Like that movie with Schwarzenegger and DeVito?” she teased.

“On no, Alex” Mark answered, “You are much prettier than DeVito.” They both laughed.

Alex rested her head on his back, soaking in his strength, enjoying his warmth. Everything was going to be okay.

“You can call me Alexa,” she whispered, thanking God with all her heart.

The End