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Great Love

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Rida Allen

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Dedication

Roslyn and Frederick Neuman (Nana and Papa)

My parents Judy and Ted Milbach

My husband Robert Allen

My brothers Michael, Alan, and Bill

My aunt and uncle Fran and Sy Laskey

My best friend Heather Murray

And of course, to the dogs!

(Sugar, Crystal, Brandi, and Bailey!)

Hey everyone, look, I'm a street sweeper!

Prologue



Parking her car, Samantha Velmar got out and tucked her keys into her purse. The small shopping center boasted several clothing stores, a few food establishments, a grocery store, and an optician. The objective today was seemingly simple...purchase a couple of outfits for work. Granted, she could be relatively casual for her assistant manager's position at the bookstore, but preferred businesslike attire. And the small wardrobe she had needed to be rejuvenated with new additions.

She paused on the sidewalk, gazing at the mannequins in the store window. They sported fashionable pantsuits and skirts in bright, vivacious colors. While she stood in front of the display, a pair of younger women passed behind her. They looked from her, to the mannequin, and then at each other. As they walked away, they whispered furiously to each other and burst into laughter. With a sigh, Sam turned away and entered a store two doors down. The sign on the front announced boldly, "Discount Fashions for the Larger Woman Sizes 14+."

Inside the store, there were racks and displays scattered about, leaving wide aisles for walking. Frowning, Sam passed several

stands that had shirts with big floral prints and patterns. Toward the back, she found long, flowing dresses and thigh-length jackets that would compliment her 5'7" frame. She picked out several solid-colored dresses and a few jackets then headed for the dressing rooms located to the side of the shop. With a twist of the knob, she realized the door was locked.

"Need some help, honey?"

Sam turned to find a petite brunette calling out to her from behind a rack of knit pants. "Yes, please. I'd like to try these on."

"Oh, sure." The woman approached and unlocked the door with keys attached to her wrist. "If you need any different sizes, you let me know. My name's Jamie."

"Thanks, Jamie." Fat chance, Sam thought to herself as she closed the dressing room door behind her. How could they have a plus-size store with a size 2 salesperson? There was no way she was going to tell her dress size to a woman who could fit her entire body into one of Sam's pant legs. Wasting no time, she tried on the different style dresses and decided on one. Once the dress was picked out, she reached for one of the black jackets and inspected the result.

"Doin' okay in there, hon?" a voice called out.

"Uh huh."

"How about tryin' on a pretty sun-dress with a matching button-down sweater?" Jamie suggested. "They're all the rage now...good for a weekend at play or a barbeque."

"I don't think it would look right on me. Thanks, though."

"You'd be surprised! Let me just pick one out for your coloring. What size are you?" Jamie asked.

Cringing, Sam practically whispered her dress size through a crack in the door, then waited while the perky little Jamie went in search of said sun-dress.

"Here we go! This should do perfectly with your beautiful coloring." Jamie squeezed the outfit through the crack that Sam gave her in the door.

"Thank you." Shutting the door, she hung the dress on a peg and stared at it. What was that woman thinking? She would never have picked such a light beige color, especially with those pastel blue flowers! And the darker taupe-colored sweater was no match

for her pale skin, she would look washed out with the whole combination! Rolling her eyes, she stripped off the dress she was going to buy and pulled on the tank-style sun-dress. It slipped over her head easily and was cool against her skin. Reaching for the sweater, she pulled it on as well, then prepared for the worst.

“Ready to model for me?” Jamie’s saccharin-sweet voice pealed out.

“Wha—”

The door to her dressing cube flew open and Jamie pulled her out into the open. “Ooh! I knew it! With your beautiful auburn hair and that delicate skin, I *knew* those colors would be great on you. And the length is perfect. With some neat little strappy sandals, that’s going to be a great outfit,” Jamie cooed happily.

Sam turned back to the full length mirror and grudgingly had to agree. The color was perfect for her hair and skin. And with spring in full swing, she could even wear this to work. “Thank you for your help. For a moment, I thought you were crazy to bring this to me.”

Jamie just grinned. “It helps to know what season you are, honey. You’re a natural autumn, so your colors are really warm.” Turning away from Sam, she clucked softly. “Such beautiful skin and such a pretty face...”

Sam frowned and returned to her dressing room to change back into her own clothes. Taking her selections with her, she approached the register. “I’m going to take this, too.” She placed the dress and jacket on the counter, then reached for her wallet.

“Great!” Jamie began ringing up the clothes, as perky as ever. “You know, we have some great work-out clothes in the back, on sale!” she sang.

“Ah, no, this will be all.”

As Jamie accepted Sam’s credit card, another slender woman strode behind the counter. While she waited for approval, Jamie whispered something to the other salesperson.

Sam stiffened as the second woman glanced over at her, then looked away before replying to whatever Jamie had said. Heat filling her face, Sam signed her receipt, grabbed her credit card and practically bolted from the store. The last thing she heard as she was jogging out the door was a chipper, “Thank you! Come

back soon!”

Once in the car, she stopped to catch her breath. The store had such good bargains and a good variety of clothes that Sam would have to ignore the salesperson’s manners. But how awful it was to walk into a store meant for people her size and still feel uncomfortable! Maybe she would speak to the manager next time... Who was she kidding? She would never draw that kind of attention to herself.

Starting the car, she backed out of the parking spot and headed home, where she could be alone.

Chapter One



"This is ridiculous!" Jonathan slammed his fist against the wall, feeling frustrated and appalled. Even the clean lines of his modern and sleekly decorated office failed to calm him as he digested what the man across the room was telling him. "How could my father be so...so...idiotic!"

"Now Jonathan, you know your father loved you."

Jonathan glared at the paunchy lawyer sitting on the sofa. His balding head shimmered underneath the overhead lights as cigar smoke hovered around his face. "I'm beginning to think he was crazy! And you, too, for going along with him, Simon!"

Simon harrumphed around his cigar. "Your dad, he was in his right mind, and that will is very legal and very binding."

"Barbaric is what it is! As if my whole life should revolve around creating a family," Jonathan grumbled.

"Your parents were very much in love for over forty years. I know for a fact that your father regrets waiting as long as he did to have you. He focused his whole life on his career and by the time you came along, he was not only older than he wanted, but he was also set in his ways when it came to work and his daily life,"

Simon explained.

Jonathan crossed his arms over his chest. "I never wanted for anything."

"Did you ever play ball in the back yard with him? Did he show you how to ride your first bike? Take you on your first campout? Or go hiking or fishing or swimming in the lake?" Simon's voice was kind but his eyes were sad. "And here you are, twenty-nine going on sixty-five, with no life but this business. Your father married late, had you even later, and has now passed on before he could see you even begin to live. He wanted more for you."

Jonathan sank onto his chair. "Twenty-nine isn't so old, Simon."

"But it will be before you know it." He stubbed out the remains of his cigar and pushed to his feet. "You have an entire year before the first stipulation of the will must be met. You're a handsome young man with a lot to offer. You'll be fine."

"What does my mother have to say about all of this nonsense?"

Simon reached for the doorknob, turning back to look Jonathan over. "You know your mother thought the sun rose and set on your father. She supported this like she supported everything else he ever said or did."

Jonathan nodded and rested his chin in his hand. "Yes, she did."

Simon opened the office door and stepped out, closing it softly behind him.

Jonathan barely noticed his departure. His parents' marriage had been full of love and devotion unlike any other he had ever seen or known. Even with the fourteen-year age difference, their marriage had been rock solid for forty-one years.

Despite their happy marriage, he had never once considered following suit, and yet here he was, being forced into it by a dead man in order to maintain control of the family business. A business that was his entire life. And even worse, his mother held the final word on whether his "relationship" was legitimate. While his mother may have been the "good little wife," she was no pushover and knew all about true love.

Damn that man!

Jonathan wiped the sweat out of his eyes as he rounded the corner of the indoor track. Running was as much a stress reliever for him as an exercise regimen. This indoor track and the modern health club in the basement of the office building was one of his ideas. It was free for employees, opened early, and stayed open late into the evening to accommodate different schedules. Jonathan considered it one of the company perks that helped them maintain good people on the payroll.

One of the reasons he was running tonight was to try to work on a plan. He had no idea where to even begin looking for a wife. The thought of going to a bar to find a suitable woman was out of the question for him. What else did single people do? Should he scope out the vegetable aisle in the grocery store? Hang out in the lingerie section of the local department store?

What did he really want out of a life partner? Someone with intelligence, humor, passion, and goals of her own. No offense to his mother, but he wanted a woman who had her own life, her own thoughts, and her own mind.

But he needed to think farther ahead. Part two of the will indicated he was to start his family within the first year of his marriage. So the woman he married would need to be loving, nurturing, and most importantly, *fertile*.

Two days later, still stumped and concerned that time was slipping by, Jonathan went to visit his mother at her home. While large, the house was far from ostentatious. Alaria preferred the homey, lived-in look, and her home reflected that in every room.

On that particular Sunday afternoon, Jonathan found Alaria Edwards settled comfortably on the couch in the family room of her four bedroom colonial home. Her short brown hair was neatly coiffed, as always, and despite it being a weekend day, she was dressed in tan slacks and a crisp white shirt. Even her low-heeled shoes were better suited for a trip to the office, even though the woman in question had never worked outside her home a day in her life.

Alaria looked up from her book to see her one and only son standing in the archway. "Jonathan!"

A smile softened his face as he approached her and leaned

over to kiss her smooth cheek. “Mom, how are you feeling?”

She touched his cheek. “Darling, I’m doing fine. It’s quiet, but I’m adjusting.”

Jonathan settled onto the couch next to his mother. “I miss him, too.”

“He adored you, Jonathan.”

He gave her a wry smile. “He had a funny way of showing it.”

She took his hand in hers. “You’re so much like him. He was very aware of that. And while that pleased him to no end, it also worried him terribly.”

“Didn’t he have a good life, Mom?” He rubbed her fingers with his thumb.

Her voice softened. “He had a wonderful life and he would never have traded it for anything. But like any parent, he wanted you to learn from his mistakes. And with him being gone,” her voice caught, “this was the only way he knew how to do that. He taught you very well when it came to business. But love and life, well, he just didn’t know how to pass those lessons along to you.”

“What if marriage isn’t right for me, Mom?” he questioned.

She smiled. “You are your father’s son, Jonathan. You have the heart for great love, you only need to realize it’s there.”

Frowning, he shook his head. “I have no idea how to find it.”

“Don’t go looking for it, sweetheart. Just open yourself up to the world, and it will develop before you know it.” Alaria kissed her son’s cheek and stood. “Please tell me you’ll stay for dinner.”

He stood with her. “You couldn’t chase me away with lima beans.” Smiling as she laughed at his least favorite food, he followed her into the kitchen.

Samantha opened the front door to her little yellow house and sighed. Yet another customer had kept her late at the bookstore. She closed the door just as her eighteen-month-old golden retriever mutt came barreling around the corner.

“Molly!” Sam barely kept her balance as the rambunctious dog nearly knocked her over. “I’m so sorry, sweetie! I know I’m late.”

Molly didn't seem to notice. Her every efforts were focused on tackling her mistress to the ground.

"Okay, okay! Let me change my clothes and I promise you'll have a good long romp in the park," she sang as she stepped around the pooch and headed for her bedroom. "Go find your frisbee, Mol."

Molly's ears perked up at the mention of her favorite toy and she shot off into another room.

Jonathan eyed the green park from the safety of his car. Get out into the world, his mother had said. Could he give up the security of his indoor track for this park? Would the trails be rocky and uneven, making his run dangerous? But then again, the weather was perfect, and dusk was his favorite part of the day. It was only one run, right? If he didn't like it, he could go right back to his track.

With the decision made, he opened the car door and got out. It took him a few minutes to figure out what to do with his car keys, but once he tucked them away, he headed for a nearby bench to begin his stretching exercises. As he stretched, he looked over his surroundings. With some disappointment, he realized there were very few people in the park. Oh well, it was only one run, right?

Sam parked her car and turned to the dog panting excitedly beside her. "Okay, Mol, no knocking over any old ladies or little children."

Molly barked and licked her mistress' face.

Laughing, Sam opened her door and jumped out of the way as the big retriever tumbled from the little car. Fortunately, the park seemed pretty deserted at the moment. She grabbed Molly's frisbee and shut the car door with a thud. Walking toward an open, grassy area, she whistled once for her dog.

With great delight, Molly danced excitedly from one spot to another, waiting for Sam to throw the disc.

Jonathan was actually beginning to enjoy his run along the open fields. For a short span, the path wound its way through some trees. Moving at a good clip, he worked his way up a long hill. As he crested it, the setting sun came into view and he was almost mesmerized. He was so transfixed he never saw the bright red

object flying directly at his head. He vaguely heard a shout before something struck him on the temple. The blow knocked him off-balance and he fell to the ground, cushioning the fall with his left hand.

“Damn!” he cursed, then ducked as a furry object jumped over him and retrieved the red object from the grass.

“Molly!”

Jonathan blinked and tried to focus on the direction the voice was coming from.

“Molly! Come here!”

Staggering to his feet, he turned just in time to be met with two big furry paws against his chest. With a shout, he landed on the ground again. He tried to cover his face to avoid being slobbered on, but to no avail.