



The Legacy Tree

Rida Allen

with never before published bonus short story

The Lake's Gift

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The Legacy Tree

Rida Allen

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Dedication

To my husband, Rob, who has supported me in so many ways and who has kept encouraging me even through the many times when I threatened and/or wanted to quit.

To my parents, Judy and Ted, who continue to support me no matter what choices I make.

In memory of my Nana and Papa, I love you both so much.

To my brothers, my sister-in-law, and my nephew and nieces for the support they've shown if only through laughter.

To my best friend Heather, who has been along for the journey, even when from afar, for over thirty-one years!

To my new author friends, thanks for the ears and the benefit of your experiences.

Big girls rule!

And as always, to the dogs! Those who have left us, those who are still with us, and those who are still to join us.
(Sugar, Crystal, Brandi, Daisy, Caramel, and Bailey)

Prologue



“Hey.”
Without looking up, the boy responded, “Hey.”
“What’re you looking at?”
“Toad.”
“Yeah?” The red-haired girl toed the ground with a dirty white sneaker.
“Yeah.”
Silence.
He glanced over his shoulder. “Yours?”
The girl patted the big yellow dog next to her. “Yeah.”
“He fetch?”
“She.”
“She what?”
“She fetches.”
“Yeah?”
“Yeah.”
Silence.
“What does *she* fetch?”
Shrug. “Whatever.”
“She swim?”

“Course. She’s a water dog,” the girl said proudly.

The boy got to his feet and faced them. “Prove it.”

“Kay.” Looking around, she found a stick on the ground, turned and flung it out onto the lake. “Go get it, Peanut.”

The dog went from statue to almost airborne in a flash, jumping headlong into the water after the stick. Within a few minutes, she was back and had dropped the stick at the girl’s feet.

“Cool.” His brown eyes finally met her blue ones. “Can I throw it?”

Shrug. “Sure.”

He picked up the stick and lobbed it out into the water. He frowned when the dog remained frozen to the spot. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Gotta tell her to get it.”

“Oh.” Pause. “Go get it, Peanut!” he yelled. And just like that, the dog took off. “Cool.”

She waited until Peanut had returned before facing the boy. “I’m Robyn, with a ‘y.’”

“Erik.” He picked up the stick again. “You campin’ just the weekend?”

She squinted up at the sun. “Be here ‘til next Sunday. You?”

With a grunt, he threw the stick again, then commanded the dog to retrieve it. “Been here a week. Be here another.” He rubbed his nose along his sleeve and eyed her. “Got any brothers?”

“Nope.”

With a sniff, he crammed his hands into his pockets. “How old *are* you?”

“Twelve.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Silence.

“Me, too.” He watched the dog emerge from the water and give a violent shake. “Want me to show you where the pier is?”

“Is it a divin’ pier?”

“Yep.”

She seemed to contemplate her sneakers before giving him a broad smile. “Kay.”

He stared at her for a second before puffing out his chest and

leading her through the trees. “You ever been camping before?” he asked over his shoulder.

Running to catch up to him, she nodded. “We go every summer. Never been here before.”

“We come here every year. Never seen it crowded, though. No kids at all last week.” He kicked a rock and watched Peanut chase it. “Used to be okay ‘til my brother started actin’ all weird.”

“Weird?”

Sniff. “Lookin’ funny at them girls.”

“How old is he?”

“Fifteen.”

“Oh.” She nodded sagely.

“Dunno what is so innerestin’ about ‘em. Just icky, giggly girls,” he grumbled. “You don’t giggle, do you?” he asked cautiously.

“Naw.”

“Good.”

One year later..

“You bring your rod?” Erik Richards asked.

“Rod?” Robyn Douglass threw a tennis ball ahead of them for Peanut to chase.

He rolled his eyes. “For fishin’.”

“Oh.” She squinted at him. “I don’t *have* a fishin’ rod.”

“Hmph. How do you go campin’ without a rod?”

She raised a light red eyebrow at him. “We came campin’, Erik, not fishin’.”

Laughing, he shoved her. “Shut up.”

She grinned back and continued walking next to him.

“Guess we could swim,” he suggested.

“Kay. You learn how to dive yet?”

“Nope. Cannonball is my specialty.”

“So I’ll meet you at the pier in fifteen minutes?” she asked.

“Kay. Bring food,” he ordered.

Rolling her eyes, she snapped her fingers and raced Peanut back to her tent. It had been a year since she’d last seen Erik Richards at this very same campground. Only a week had made them fast friends, and letters kept them in touch the other 51

weeks. He was exactly as she remembered him, though his mink brown hair was a little longer. Changing into her bathing suit, she promised her parents she would be careful, grabbed a bag of Cheetos, and set off with Peanut toward the pier. Toward the best friend she had...other than Peanut, of course.

The path back to the pier was deserted. Clutching the Cheetos and her towel, she ran alongside Peanut, her heart bursting with happiness. At home, it was only her and Peanut, playing alone in her room or in the backyard. But here, away from her life of being the shy one, she was exhilarated! Not only that, but Erik loved Peanut almost as much as she did...and he never commented or made fun of her for going everywhere with the big yellow dog. He thought it was kinda cool. She spent twenty-four hours a day with Peanut, even letting her sleep on her bed at night.

Breaking through the trees to the water's edge, she dropped her towel and the bag of Cheetos. She could see Erik already sitting on the edge of the pier, so she took off at high speed. Peanut raced beside her, barking happily.

Erik barely had a chance to leap to his feet before Robyn and Peanut raced by him. He watched them both jump off the end of the pier, Robyn with a shriek and Peanut barking loudly. Grinning he leapt off the pier, curled into a ball in the air, then landed right between dog and owner. He broke through the surface of the water and flicked his hair out of his face.

As usual, Peanut was dog-paddling around Robyn, watching her like a mother hen.

"Race you to the float!" she challenged before ducking beneath the surface of the water.

He laughed happily and took off toward the float, trailing after both Peanut and Robyn. When he reached the float, he hopped up onto it and helped Robyn lift Peanut from the water.

Peanut shook violently to remove the water clinging to her fur, then plopped down on the wooden planks, panting heavily.

Robyn lay down on her back, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her face. "I wish I could live here year 'round." She sighed.

"It would be great to live in a tent all the time. No cleaning your room, no making your bed..." He tucked his hands behind his head and watched the clouds float by.

“Yeah.” She squinted and thought silently that out here, she was someone. She wasn’t just a girl with a dog...she had a friend who understood her and liked spending time with her. “Hey, where’s your brother?”

He snorted and reached out to pet Peanut. “He found some girl to chase around the arcade.”

“Don’t you like having a brother?” she asked curiously.

“I’d rather have a dog.”

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the float. Immediately, Peanut was by her side, tail wagging.

“Peanut never picks on you...never deserts you for some girl who just giggles all the time,” he said disgustedly. “She’s just a great pal,” he finished. “Yeah, I’d take Peanut over George anytime.”

Wrapping an arm around the wet dog, Robyn kissed her furry yellow head, amazed that Erik could envy anything about her life. “Well, I’ll share Peanut with you, okay?”

“Deal.” He scrambled to his feet and ran off the float next to her, landing in the water with a big splash.

She shrieked as the cold water hit her warm flesh. “You jerk!” A second later, she and Peanut tumbled after him into the lake.

One year later...

Where was she? It was nearly eight p.m. and there was no sign of her or her parents’ station wagon. Running long fingers through his already rumpled hair, Erik hoped they would arrive soon. He started at the sound of a car and nearly jumped up and down at the sight of the ugly brown vehicle.

Their letters had been a little less frequent this past year, but he still couldn’t wait to spend the next week with Robyn and Peanut. When he saw Robyn’s mom wave, he waved back enthusiastically.

The car stopped and the doors popped open.

“Want me to help you set up, Mr. Douglass?” Erik offered, waiting for Robyn to tumble out the back door.

The older man glanced into the car before answering. “No, thank you, Erik. Why don’t you help Robyn walk off the car ride?”

Erik frowned, then shrugged. “Kay.”

Robyn bolted from the car, red hair streaming out behind her.

She practically hurtled past Erik into the fading twilight.

Without another thought, Erik ran after her. “Robyn, wait!” He finally caught up with her—damn she was fast—on the path toward the lake. Catching her arm, he hauled her around to face him. “What the he—” But he never finished his sentence. Robyn’s body faced his, but her head was turned away. In the fading light, he thought her cheeks looked wet. “Robyn, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t want to be here.” She tugged at her arm.

He snatched his hand away. “*What?*”

“What’s the point?” she half-sobbed.

Erik’s eyebrows went up. “What are you *blubbing* about?”

With another sob, Robyn threw herself into his arms. “Oh, Erik!”

Awkwardly, he caught her against him, not sure what to do. She was crying and hanging on to him for dear life. “It’s okay,” he said lamely.

“No!” she wailed and pressed her head against his shoulder.

He patted her back clumsily and looked around for help. “Say, I know what will cheer you up. Let’s go get Peanut and go for a night swim.” He frowned when she cried harder. “Robyn, what’s going on? Where *is* Peanut?” In all their camping times together, Peanut had *never* left Robyn’s side. He pushed her away from him and looked into her soggy face. “Where’s Peanut?”

“Dead!” Robyn wailed before crumpling to the ground.

Erik’s arms hung limply at his sides, the sound of Robyn’s heartbreak ringing in his head. With a quiet grunt of distress, he fell to his knees and gathered Robyn into his arms. *Dead? Dead!* He moaned and hugged her tighter, hoping she didn’t look up and catch him crying, too.

“What happened?” he whispered some time later, when the darkness had enveloped them.

She hiccuped and wiped her nose on her sleeve. “She got hit by a car, Erik. It was terrible. They said they couldn’t save her.”

“I’m sure they tried,” he said softly.

“One minute she was there, the next, she was gone.” She gulped around the tears.

“Gawd, Robyn...when?”

“Last week,” she whispered tearfully.

He finally met her gaze and patted her hand. "It'll be okay, Robyn. We'll do something special for her here before we leave, okay?"

"Kay."

Her voice was soft and small, like the day he had first met her and Peanut, two years ago. They had bonded so quickly, the three of them. Well, now it was just two, but *he* would watch out for Robyn, just like Peanut used to.

One year later...

Erik leaned against the tree, waiting for Robyn to arrive with food and her swimming gear. He scratched his nose and wondered if she would be impressed with his new diving skills. He had practiced all spring and most of the early summer.

"Hey," Robyn called from behind him.

"Hey," he answered, not bothering to turn around. "Food?"

"Cheetos," she answered, laughing. "Swim first." She strolled up next to him and smacked at his arm. "Race you! Last one in is a rotten egg!"

He turned and caught sight of her as she took off toward the pier. Whoa... She was all tanned legs and red hair. Where had *that* come from? She was halfway to the float when he finally shook himself and took off after her. He had been so excited to see her arrive an hour ago that he hadn't paid any attention to her clothes or her hair. As he reached the pier's edge, he could see her draw herself up onto the float. Creamy shoulders appeared, then a sleek black bathing suit covering a firm back and rear end, before those long legs. He stumbled and sort of fell into the lake. He was glad Robyn had taken off before him so she missed his ungainly tumble into the water. With long, sure strokes, he propelled himself toward the float.

"What took you so long?"

Erik squinted up at her from the water. "You cheated."

She raised an eyebrow at him and crossed her legs Indian fashion. "I did no such thing!"

Snorting, he hauled himself up onto the float. "You distract me with food and then take off...what do you call that?"

"Strategy, you rotten egg, you," she teased. Flipping her long

hair over her shoulder, she eyed him. “I don’t know where you put that junk.”

Slicking back his hair, he grinned at her. “Hollow leg.”

“So what did your Mom say about your driver’s license?”

He frowned, thinking back to the conversation. “She doesn’t care since I don’t have a car. You?”

“My dad said...” She cleared her throat and lowered her voice. “No driving or dating until you’re thirty-five!”

“What?”

Laughing, she waved her hand at him. “He’s been saying that for as long as I can remember. My mother always pooh-pooh’s him and makes some nauseating remark about me being daddy’s-little-girl.”

He narrowed his eyes, trying not to notice how her body seemed to have changed since last summer. “You haven’t been out on a date yet?”

“Well...group dates, yes. My father is really paranoid about me being alone with a boy,” she stated.

Erik blinked. So if he wasn’t a boy, what was he? Of course, they had known each other for years...they were friends. Friends and *that was all*.

After a moment’s silence, she looked over and saw the expression on his face. “Oh! I meant...” A blush crept up her neck and over her face. “Erik, I didn’t mean you!”

The float lurched drunkenly as he sprang to his feet. “I know what you meant.” With hardly a splash, he dove off the float into the lake.

Startled, she watched him cut cleanly through the water toward the shore. What had just happened? She and Erik were friends! Sure, he was a boy, but not a *boy*. Shading her eyes, she scanned the water and saw him coming to his feet at the lake’s edge. He was taller than she remembered, and leaner. But he was just Erik...her best friend. She never saw him as a person of the opposite gender, merely as her best friend. As he stalked away from the water, she watched the muscles working in his legs. *Muscles? When had he developed those?* Her stomach clenched, reminding her that Erik was as male as they came, and as a female,

she was noticing.
And so was her body.

Chapter One



“**B**ig weekend planned, Robyn?”
Robyn looked up at her coworker and smiled tiredly.
“Sleep, and lots of it.”
“No party? Twenty-five is a pretty big year.”
Snorting, she opened her e-mail to check for new messages.
“It’s just another day.”
With a wave, the other woman left her desk and headed home.
The only message of any interest was from her long-time friend, Erik Richards.
‘Getting old, girl! Too bad your parents are in Jamaica...can’t believe they left their precious girl alone on her birthday. What in hell are you going to do to celebrate?’
With a sigh, she hit the reply button. As she began typing, a message popped up in the middle of her screen.
“Birthday girl!”
Robyn grinned and typed quickly. *Hey Erik, how’s tricks? Good. <grin> What are you doing at work? It’s after five on a Friday.*
I was trying to leave...
What say we go fishing.

Laughing out loud, she answered. *No fishing pole.*

Seriously, let's get together this weekend.

The cursor blinked unfailingly at her.

Robyn?

What's gotten into you? she typed.

It's your birthday. You should spend it with friends. We're only a couple of hours away.

You're going to drive three hours to go fishing?

Blink, blink, blink.

We could camp out overnight. Separate tents, of course.

<leer>

A giggle bubbled up her throat and she clapped her hand over her mouth. *I haven't been camping in years.*

It's settled.

I don't have a tent... she tapped out quickly.

I'll take care of everything. Meet me at the pier.

Erik, we can't...

See you in three hours. Drive careful.

When Robyn tried to protest again, the messaging service came back with an error, saying Erik was no longer online. She scrunched up her nose and exhaled noisily. Now what?

What was he thinking? It had been five years since they'd seen each other...and at this very same location. But that weekend had turned out to be a huge mistake. It had been a half-hearted attempt to bring together two different groups of friends...his and hers. Not only had they been incompatible, but Robyn's "date" had been pretty peeved at how much time she had spent with Erik.

It had seemed like such a good idea at the time...a long weekend, several tents and a bunch of fun people. But somewhere along the way, something went wrong.

Erik was standing with his college roommate, his roommate's girlfriend, and two other classmates, when a car appeared along the lane. Recognizing the ugly station wagon, he brightened and broke away from his group. When the car finally came to a halt on one of the campsites, he hurried to the driver's side to pull open the door.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

Erik frowned at the unfamiliar guy behind the wheel. He was sure this was Robyn's car.

"Erik!"

His head shot up and he looked across the roof of the car. "Robyn!" A grin split his face and he raced around the front of the car to reach her. She was beautiful, as he had expected, with her glorious red hair bouncing gaily around her face. As a young girl, she had been pretty, but the last five years had matured her into a full-blown woman. He hugged her close, reveling in her soft, round curves. The last summer he'd seen her, she'd been a reed with barely blossoming breasts...now she was long-stemmed rose in bloom.

"It's so good to see you again!" Robyn exclaimed, pulling away just far enough to study his face. As teenagers, she'd always been taller than he was, but at almost six feet, he was at least three inches taller than her.. "This was such a great idea!" As she spoke, her friends tumbled out of her parents' station wagon.

"We should all get together and introduce ourselves," he announced, grabbing her hand and tugging her across the lane to his group of friends.

"C'mon, guys!" Robyn called over her shoulder to her friends. As she followed Erik, her friends trailed behind them, their footsteps loud on the leaves and gravel. When they came to a halt, an arm snaked around her waist. Looking up, she smiled. "Well, I'm Robyn and this," she wrapped her arm around the man's waist, "is Peter."

Erik saw Peter stake his claim on Robyn immediately. He had known ahead of time that she was going to bring her current boyfriend, but he hadn't anticipated the possessiveness that would emanate from Peter. "I'm Erik." He nodded to his roommate and the introductions continued around the haphazard circle. There were nine people total, on two campsites with what turned out to be four tents. Once the tents were set up, he grabbed Robyn's hand and started off down the path toward the lake.

Robyn looked over her shoulder, probably looking at Peter standing next to their tent.

Erik followed suit, noting that Peter was a big guy, broader and taller than Erik, with reddish-blond hair and a close-cropped

beard. At the moment, the corners of his mouth were turned down and his arms were crossed over his chest. "It'll just take a few minutes," Erik reassured her. "We have to see the tree."

"I know, I know! I just should have told Peter where we were going," she told him.

"He's a big boy, he can fend for himself for twenty minutes." His voice was light, but he was annoyed already at Peter's attitude. Robyn had been his best friend for eight years...he had some rights to spend time with her.

"He's not used to sharing me with another man," she teased, squeezing his hand.

"Well, he'd better learn, because a part of you belongs to me," he responded firmly.

Grinning, she walked alongside him in silence, as if they were gearing up to pay their respects.

"Robyn?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad we got together. Five years is too long."

"I agree."

Five years was definitely way too long! Why had they waited so long...then and now? Steering his SUV through the entrance to the camp grounds, Erik searched the posted numbers for their site. It hadn't been hard to get a reservation. Even though the fall was a great time for camping, families tended to only come when school was out. He parked his vehicle and hopped out, striding to the back to pull out his supplies. It didn't take him long to set up the tent and he was reaching for the sleeping bags, plural, when another vehicle came down the road. He squinted at the headlights before recognizing Robyn's convertible from her detailed description. She'd been so excited when she bought it a year ago. With a grin, he loped over to her parking space and threw open her door. "Robyn!"

Without any hesitation, she hopped out and threw herself into his arms. "Erik!"

They were grinning and hugging and laughing at the same time.

"It's so good to see you," Robyn said when they finally broke apart.

“No kidding! Five years is a long time.” He eyed her car. “So, did you bring food?”

With a deep chuckle, she opened the trunk and said over her shoulder. “Obviously it hasn’t been *that* long.”

“Let me help you with those bags,” he offered, reaching in and grabbing the bags filled with Cheetos, corn chips, and soda.

“That’s right, leave me with the fruit and juices,” she called, slamming the trunk and hurrying to catch up with him. As she rounded his SUV, she came to an abrupt halt. “Hey, where’s my tent?”

“Right there.” He motioned with his chin.

“Okay, then where’s *your* tent?”

He lifted one eyebrow at her stricken face. “One tent, two bags.”

“You said two tents,” she whispered.

“I was in a hurry and I only had the one tent.” He nudged her shoulder with his. “It’s big enough for six adults...I think you and I will fit.”

“Yes, of course we will,” she murmured.

“Not to worry,” he said cheerfully, taking the food into the tent. “I’ll behave, I promise.”

She followed him inside and dumped her food next to his. “I’m not worried. After all, we’ve been friends for thirteen years.”

“That’s right.” Friends...just friends. “Let’s take a walk down to the water.”

“Can we go see Peanut’s tree?” she asked.

He grabbed her hand and tugged her out into the night air. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

They walked along the dark path in silence.

He finally flicked on his flashlight as the trees closed in around and above them. “Remember when we snuck off to do this that summer?” he whispered.

“Yeah,” Robyn whispered back. Erik had come to get her at midnight, after both sets of their parents had gone to sleep. Together they had slipped through the darkness toward the spot where they had first met. Peanut, at six years old, had been hit by a car only a week before. The yellow lab had been her best friend and protector

for six years and then boom, she was gone. Devastated, Robyn could think of nothing else but her loss. Only Erik's promise to memorialize Peanut had tempered her unbearable grief.

"What are we going to do?" she whispered, tears collecting in her eyes.

"You'll see," he whispered back, squeezing her hand comfortingly. "It will be okay, Robyn."

"Okay." She let him drag her through the trees toward the water. "There it is."

"There it is," she murmured, her hand tightening in his.

"Yup."

"Do you think it's still there?"

"Unless someone chopped it down." His teeth flashed white in the darkness when he grinned at her.

"Do you remember which tree?" she asked.

"Oh yeah." He reached out a hand and ran his finger along the rough bark of one tree. It was just to the left of the spot where she'd found him studying a toad thirteen years ago. It took him only a moment to find the carving, and just a second longer to shine the flashlight on it. "There."

Robyn stepped up next to him, one hand on his shoulder as she peered at the tree. She reached out with her free hand to trace the carving. It had taken them until dawn to finish it with Erik's Swiss army knife. They had hacked away the bark in a circle until the space was smooth. Once that had been accomplished, Erik had carved Peanut's name and the date of her death. Underneath that he had carved both sets of their initials.

"Oh, Erik," she breathed. "Can you believe that I still miss her?"

He pulled her around and against his side. "Yeah, I believe it. She was a great dog."

Letting her arm curl around his waist, she leaned into his warmth. "If it weren't for you, I would never have gotten through her death." Even after their week of camping was over, he had called her every night for a month to comfort her.

"Sure you would." He turned his head and pressed a soft kiss to her temple. "But I didn't want you to deal with it alone." He inhaled deeply, then let it out on a long sigh.

She turned into him, sliding her other arm around his waist. “You are so good to me.”

He pulled her closer. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“You are the best friend I ever had.” Her voice was muffled by his shirt.

He stiffened almost imperceptibly. “C’mon, let’s head back.”

They pulled apart and Robyn touched the carving one last time before turning away. “So, did you bring your fishing rod?”

He gave a curt bark of laughter. “It’s pitch dark, Robyn, we can’t fish now.”

She heaved a loud sigh. “I didn’t mean for now, you dorkus.”

“Besides, you don’t fish.”

“Only because I don’t have a rod,” she replied sweetly.

They grabbed their toiletries and parted under the bright lights of the bathroom building.

“Ten minutes,” Erik called after her.

“No problem.” Robyn ducked into the empty bathroom and set her bag on the ledge over the sink. She couldn’t get over how good Erik looked. Always lean, he now sported firm muscles that his embrace had made her intimately familiar with. His dark hair was on the longish side, but looked soft and touchable. And when was the last time she had felt so safe in someone’s arms? Pulling a brush through her hair, she wondered about their sleeping arrangements. It wasn’t really Erik she was worried about...after all, he was always the gentleman. And from past conversations, she knew that Erik’s tastes in women ran more to petite blondes. What really concerned her was this tingle of attraction she felt when she saw him. But he was her best friend and that was more important than anything else. With one last rinse, she tucked her toothbrush back into her makeup bag and turned away. Outside, she leaned against the corner to wait for Erik.

“Hey.”

Turning, she greeted him. “All done?”

“Yeah, you?”

“Yep.”

He held out a hand and clicked on his flashlight. “Then let’s head back.”

They walked in silence, their shoes crunching along the pathway.

Once inside the tent, he turned on the battery operated lantern. “Why don’t you go ahead and change. Call out when you’re ready for me to come in.”

“Where are you going?” she asked, then blushed.

“I’m going to wait outside. Don’t worry.” He grinned. “I’ll keep an eye out for stray bears.”

She giggled, then immediately clapped her hand over her mouth. Seeing his eyes widen questioningly, she turned away to gather her night clothes. The last thing she wanted to do was become one of those giggly girls he hated.

“Call out when you’re ready...uh, done,” he murmured before stepping out of the tent and letting the flap drop closed behind him.

She changed clothes as quickly as she could, then slipped into her sleeping bag. After zipping it all the way up to her shoulders, she called out to him, “Erik?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m done.”

He stalked into the tent, zipping the flap closed behind him. Staring down at her, he seemed frozen in place.

“Aren’t you going to change?”

“Yeah.”

She swallowed, her eyes tracking his movement across the small space. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No! I mean, uh, no. I’ll just turn out the light and change in the dark.”

“How will you see?”

He flashed her a grin before switching off the lantern. “I think I can manage.”

Robyn closed her eyes and listened to him move about quietly. Behind dark lids, she pictured him stripping off his shirt, then his pants. Catching her lip, she scrunched further down into her sleeping bag.

After a few moments of silence, he cleared his throat quietly. “Robyn?” he whispered.

“Yeah?”

“You okay over there?”

Keeping her eyes squeezed shut, she thought about the scant three feet separating them. “I’m fine,” she squeaked.

“Are you warm enough?”

She shuddered, wondering if he would offer to share his body heat. “I’m okay.”

“I’m glad we did this.”

“Me, too.”

“Good night, Robyn.”

“Night, Erik.” After a few minutes, she held her breath to see if he was asleep. He wasn’t snoring, but his breathing seemed slow and even. Opening her eyes, she waited a few seconds for them to adjust to the darkness. There would be no easing into sleep tonight. Three feet away and still awareness sped through her veins. How was she supposed to make it through this weekend? Here was her best friend, taking time out of his life to keep her from being alone on her birthday...and she was lusting after his body. And oh what a body! Tall, tanned and firm...what more could a woman ask for? Perhaps the only thing to ask for would be a return of the attraction she felt. That, however, was way too much to ask for from a best friend. Lovers were easy to find, right? The spiritual and emotional connection she had with Erik was precious...something to be cherished, not sullied by lust.

Sighing quietly, she rolled onto her side and peered across the tent. This was a weekend to enjoy with her friend. They would grow older and move on with their own lives soon...she would not give up this rare opportunity to have fun with Erik. But still, as her eyes drifted closed, her last thought was of crawling across the empty space and squeezing into Erik’s sleeping bag.

Damn, Erik thought as his eyes popped open. Sunlight was filtering through the tent’s front flap, giving him a clear view of one long bare leg. Robyn was sprawled on her stomach, her head turned away from him and one lightly tanned leg wrapped over top of her sleeping bag. Where were the baggy sweats that should be covering her from neck to ankle? As far as he could tell, she was naked from her thigh to her toes. Groaning quietly, he grabbed the jeans he’d shucked last night from the pile next to

his bag and slid them on. It was a tight squeeze inside his sleeping bag, but there was no way he was going to present himself in a pair of boxer shorts in his current condition. Cautiously he zipped up his jeans and started to unfold from his bag. At that moment, Robyn moaned, pulled her leg back under cover and rolled away from him. The slight chill in the morning air was probably the cause for her retreat, and he was grateful. He stood, stretched, and grabbed his tee shirt from last night. He could definitely do with a shower...most likely cold.

“Morning,” Robyn said, her voice husky with sleep.

Erik looked down at her sleep-softened face and forced a grin.

“Good morning.”

“What time is it?”

Her smokey voice curled through him and he had to clear his throat to answer her. “Quarter after Happy Birthday!” he sang cheerfully.

“You are such a morning person.” She said the words as if they were dirty. “Is it noon yet?”

Chuckling, he gathered up fresh clothes and his toiletries bag. “Sweetheart, it’s barely seven.”

She groaned and closed her eyes. “What are you doing up?”

“I’m going to take a shower and get spiffy for your special day.”

“At seven in the morning?” she croaked.

“Don’t you know it takes me hours to look beautiful?”

Snorting, she slid her hands under her cheek and sighed. “Off with you, then. I’ll catch up with you in a couple of hours.”

“Okie dokie.” Clutching his towel and clothes in front of him, he strode out into the morning sun.

Robyn rubbed the itch on the end of her nose and sniffled softly. A second later, she flicked at something on her cheek. With a start, her eyes flew open and she was met with an amused brown gaze.

“C’mon, you’re sleeping your birthday away!”

She closed her eyes and sighed. “Is it a decent hour yet?”

“It’s nine-fifteen,” he answered. “And I have breakfast.”

Robyn sat up so fast she nearly cracked her head on Erik’s

chin. "Breakfast?"

Laughing, he folded his legs and sat back. "Bear claws, orange juice, cranberry muffins, coffee..."

"Mmm." She practically purred when he passed her a muffin and a small jug of juice.

He shuddered.

She sat up across from him, the sleeping bag top cast aside in favor of food and drink. No wonder he'd shivered. In her boxer shorts and long cotton tee shirt, even with the sleeping bag around her, she was chilly. "Where did you get this delicious food?" When he didn't answer, she tapped his knee.

"Uh, what?"

She cocked an eyebrow at him and pushed her disheveled hair over her shoulder. "The food?"

"Oh...uh, there's a bakery about ten minutes from here. I figured it would give you a little more time to sleep."

"Mmm. Well, so far this is a great birthday. Good food, great friend..." She smiled and crumpled up her muffin wrapper. "Now I could use a long shower to top it off." She unfolded herself and stretched to grab her bag in the corner. As she moved, she felt his eyes on her, but when she straightened, his was looking at his food.

He stuffed the rest of his bear claw into his mouth, then washed it down with a gulp of coffee. "Think about what you want to do today," he mumbled as she stood and slipped on her sandals.

Narrowing her eyes, she clamped her mouth shut to keep her response from tumbling out. With a curt nod, she left the tent. It was still cool out but Robyn didn't really notice. She hurried along the path to the bathrooms, her body already responding to the images in her mind. What did she want to do today? *Him*. Him in the tent, him in the lake, him on the crunchy fall leaves along the path to Peanut's tree. Oh...him on the float under the hot sun.

She groaned out loud and set her belongings on the bench outside a shower stall. What was wrong with her? She'd never had these kinds of thoughts about Peter when they'd camped here five years ago. As a matter of fact, they'd come here expecting to consummate their relationship, but something had held her back. At the time she thought it was anger over his jealousy of

her friendship with Erik. But now she wondered if an underlying attraction to Erik had turned her off to Peter.

Stepping into the shower, she pulled the plastic curtain closed and stripped off her pajamas. She set them out on the bench then turned on the water. As the water warmed, she closed her eyes. Unbidden, images of Erik joining her in the shower flashed in her head. What a birthday gift...

Twenty minutes later, Robyn was pinning up her wet curls when she heard her name being yelled. She trotted to the bathroom entrance and stuck her head out. "What?"

"Hey, the guy at the front office said that there's a group leaving for an intermediate hike on the other side of the lake. About six people...want to go?" Erik asked.

"How long is the hike?"

"Four to five hours round trip. You up for it?"

"Sure." Better to be with a group than alone with Erik. "How much time do I have?"

"They're meeting in the parking lot in fifteen minutes," he told her.

"Okay, I'll be out in five." She went back into the bathroom.