

Chapter One

“Reese, if you weren’t dead, I swear, I’d kill you!” D’Anne Palmer stomped from her mosquito-infested campsite toward the Laundromat. “Damn it!” she cursed, smacking a super-sized, bloodsucking pest feasting on her neck.

Was this her fault? Had Reese tried to tell her? A month and a half ago, unable to comprehend the truth, she’d curled into a ball and cried for two weeks straight. Next came the zombie stage. Now, she’d moved on to anger, latched onto it with fury, and couldn’t seem to let go. Reese was dead, and she was broke and stranded outside of Nashville in a campground along the Cumberland River.

D’Anne flung open the Laundromat screen and headed across the room to the bulletin board. She pulled a pushpin from the cork, and tacked up the index card she’d brought with her. Letting go of a disgusted sigh, she read her handy work one last time.

For hire: 40 foot RV. Sleeps six. Cook and driver included.

Fee negotiable.

See owner at campsite 47, Paradise Park Campground.

After a sleepless night of weighing her limited options, she’d made her decision—the first in twenty-five years without her husband’s input.

“Unreal,” she muttered as she fished her cell phone out of her shorts pocket. Bracing for yet another argument, she called her son, Dean, back in Los Angeles. “This is your mother. Don’t start telling me I’m off my rocker again or I’ll hang up.” She squinted and glanced at the ceiling. “I’ve made my decision. I know you think that’s something I’m incapable of doing, but nevertheless...I’m going to pay my way across country by renting out the RV.”

Dean began to rail, but D’Anne interrupted him mid-jibber-jabber. “My decision is final. Deal with it.”

“I don’t think Dad would want you to do this, Mom.” His voice crackled over the line.

“Sell the RV and fly home. Please?”

“This RV *is* my home. It’s all I’ve got left in the world. And it was the last purchase your father and I made together. I’m keeping it.”

“You know he’s probably rolling over in his grave, don’t you?”

“He’s not in a grave.”

“And Randy is going to hit the ceiling.”

“What else is new? Your brother thinks everything in life is a crap frappé. He needs to grow up.”

Still, she wondered, would Reese approve of her decision? She swallowed the dry wad lodged in her throat and pulled herself from the thought. “You tell Randy to call me when he has a job. Then I’ll consider his expert opinion about *my* life.”

“Ma...”

With water welling in her eyes, and not wanting Dean to catch on, she prepared to disconnect. “I love you, but I’ve got to go.”

For the second time in the past month, she hung up on her eldest son. The first time was one week after Reese had died. She’d called home to have Dean wire money for a casket to ship Reese back to California. Dean told her Reese had invested their entire savings on one surefire stock. The last quarter earnings showed it down to two bucks a share. There was no money to send. She’d been too angry to cry. Instead she’d hurled Reese’s cell phone against the wall and had him cremated. He now resided in a jar in the motor home—the top-of-the-line RV they’d purchased with all but ten grand from the sale of their house. And that ten grand was now almost

gone. Apparently, her brilliant economics professor husband hadn't practiced what he'd preached in the classroom. D'Anne couldn't tap into Reese's college pension for another year without losing fifty percent of its worth. Even then, she'd only receive a portion of the value. She intended to live a long time, and fifty percent of a professor's pension wouldn't do. She'd have to hold out for the rest of the year.

Glancing toward the ceiling, she said, "Reese, you've left me on my own, and this is my game plan. I'll work things out. Don't worry."

She left the Laundromat and headed for the corner market to post another index card.

August in Tennessee: heat, humidity, and mosquitoes. Damn.

At least the RV had air conditioning, even if it did make an annoying rattle lately. She trudged on, kicking up a dusty trail that settled on her sticky skin and turned her white socks and cross trainers an ugly shade of gray. Her shaggy hair fell across her face. She needed a style and a weave, but those luxuries, that and good California wine, would have to wait for when she returned home, found a place to live, and got a job outside of the home...for the first time in her adult life.

As of today, her budget was thinner than her best friend Theresa's thighs. *Maybe by the time I get home, I'll be as skinny as she is.* She'd kept the overforty spread to a minimum, but could easily stand to lose a few. Couldn't everyone?

Glancing at her "to do" list, she worried who the hell would be interested in renting an RV with a person included? Fear smacked her upside the head and back to reality. What if she wound up with a pervert...or worse?

When she'd devised her plan, she'd visualized a senior citizen couple who wanted to see the country but weren't comfortable driving an RV. Or a family with little children and a pet. Hell, she could throw in free babysitting to sweeten the deal. Maybe this wasn't the brainiest plan. For a heartbeat she hesitated and thought of marching straight to the RV to hide, but she'd done enough of that over the past six weeks.

D'Anne glanced around the crowded street. Everywhere she looked, she saw boots, ball caps and cowboy hats. What if some tobacco chewing local wanted to rent her RV? Where would she draw the line? Preoccupied, she almost tripped over an old coffee can beside a bench. Tobacco juice? God, she needed to get home.

Following a nosedive of jitters, an idea materialized. *Rules! I better come up with a list of ground rules for prospective renters.*

Tyler White threw a second can of tuna into his grocery cart. He'd heard a high protein diet could help a person lose up to ten pounds in a couple of weeks, and that was exactly what he needed to do by September 5th, when a music scout would listen to his act. He ran his hand across his shirt, noting the strain of the middle two buttons. Tyler sucked it in and stood a little straighter when he saw his reflection in the frozen food glass door. He stopped himself from reaching for a gallon of ice cream and instead chose a pint of raspberry sorbet.

Ten years ago he was on top of the world with the number one hit country song, "Your High Class Love Broke My Honky-Tonk Heart." He'd packed concert halls, had played the Grand Ole Opry.

His first wife left about the same time the royalties stopped showing up. He left his second wife when he realized she preferred a bottle of Southern Comfort to him. Now about all he had left was his dog Dexter.

Tyler needed a comeback but after two months, all he'd lined up was three weeks worth of secondrate concerts for his new band. He'd gone out on a limb to hire musicians he couldn't afford. It had taken him a long time to feel confident enough to write a few new songs and even more to muster the nerve to sing in a dive in Nashville, in The District. When he'd peddled the

songs to the record companies on Music Row they'd all asked the same thing, "What have you done lately? Do people still want to hear you?"

Who would have thought at forty-two he'd have to prove himself...again? And now he had another problem.

His transportation plans had fallen through. How the hell was he going to get three musicians plus himself to eight concerts in four different states? He knew the drill from firsthand experience, and if he wanted to make sure his band showed up to work, he'd have to get them there himself. They could all squeeze in his old car, but could they sleep there? And where would they clean up, at gas stations? Not to mention toting the instruments around.

He picked up a package of skinless, boneless chicken breasts, checked the price and put them back, settling for chicken tenders instead before pushing his cart down the aisle.

Renting an RV from the dealership was way out of his price range. A friend had offered an old school bus, but it was unreliable. He'd just have to hope putting out a "wanted" ad would bring the transportation he needed.

He took a three-by-five index card from his pocket and glanced at it one last time.

Wanted: Large Crew Cab truck. Will swap Classic Eldorado Cadillac.

Hell, he hated to part with the car once test-driven by The King—or so it was rumored. But a man had to do what a man had to do. Tyler was about to pin the card to the store's bulletin board when another card caught his eye. Before anyone else saw it, he grabbed it, and left his in its place.

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