

CHAPTER ONE



“NO, MOM, I’M NOT GOING to call Brady Logan for a date. Would you please give up that notion and move on? What part of ‘I’m engaged to Eric’, don’t you understand?” Rev. Samantha Evans tucked her cell phone under her chin, shimmied out of her heavy coat, and shivered as it hit the carpet. Her fiancé of a scant four months, Eric Palmer, called April in northern Maine “chilly.” Ha. She called it downright frigid.

“But dear, I don’t think I’m comfortable with this man you say you’re engaged to. He doesn’t even have a real job.”

Samantha plopped down on the couch in the church parsonage she called home and jerked off her boots. “He does too have a real job. He’s a forest ranger.”

She rested her head on the back of the sofa and covered her mouth as she yawned. She didn’t mean to sound harsh, but her mother had a way about her that jangled the nerves. *Lord, grant me patience.*

Quickly.

Her mother droned on. “Didn’t you say he wrestles moose? Doesn’t sound like a real job to me.”

“Not a moose wrestler. A moose *wrangler*. As in, he catches moose and places radio collars on their necks in order to track their movements. He—”

“That nice boy, Logan Brady, is an accountant. That’s a real job.” Samantha’s mother sniffed.

If you like him so much, you marry him, Mom.

Fortunately she had sense enough not to say that out loud. Neither of her parents would find it funny. She dialed her voice down to the serene setting. “I thought his name was Brady Logan? Never mind. I’m going to marry Eric Palmer, and I’m happy, Mom. Really happy.”

Samantha had been floating on cloud eighteen ever since her sweetie had shocked her with the super-romantic proposal right before Christmas. She loved that man with all her being. Why was that so hard for her mother to understand?

“Samantha, I just want you to weigh your options. Don’t be so quick to jump into a commitment. Why would you say yes to the first man who comes along? I wouldn’t want you to regret a missed opportunity.”

Missed opportunity? Her mom had been hounding her for years to get out there and find a suitable marriage partner. The phrase “not getting any younger” had come up in conversations countless times. And now that Samantha had dashed headlong into the happy state of betrothal, her mother wanted her to back up?

Samantha’s Maine Coon cat, Jezebel, sailed into her lap and kneaded her thigh. With two superfluous toes on each of Bel’s front paws, the cat had the art of massage down pat. Maybe Samantha could rent her out to a day spa to bring in additional money. The buzzer on her stove hummed and Samantha winced as a sharp claw dug into her kneecap. She unhooked the curved spike on that extra-large paw and whispered, “Ouch, baby girl. Watch it.”

“What did you say? When are you going to bring this Eric person down to meet us? You’ve been engaged for months now and we haven’t met this man yet. Your father’s worried about you.”

Samantha sincerely doubted that. Her father was always in her corner. “Hey, Mom? I have dinner in the oven so I’ve got to go. Please say hello to Dad.”

“But when are you coming to visit? Maryland is only a day’s drive.”

A *long* day’s drive, which they could do just as easily. “We’ll try to come soon. Bye-bye.”

Samantha ended the call, deposited Bel on the floor, and rose to switch off the demanding buzzer. She peeked in the oven. Almost done. She turned the temperature to warm, the savory scent of her first attempt at a Yankee pot roast making her mouth water. She had let the dish cook while she’d polished her sermon at the church office across the parking lot. The furnace in the Free Methodist Church where she pastored was acting up again, and she was tired of the added layers she had to wear. It might be early spring in northern Maine, but when she was indoors she didn’t want to dress up like an Eskimo ... a French-Canadian Eskimo, anyway.

At least it was nice and warm in her own little place. Maybe if she rearranged the space she could cram a desk in here. She glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. Eric should be here soon so she'd better get a move on and change. She was struggling to extricate herself from her cardigan when her doorbell chimed. With one arm still stuck in a sleeve, she heaved the door open.

Genevieve Leblanc, her friend from down the street, blew in with the north wind. "Harrumph. Lisa. That's all I have to say. Lisa!"

Samantha shut the door with a thump and smirked. "What's your new housemate done now?"

Gen reached out and tugged on Samantha's stubbornly clingy piece of clothing, freeing her to begin unbuttoning the vest underneath. "She just acts so ... so ... *superior* would be a kind word. Nothing anybody does or thinks or says is good enough. She's driving me crazy. She's got that fancy car too, you know."

"Uh-huh. Totally useless in the snow."

"You got it. Guess who she's conned into driving her to work?"

Samantha patted Gen on the shoulder. "You're at the top of my list. What a nice thing to do. Here, come sit down."

Genevieve threw her coat over the back of the wing chair and settled herself on the threadbare cushion. "My sentiments exactly, but now she's treating me like a taxi service. I don't mind lugging her around once in a while, but she really needs to get her own transportation. Plus, she criticizes my driving. She says I drive too slow. I drive slow because I want to get where I'm going in one piece."

"Unlike many of the tourists who slide through the snow as if cars were sleighs. Not fun." Samantha tilted her head. "It's all my fault for mentioning you had half a house to rent. Sorry."

"Hey, I'm the one who said yes and took her in. I've always been a sucker for a sob story and she's got a good one." Gen sniffed the air. "What smells so good?"

"Pot roast. Eric's going to be here soon. We haven't had a moment to see each other all week, so we're trying to do a Saturday night date thing. I'm cooking, and he's bringing the movie."

“Oh, I’d better get out of here, then.”

Samantha turned the oven light on and peered at the roast. Yep. Doing nicely. “Sure you can’t stay a few more minutes? I could put the kettle on and you could fill me in on that date you had last week. Wasn’t it Philippe the bartender at the Blue Moose this time?”

“Yeah, and you don’t want to know. Disaster city.”

“I’m sorry. He seemed nice.”

“Seems nice and acts nice are two different things.” A pained expression flitted across Gen’s face. She managed a tiny smile and shrugged.

“Nary a hint?”

“Oh, all right. How about the man has no brains? He may be eye candy, but he’s incapable of having a thought that doesn’t include hockey scores or the best way to mix a drink. Shaken or stirred or ... who cares? He spent precious minutes of my valuable time extolling the virtues of mimosas. How can you sustain a relationship on that?”

Samantha cracked a smile. Free Methodists and mimosas didn’t mix well either.

“I guess the older I get the less I care about that sort of thing.” Gen buffed her lacquered nails on her scarf. “I’m not in college anymore, and I want a man who can hold down an adult conversation. Not a juvenile, but not stuffy either. Just real, you know?”

Samantha did know, and she daily thanked God for Eric. She pursed her lips. How could such a sweet, pretty girl have such a hard time meeting the right man? Samantha had only known Gen for a few months now, but it was long enough to notice she drew admiring glances from all the guys in town. Maybe that was the problem. She intimidated the good fellows and encouraged the bad. An idea sprouted. “I could—”

“No, you couldn’t.” Genevieve jumped from the chair and gathered her coat. “If Eric’s on his way, I’ll take my leave so you two lovebirds can be alone. Besides, I have to get home, feed the cat, and figure out how to confront Lisa.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Say hello to your hunky fiancé.” Gen floated out the door with the grace of a songbird on the wing.

Samantha shut the door in a hurry. Eric maintained it was a strange spring thus far, with extreme dips and peaks on the thermometer. Tonight, the temps were predicted to plunge into the single digits.

She yanked the scratchy wool vest over her head and quickly shrugged on the shell-pink cashmere twin set she’d discovered at an L.L. Bean outlet. Her sister Cecelia had sent her a gift card for Christmas, and she’d used the whole thing on the deal of the century. The incredibly soft sweater had been marked way down because it had two buttons missing. Seriously? Only two buttons gone and the velvety treasure had been marked half price?

Samantha wasn’t very good when it came to sewing, unlike her friend Marion Landry, matriarch at the church. The older lady had acted as if Samantha was doing *her* a favor by giving her something to repair. She’d returned the mended sweater the next day and refused even a token payment.

She crossed her arms, caressing the cozy cashmere with her palms. But it wasn’t the soft fibers that warmed her. Eric would be there soon and the concept of being with her true-love filled her with wonder. She danced into the kitchen to fix a fruit salad to go with the roast. She’d throw in a handful of cranberries, Eric’s favorite fruit.

Samantha glanced into the living room. Her cat perched on the windowsill, chattering with that special feline intonation that clearly said, “There is a beastie on my lawn and I want it gone.” Her darling hissed and pounded on the glass with her front paws.

Samantha dashed over and peered outside. Yep. In the yard, a magnificent doe posed prettily, unfazed by the puny show of aggression. “For goodness sake, Bel, it’s just a friendly, neighborhood deer. Calm down.”

Oh my. Eric was bringing the dachshunds over tonight and they always did as they were told. Her territorial kitty better be on her best behavior.



Eric hurried down the path toward the woods, shouting for his dog. “Apollo. Stop!”

The bounding deer rapidly disappeared in the distance, and the gleefully barking miniature dachshund followed in hot pursuit. Eric didn't have time for these shenanigans. He was due at Samantha's house for dinner, and he was already running late.

The merry deer headed for the trees, traipsing through the wet spring snow as if prancing on a sandy beach in the Bahamas. Before Bambi's mom disappeared completely, the female deer flipped her white tail at the excited dog, making a game of the chase. The two sped down the path Eric had created with his snowshoes, taking advantage of his man-made corridor in the trees.

"Apollo! Get back here."

His disobedient dog paid no attention whatsoever as he scrambled, hopped, and skated across the freshly fallen snow lying atop frosty ground.

Eric quickened his pace. Tonight, he'd planned to bring the boys over to Sammie's to introduce them to Jezebel. Before stowing the wiener dogs in the car, he'd let them out for a quick pee break. His attention had wandered as he'd allowed himself a moment of reverie ... Sammie had such soft, silky hair ... That was when Apollo had spotted the deer.

Eric glanced over his shoulder. His more obedient dog, Zeus, waited on the front porch. Hopefully, the little guy would still be there when this ill-timed adventure was over.

Excited yips echoed through the crisp air. Dang it! His dog was headed for the frozen creek. Eric's best boots broke through the crusty top of the snow, the resulting crunch ringing in his ears as he tramped down the trail. Apollo had to be tiring by now, and that blasted deer had to be long gone. But then again, his pup was the stubborn type.

When he'd trudged through here yesterday morning, the sun was perched on the horizon, rays of soft light peeking through the treetops. So peaceful, so serene, so awe inspiring. A good way to start his day. Now, through the trees up ahead, pink woolly clouds puffed across a spectacular sunset and glimpses of waning light glinted off the snow-covered creek. Surely his foolish dog would stop when he reached the debris-strewn banks of the solidified water.

Eric rounded the corner in time to see the deer hurtling up the bank on the opposite side of the creek. The waters of Moose Creek were normally deep and fast, the wide expanse river-sized at this point in its journey south. The creek had been frozen over for a couple months, though the big deep freeze in northern Maine had been late this year. On his daily walks, he'd thought he'd heard water running near the beaver dam upstream. Was the ice safe? The deer had

made it across handily, and if she could do it, so could a ten-pound canine. Right?

A moot point, since his dog was not going to get the chance if he had anything to say about it.

A short distance away, Apollo picked his way between the rocks on the shore, each step taking him closer to danger, his gaze on the prize fifty feet away, across the frozen expanse. Mrs. Deer stopped at the top of the hill, seemingly just as fascinated with the sight of the yappy dachshund.

The scrappy dog was shaking, whether from excitement or cold, Eric couldn't tell. He headed down the slope toward his miniature canine. "Come here, boy."

Apollo tossed him a cursory glance and then ogled the deer, the joy of the chase shining in his doggie eyes.

Eric sidled a few steps forward and to the side, moving slowly and carefully so as not to send the dog running in the wrong direction. He was so close he could almost reach out and grab the dog's collar.

Whew. Apollo yipped one last time and back-peddled toward Eric's waiting fingers. At last.

And then the deer at the crest of the hill pawed at the crunchy snow. Her mate joined her, a splendid twelve-point buck with an impressive rack, shaking his head, twin plumes of steam streaming from his nostrils. The canine couldn't help himself. He launched onto the frozen expanse, tiny legs propelling him like a windmill in a gale. A few feet out, the dog lost his footing on the slippery snow-covered ice. Landing on his stomach, legs all akimbo, the brownish-red missile rocketed straight for a thin spot in the ice on the other side of the stream.

With only a split second of indecision, Eric flung himself off the bank, half-skating on the ice, the breeze stinging his ears as he zipped forward. If he had any hope of catching that bundle of fur, he was going to have to slide. If a full-grown deer could make it across...

The ice creaked, but it held fast. Thankfully, he was gaining on the dog. Halfway across the river, he caught up to Apollo and grabbed his collar with his right hand. They kept sliding. They were going to make it.

Crack! The ice on the other side of the stream gave way and he plunged into the frigid

water, his breath whooshing from his lungs. The animal slithered from his grasp as Eric fought to keep his head above water.

Apollo's soft brown eyes grew impossibly large as he bobbed to the surface a few feet away. Before Eric's frightened dog could be carried away by the loosed current, he managed to grab onto the leather collar, hauling the animal to his upper body.

Water swirled around them. He kicked his legs to bring them to shore, grateful he only had to push against the current a few more feet before he was able to stand. His sodden cold-weather clothes weighed him down, but he stumbled through the cripplingly cold water, laboring each step of the way, his boots as heavy as if he had a brick strapped to each foot.

The poor dog whimpered and Eric clutched him closer as he stumbled onto land. "It's okay, boy. We're safe now."

His gaze traveled up the hill. An entire herd of deer gaped at him. "Lotta help you guys were."

He crashed down on a log and surveyed his soaking body, chest heaving. No doubt about it, he was in a pickle.

His chin rose and he glanced at the western sky. Precious little light left. He would have to hurry if he was going to be able to see to make it home. Without thinking, he reached into his coat pocket for his phone. Not there. Oh right. When he'd stopped by home to pick up the dogs, he'd left his phone charging in his Land Rover. Work supplied the latest and greatest shockproof, waterproof phone, but he doubted a dunk in the river would improve the already spotty reception.

But still ... no phone.

He backtracked in his mind and assessed his situation. He was soaked through, as was a shivering Apollo. Now he understood how those poor people on the Titanic felt in the freezing cold water, and he'd only been in the drink for a very few minutes.

Eric shivered, held up the slick dog, and stared him in the face, nose to nose. Apollo squeaked out a weak yip, blinked, and trembled pitifully. "Ah, buddy, I'm so sorry you're cold. I'm cold too."

Boy howdy, it was wicked nippy out here.

Eric unzipped his coat, lifted the wool sweater, flannel shirt, and cotton undershirt plastered to his body, and shoved his popsicle of a dog underneath. He quaked at the touch of the furry ice pellet, zipped up quickly, and crossed his arms to hold in the heat. Apollo quivered against his skin, but after a few moments stilled. Now Eric remembered yet another reason why he loved dogs. They were warmer than humans and a pleasant glow started to radiate through his numb torso.

Now if he could only do something about his feet. They already felt like blocks of ice.

Better get moving. But how am I going to cross the creek?

He wasn't going back the way he'd come. Hmm. There was a proper bridge down river, but that was miles away. By the time he was anywhere close, it would be darker than the inside of a pocket since there was hardly any moon tonight. Trudging through the woods in the dark didn't scare him. It just wasn't wise. One tended to bump into trees.

Been there, done that when he'd taken Sammie on a snipe hunt once when they were teenagers. He smirked at the memory. Somehow, he'd convinced Sammie to come out with him in the middle of the night to catch the silly things, but he'd collided with more trees than she had in search of the feathered fowl. Or maybe she'd known that banging on gongs and waving torches to disorient the birds wasn't the best way to catch one of the wily creatures. Maybe she'd been the one putting him on. He'd never really known for sure.

Sammie's wry, subtle sense of humor always made him smile.

A shudder wracked his body. Hypothermia was a real concern, and being a forest ranger for Aroostook County, he knew the dangers. The extremely cold water had been a massive shock to his system. He tried to slow his fast, deep breathing. He was already headed toward loopy. Snipe hunt. Ha. He pulled his partially frozen flap-eared cap down over his ears and wrapped his arms around his body. Had to keep that core temperature up.

God? Got any good ideas?

He'd head up the creek and hope for some way across. A light-headed laugh bubbled in his throat. He was up the creek anyway. Settling Apollo a bit to the right so that cold nose didn't press into his ribs, Eric thanked the good Lord he didn't have a St. Bernard to carry. He stamped his feet to get the circulation started again and headed along the creek toward the last of the fading sunlight.