

A Grand Design

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“I hate the month of June!”

Alyssa Denham shouldered her way through the revolving door to her office building and onto the concrete sidewalk, her arms laden with bridal shower grab-bag gifts. She should have tossed most of the stuff, or found an unsuspecting coworker and bestowed the gifts on her as a random act of kindness. Three office bridal showers in the first three weeks of April. It had to be a record. The predictable wedding invitations arrive in her inbox, and she still didn’t have a date for the events. Some of it was her fault. It shouldn’t bother her, but it did.

I don’t have a date, period.

Every year for the past five years, whenever a wedding occurred for someone she knew, it happened in June. And this year was no different. If June was her least favorite month, then April followed as a close second. As Alyssa stepped out from under the overhang, the light drizzle falling most of the day changed to a steady rain.

“Perfect,” she muttered, looking up and down the street for a taxi to the train station. She usually walked, but the gift bags and little wrapped items she carried made the idea impossible. The six blocks would feel more like sixty.

Alyssa straightened when she saw a yellow cab round the corner. She stepped forward and tried to free one arm to signal it. When the driver maneuvered toward the curb, relief coursed through her. Just as she reached for the door handle, a Tom Cruise look-alike in a dark gray tailored suit stepped in front of her. He opened the door and held it for a young blonde who could easily pass for a magazine model.

Recognizing the girl as the latest bride-to-be from her office, Alyssa rolled her eyes and sighed. The pretty girls always get the guys—and the cabs. So what if the girl was also in a jam. The young woman and her fiancé might be late for dinner reservations, but Alyssa had an armful of packages—thanks to the two who had just stolen her ride. The cab pulled away from the curb and the rear wheels sent a spray of water in her direction.

Her favorite cream slacks now sporting a dirty rainwater splatter, Alyssa headed for the corner to catch the city bus. It arrived just as she reached the stop. Balancing her bags on one arm, she managed to withdraw enough loose change from the purse dangling on her arm for the fare, then turned to find a seat. Sandwiched between a woman in a black business suit and stiletto heels with a cell phone pressed to her ear and a fifty-something gentleman with a rounded middle and gray-speckled hair, Alyssa couldn’t wait to get home.

If you don’t do something besides work and stay at home, you’ll never meet Mr. Right. Live a little, Alyssa!

The admonishment from her best friend floated through her mind as she surveyed the

other riders. From the shabbily-dressed, college-age crowd to the handful of silver-haired men headed for retirement, there wasn't a prospect in the bunch—unless she counted the Don Juan type with the slicked back hair and gold-capped smile who eyed her from across the aisle. At only twenty-nine, she wasn't *that* desperate yet.

Well, Lord, I would live a little. But on my salary, this is about as social as it gets.

Thankfully, the ride to the train station wasn't long, and Alyssa stepped off the bus. Grateful to be under shelter, she smiled and thanked the man who held the door for her and headed inside to catch her train.

Forty minutes later, she walked through the door to her comfortable two-bedroom apartment. She deposited her armload onto the maple dining room table her grandmother had given her and breathed a sigh of relief. Alyssa flipped through the stack of mail. Nothing but bills and advertisements. She sighed. The usual. Suddenly, a bold word on the front of one envelope caught her attention.

WINNER!

Alyssa stared at the return address. Oh, no! How in the world had this happened? She'd entered the magazine contest on a dare. And now, she'd won? She'd never won anything before in her life. Was this God's answer to her current solitary life, or was He pulling her leg? Alyssa smiled. It had to be a God-thing.

But why this? And why Mackinac Island of all places?

Curious, Alyssa slit the envelope and pulled out the full-color, tri-fold brochure along with a letter. She kicked off her pumps, padded over to her favorite burgundy recliner, and extended the footrest. The one lone accent piece in her otherwise neutral décor. Settled into the cozy comfort of the soft velour, Alyssa scanned the enticing images and well-written descriptions. Just the way the mind of her youth remembered it. As if nothing had changed in all these years. The image of a lighthouse and a few seagulls reminded her of her father and the walks they used to take along the beach. Speculating on the types of people who had walked the beach leaving prints behind had been a favorite pastime for both of them.

Every written description in the brochure promised an unforgettable time. And each picture included a happy couple enjoying the boating activities, horseback riding, rafting, and tennis, not to mention the horse-drawn carriage rides and scrumptious dinner selections. She'd done it all at one point many years ago. Advertising the island as a romantic getaway made sense. But it didn't make her current status any easier to swallow.

Couples, couples, couples! Didn't singles go anywhere anymore? Just once she'd like to see a vacation spot showing someone having a grand old time alone. But as she unfolded the brochure, each new page revealed another toothy twosome, caught up in euphoric delight. And she was a "onesome"—an unsmiling "onesome" at that. Blotting out the images of the couples, she focused on the swimming, boating, and nature walks—things she loved to do and hadn't done since she was a kid. And she hadn't taken her vacation yet this year. Why not throw out the romance and do a getaway for one?

But just the thought of going alone dampened her excitement. She'd played the odd-woman-out too many times. Not her idea of fun. She stared at the word *two* in the letter as if it were a death sentence. *Two*. Then, a flash of enlightenment tugged at the corners of her mouth. Not a couple. Just *two*.

Alyssa snapped the recliner into its upright position and reached for the phone on the end table next to the chair. After dialing, she waited for her best friend to pick up. One . . . two . . .

Alyssa straightened as the third ring stopped midway through and planted her feet on the carpeted floor. “Libby, you’ll never guess what’s happened.”

“What?” Libby’s excitement transcended the distance between them.

“Remember the contest the girls dared me to enter in the latest *Bride* magazine?” Alyssa twirled the phone cord around her fingers and leaned back. “The one promising a chance to win an all-expense paid trip for two and touted it as a ‘honeymoon in heaven’?”

“How could I forget? You almost wouldn’t complete the thing,” Libby complained. “And I had to dare you to mail it.” Her friend’s breath hitched. “Wait, don’t tell me.”

“Yep. I have the notification right here in my hand.” Alyssa held the phone away to avoid being deafened by Libby’s shriek. “There’s only one snag,” she said when it was safe. Tucking a strand of her cinnamon-colored hair behind her ear, she pivoted and propped her feet on the edge of the end table. “The getaway is for two.”

“Now you listen to me, Alyssa Denham . . .” Libby predictably launched into attack mode. “This is *not* a problem. We’ll figure something out. I mean, you are always looking for some excuse to get out of changing your dull routine. If you can find any reason whatsoever *not* to do something, you will use it. This is just the kind of thing—”

“I want you to come with me,” Alyssa interrupted, grinning.

“—you do all the time. And frankly, I’m . . .” Silence filled the line, followed by an incredulous, “What?”

Alyssa smiled. “I said I’m going, and I want you to go with me.”

“Alright. Who are you? And what have you done with my best friend? Alyssa would not agree to do something like this so easily.”

Alyssa laughed. “It’s me, Libby.”

“Well, you sure don’t sound like the Alyssa I know and love. She would die before she’d make up her mind this quickly. I mean, this is the girl who waited a year before getting her hair cut in the latest style. She got her ears pierced ten years after all her friends did. And she waits until styles go out of season before she decides she likes them enough to buy them. So this can’t be Alyssa.”

Alyssa crossed her ankles and picked imaginary lint off her cable-knit sweater. “Well, God and I had a little chat about my life on the bus ride home. And when I walked in the door, this letter was waiting. Seemed like a quick answer to me, so I decided to go.” Glancing back at the brochure on her lap, Alyssa sighed. “Just maybe, that friend you know is changing. Maybe she’s looking for a little excitement in her life.”

“Wow. I always said it would take an act of God to get you to break out of the rut you call a life, but who knew He’d take me seriously.”

Alyssa shook her head. Leave it to Libby to be sarcastic. They’d been best friends for almost twenty years. Libby’s rather boisterous style and brand of wit is what attracted Alyssa. Inwardly, she hoped some of it would rub off on her.

“Come on, Libby. Cut me some slack here. You’re the one who’s always telling me to live a little. So are you in or out? Answer quickly before I have time to talk myself out of it.”

“In,” Libby exclaimed. “Just bear with me. I’m still in shock.” She paused and took a breath. “And it’s free? No catches, no time-share spiels to listen to?”

Alyssa picked up the letter of confirmation, reading it again, barely believing it herself. “It says so right here. And I have the letter to prove it.” She reclined the chair back and stared at the stucco finish on the ceiling, the white speckled design resembling the intricate patterns on the

sand-washed rocks she had on the shelf in her bathroom. Another reminder of the life she'd lived as a child.

"You seriously want me to come along?"

"Well, who else would I take? I don't exactly have a long line of suitors waiting at my door."

Libby's grin came through the phone line. "No, I mean wouldn't you want to take this trip alone? You never know. Mr. Right could be waiting for you. Speaking of which, where is this place?"

"Mackinac Island in Lake Huron." Alyssa examined the brochure again. "There's even something here about it being named 'Turtle Island' by the local Chippewa Indians who discovered it."

"Turtle Island?" Incredulity laced Libby's words.

Alyssa shrugged. "Hey, I don't write the descriptions." She read further. "Anyway, the brochure says it's a great getaway with lots to do and the perfect place for some excitement." Raising one eyebrow, she pursed her lips. "Somehow, I think the 'excitement' they promise has more to do with their billing this island as a romantic getaway than the kind of adventure you and I could have."

"Do tell."

"There's boating, horseback riding, cycling, parasailing—"

"Parasailing?" Libby latched onto the word. "I can see it now. A skimpy little number with a drop-dead gorgeous instructor standing behind me as I fumble with the sail and play the dimwitted damsel who can't tell which end is up."

Alyssa laughed and shook her head. Her friend's flare for the extreme is what made their friendship work. "And what if the instructor's a woman?"

"Then I'll give her to you while I scout out the Baywatch guy."

"Gee, thanks. Some friend you are."

"You know you love me."

"Only the Lord knows why." But Alyssa did know.

Life was an adventure to Libby, and she wanted her best friend to take part in it. Libby usually managed to pull her from her staid and simple existence to create memories far exceeding her wildest imagination.

"So other than the obvious, tell me a little more about this place."

A big ball of fur jumped up into Alyssa's lap. She waited for Kalani to find a comfortable position, then stroked the dark gray Persian's ears, earning a rumbling purr in response. "The brochure says the main hotel was built around the turn of the century, and they don't allow cars on the island."

"No cars? How do you get around?"

"Bicycles, horse-drawn carriages, and your own two legs."

"Sounds like your kind of place. No modern conveniences." Sarcasm dripped from Libby's words. "Wonder if they have indoor plumbing."

Alyssa planted her fist on one hip, startling Kalani. "I appreciate my modernized lifestyle, thank you very much." She gently coaxed the cat to relax. "But, I admit, a part of me would like to get a feel for a bygone era."

"Looks like you'll get your chance." Libby made a sound like snapping her fingers.

"Hey, wait a second. Doesn't your grandmother live on the island? And isn't it the same island

where you used to spend all your summers as a kid?"

"I was wondering if you'd actually remember."

"As if I could forget. It was all you used to talk about when we first met. I always wished I could go with you just once."

"Well, it looks like you'll get your wish," Alyssa replied, throwing her friend's words back at her.

"Guess so." She paused. "It's been a while for you, hasn't it?" came the soft words.

Libby knew all about what had happened—all except for the real reason Alyssa hadn't returned.

Though her friend couldn't see her, Alyssa nodded. "Nearly fifteen years." Even now, moisture gathered in her eyes. She blinked several times and looked toward the ceiling. No. She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't. She couldn't. It would spoil the elation she should be feeling.

"It's been a long time."

"Yes." Alyssa snatched a tissue from the box next to her and held it to the corners of her eyes. "In some ways, it feels like yesterday. In others, like forever."

"Well, experiences and memories don't just go away. You and your dad had a lot of fun there for many years."

Alyssa sniffed. "And then Dad got sick, and well, somehow the joys of going didn't hold as much enticement anymore."

"Because your mom never cared much for the island. Though I'm not sure why."

"Like you, she preferred the more modern conveniences and easy access to an abundance of stores, outlets, and entertainment options." Alyssa shrugged. "The island just didn't suit her as well as it did Dad and me."

"Probably the lack of cars," Libby intoned. "Still, I think it's been far too long for you, and it's high time you returned. Guess God had the same idea."

Obviously He did. "Well, we've talked about taking a vacation together. And you said you had two weeks coming to you. I can take off as well. It's the perfect opportunity."

"When are we supposed to fly off to our land of adventure?"

Alyssa reached for the letter and scanned the page. "Umm, July seventh." She kicked her feet against the table and swung the chair around, squinting to see the calendar on the wall behind her desk in the corner. "It's a Monday."

Libby rustled some paper. "It gives us a little more than two months to plan. We can have an amazing two weeks, stop in and visit your grandmother, and get into all sorts of trouble. I can't believe this is happening."

"Me, either." Alyssa was almost tempted to pinch herself. She'd wanted a change for a while. This was just the opportunity to help her make it. And it followed all those weddings she'd been invited to attend. After being present to witness three more women she knew being joined in eternal wedded bliss, she'd need a vacation. Winning this trip sealed the deal. "We'll have a blast, whether Prince Charming is there or not."

"You're on, girlfriend," Libby chimed in, obviously infected by Alyssa's enthusiasm. "Mackinac Island, here we come!"

Well, almost. Alyssa had another phone call to make.

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"Oh, Alyssa dear, are you really coming back to our island?"

"Yes, Grandma, I am."

“Praise be to Jesus. My little girl is coming home.” Her snuffle was like a knife in Alyssa’s gut. “Oh, how I have prayed and prayed for this day to come. I’d almost given up hoping you’d ever return, dear.”

“I know, Grandma, and I’m sorry.” She shouldn’t have stayed away so long. But the days had become weeks, and the weeks had become months, and the months had become years, and before she knew it, fifteen years had passed. “I should have made more of an effort to come see you. What with school, and my summer jobs, and planning for college, then a career, it’s hard to imagine it’s been as long as it has.”

“Child, there is no need to apologize, though I certainly do forgive you. Your mama needed you after my Richard passed away. It isn’t easy losing your soul mate, the love of your life.”

Grandma knew it all too well, even if Alyssa could only imagine. First, Grandpa, and then five years later, Dad. And Alyssa had stopped her annual visits, only keeping in touch through cards or the occasional phone call.

“No.” Alyssa sighed. “But it wasn’t fair to you to be left all alone up there. I mean it wasn’t just us. You lost Dad, too.”

“Oh, child, I’m never alone on this little island. You should know that. I’ve lived here all my life and made a lot of friends over the years.” The faint sound of *Wheel of Fortune* came through the phone. One of Grandma’s favorite TV programs. Hers, too. “Then, there are all the tourists. Some of them provide a great deal of entertainment for me, and I only have to watch or listen to them for ten minutes or so. Now, you stop the line of thought leading you down a path of guilt right this instant, young lady.”

Alyssa could almost see Grandma wagging a finger in her direction. She straightened, as if Grandma could see her and would tell her to stop slouching in the next breath. “Yes, ma’am,” she replied.

“I am doing just fine, I assure you, my dear.” Her voice held all the conviction needed to make Alyssa believe it. “But to tell you the truth, your call and announcement couldn’t have come at a better time.”

“Oh?” Just how orchestrated *was* this trip? “What’s happening?”

“Tell me again, how long is this little vacation going to be?”

“Two weeks,” Alyssa replied. “Why?”

“And dear Libby is going to be joining you?”

“Yes.” She sighed. “Grandma, what’s all this about?”

“I have a little project for you while you’re here.”

“A project?” It sounded ominous. Even though Grandma couldn’t see her, she narrowed her eyes and scrunched up her brows. “What kind of project?”

“Oh, just a little something to keep you busy in the midst of all the parasailing, horseback riding, and boating I know you just *love* to do.”

Yeah, right. Alyssa loved all of the adrenaline-inducing activity most of the tourists sought out as much as she loved the thought of going to three weddings as a solo act. Libby might live for it, but not her. Not in this lifetime. “Now, Grandma, you know me better than that.”

“Yes, child, I do. And it’s why I know you’ll be excited to learn of a little something I’ve been meaning to do for over a year now, but I simply haven’t had the opportunity, or the ability.”

Why was Grandma being so mysterious? Why not just come right out and say what she

wanted Alyssa to do? It's not like she'd have any say in the matter, not where Grandma was concerned. As sweet as she was, Grandma usually managed to persuade everyone to do her bidding and make them think it was their idea in the first place.

"And I suppose Libby and I coming will now give you the opportunity?"

"Yes, dear, it will. You see, I've started a special quilt. One to unite the decades and bring together many different families. But I can't do it alone. It's going to take you and Libby helping me to make it work."

A quilt? Alyssa swallowed. As in pieces of fabric sewn together in some semblance of a pattern? Her throat constricted. She didn't know anything about quilting. She could barely sew on a button, much less attempt to make something as big as a quilt actually look good.

"Um, Grandma?" She swallowed again. "Are you certain you want me helping with this? I mean, are you sure I won't ruin whatever work you've already begun?"

"Oh, pish-posh, Alyssa dear." She could just see Grandma's hand waving off her concerns. "I know your skill set doesn't exactly involve the fine art of sewing. You leave that part to me." A chuckle. "Though I can't promise I won't attempt to teach you a little while you're here." The background sounds of the TV muted. "No, what I have in mind for you and Libby is to help me collect the various blocks to make up the larger quilt. My old body doesn't get around as easy as it once did, and your strong legs will take you all around the island."

"So, we're going to be collecting quilt blocks from other people?"

"Yes. From each lady who was once part of my quilting circle. I've lost touch with two or three of them, so reaching them might not be so easy. And two have since passed on, but their daughters or sons still live here on the island."

Oh, Libby was going to love this. It had adventure and challenge written all over it. Just the sort of thing to make Libby's day.

"You met most of them when you were a girl," Grandma continued. "So, I'm sure it won't take up much of your time. But it will mean a great deal to me to have your help."

"Of course, Grandma. You can count on Libby and me. We'd be glad to help you."

What sounded like a hand slapping a table came through the phone. "Splendid! I shall begin preparing the list of ladies' names and addresses to the best of my knowledge, and it will be ready when you arrive." She paused. "And Alyssa, dear?"

"Yes, Grandma?"

"I'm pleased to know you're coming for a visit, more so than seeing this project finished. You know I do, don't you, dear?"

"Of course, Grandma." How could she doubt her?

"Very good. We shall be seeing each other soon. Between now and then, you make sure you pack your prettiest clothes and get a fresh haircut. There are quite a few handsome gentlemen on this island, and you never know who you might meet."

Alyssa rolled her eyes. First Libby, and now her grandmother. Was everyone going to try to pair her up? Libby and Grandma were both single, too. Besides, she wasn't taking this vacation to meet men. Not even to meet one man. Now, she just had to convince everyone else of it.