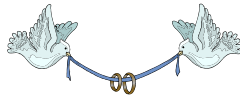


# Chapter One



“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Nathan Rudolph raised an eyebrow in Tyler Jackson’s direction. “You know me better than to ask that question. We’ve been friends for two decades.”

Tyler shook his head. “Yes but you’ve never done anything this stupid.”

Nathan ignored the younger man’s exasperation. Instead, his piercing blue eyes swept across his spacious office with windows stretching from the floor to the ceiling, giving him an ample view of downtown Omaha. Nathan, the owner and president of Rudolph Vacation Enterprises, was proud of his accomplishments. But for all the fame and fortune he obtained over his forty years on Earth, one thing was missing: an heir, someone he could leave his company to when he died.

The telephone on his large mahogany desk buzzed. Swiveling in his leather chair, he lifted the receiver. “Yes, Carmen?”

“Miss Debra Raymond is here to see you,” his secretary said.

Ruth Ann Nordin

“Good. Tyler will bring her in when we’re ready.” He set the phone down and shut his laptop. Standing up, he told Tyler, “Give me a quick glimpse of Miss Raymond.”

Tyler loudly sighed, shifting uncomfortably on the soft black carpet before reading the list on his clipboard. “Debra Raymond is twenty-nine. She’s been in advertising for eight years and has an impressive sales’ record-”

Nathan held up his hand to stop him. “I don’t care about her employment history. I want to know what she’s like, what her interests are, has she been married, does she have kids. Stuff like that.”

Groaning, Tyler went down the list. “She’s single. No kids. She likes biking, canoeing, and mountain climbing.”

He momentarily grimaced. His strength came from his mind, and he had no desire to explore the outdoors. His idea of roughing it was to fly coach.

“She occasionally reads fiction but prefers to live life rather than read about it,” Tyler continued. “Her parents are both alive and live in San Antonio. She has two brothers and a sister. She has a couple of ex-boyfriends but none were serious. Her longest relationship lasted for five months.”

“What caused the break ups?”

“All she would tell me is that they weren’t compatible.”

“Not compatible? What does that mean? Were her boyfriends not into camping?”

“I don’t know, Nate. I couldn’t get any more from her than that.” Tyler shot him a frustrated look. “It wasn’t easy to interview all these women without arousing their suspicions. They believe you are considering a promotion for one of them.”

He shrugged. “You’re the vice president. Sometimes you have to do the not-so-fun part of the job.”

“If that’s what you can call this rounding up of single women in your company,” he sourly replied. “Do you want me to continue?” He motioned to the clipboard.

## What Nathan Wants

“That’s enough. I get the picture. Bring her in. Oh,” he began before the blond could leave the office, “may I remind you that even though you are a friend, you are my employee. I’d prefer it if you didn’t show your disgruntled attitude out there. I like to keep the atmosphere pleasant.” Though his words were firm, they were also kind.

“Yes, boss.” Tyler gave a mock salute, his smile betraying him.

Nathan chuckled. He liked the fact that Tyler wasn’t afraid to voice his opinion. In a world where people kissed up to him to get something, Tyler’s honesty was refreshing, which was why he hired him. After Veronica Lyon, he learned the value of honesty. He shook his head. His ex-wife was safely in the past.

When Debra came into the room, Nathan stood up. “Miss Raymond, will you have a seat?”

The perky thin blond nodded and quickly complied. She was surprisingly stunning. Apparently, she knew it too, for when she crossed her legs, she wiggled so that her skirt was forced halfway up her thighs.

Pretending not to notice, Nathan returned to his seat. “I have a few questions to ask you.” He picked up the piece of paper in front of him and read the questions he had written out ahead of time. “What was your childhood like?”

“Great.”

“Did anything happen that might have scarred you for life?”

She giggled. “No. Not unless you count that time I wrestled a rattler to the ground.”

“You did what?” He didn’t mean to let his shock show, but it was unfathomable that anyone, let alone a female, would dare do such a thing.

“It was nothing. Right before college, I traveled through the Amazon with my father. There were more adventures there.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

He held the piece of paper in front of him and imagined what his life would be like with her. Confronting wild animals, risking his life along the way, and dying of anxiety...if one of those animals didn't get him first. No, he decided. He was much better off living a nice, comfortable life safe at home where his biggest danger was his wife trying to talk him into changing a dirty diaper.

Standing up, he said, "Well, it sounds like you have a lot of excitement to look forward to."

She jumped up and clapped her hands. "Really? Wow! I mean, I didn't think it would be that easy."

He blinked and stiffened. Did he miss something?

She leaned forward and winked. "I promise I won't tell anyone else I got the promotion."

As she giggled again and practically did a marathon run out of the room, he groaned. Right. She had no idea what he was really doing.

Tyler entered the office and shut the door. "She was unusually happy. Is she the one?"

Nathan cringed. "Hardly." He sat back down and rubbed his eyes. Why did this have to be so hard? "Do we have a connection with a company that gives tours in an exotic location, like a volcano or something?"

"A volcano?"

He rolled his eyes. "You know what I mean. Somewhere dangerous."

"Well, there is that African Safari package."

"Perfect." With a nod, he quickly grabbed a piece of blank paper and wrote on it. "She's just been promoted."

As he handed the paper to Tyler, his friend raised an eyebrow. "You're not really promoting anyone, remember?"

"Who owns this place?"

"Fine. You win."

"Great. Who's next?"

## What Nathan Wants

Looking at his clipboard, he said, “Amy Watson. She’s a thirty-four-old widow--”

“A widow?” Nathan asked. This day in age, he expected either single or divorced for a woman in her thirties.

“Her husband was deployed over to the Middle East and didn’t make it back.”

“Oh. That’s sad. How long ago did it happen?”

“Three years ago. That’s when she started working here.”

“Any kids?”

“Nope.”

“What else do you have on her?” So far, she sounded good, but he’d found that there was usually a catch. “Is she living with someone or does she go clubbing?”

He caught a glint of amusement in Tyler’s eyes. “No. She’s utterly and completely boring. She grew up in the panhandle in Florida, got a bachelor’s degree in history, and met and married her husband who was stationed at Eglin Air Force Base. They were married for five years before they ended up here at Offutt Air Force Base. He got sent overseas and you know the rest. Her parents still live in Fort Walton Beach.”

Nathan’s eyebrows furrowed. “So what’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing as far as I can tell. She’s a travel agent, has a stellar rapport with customers, and gets along with her co-workers.”

“There has to be something wrong with her.”

“If there is, you’ll have to figure that out for yourself. Are you ready to see her?”

Nathan snapped his fingers. “That’s it, isn’t it? She’s ugly.”

“She’s average. There’s nothing astounding or outwardly repulsive about her. She’s just average. Average personality, average background, average looks.”

Ruth Ann Nordin

Average didn't sound so bad. Not after everything he'd been through. "Bring her in."

"After this one, I'm going to lunch."

"Fine. We can always sort through the next batch this afternoon."

Though he groaned, he nodded and opened the office door to tell Amy to enter.

Nathan stood and was pleasantly surprised by just how 'average' Ms. Watson was. She gave Tyler a nervous smile and entered the room. Her shoulder-length light brown hair was tucked behind her ears. She had a nice figure. It wouldn't be difficult to slip into bed with her to have that child he wanted. She wore a pink long sleeve shirt and black slacks. The clothes didn't cling to her, but they did accentuate her curves. Yes, he thought she would do just fine...as long as the interview played out as well as everything up to this point had.

"Please have a seat," he said. He waited for her to sit before he sat down and picked up his paper. "Ms. Watson, I see that you grew up in Florida. What was it like when you were growing up?"

She frowned and shifted in her chair. "May I ask what this has to do with the promotion?"

"Well, since this is a travel agency, I thought that your background might make you better acquainted with travel."

It was a lie, but it was one that she seemed to buy, for she relaxed. "Is the position in relation to Florida?"

"Something like that." Another lie.

"In that case, I'll be happy to answer the question."

He hid his grin. He liked that she didn't jump in and answer his question without making it relevant to what the "job" would entail. She wasn't one to back down, which meant she'd be a challenge, and if there was something he couldn't resist, it was a challenge.

## What Nathan Wants

“Florida is a beautiful place,” Amy began, using a smile that he guessed she gave all of her customers. “The beaches can be as bright as snow at times, so I often recommend people take sunglasses along. The water is a clear blue with elements of green in it. That’s why the Fort Walton Beach area is also called the Emerald Coast. Of course, the summers can be humid--”

He cleared his throat, intentionally interrupting her. “Thank you. It sounds like a wonderful place to visit. Did you go to the beach often?”

“Sure. There are restaurants and gift shops along the beaches, and for a small fee, you can rent a chair and umbrella. People can do lots of fun things there. They can build sandcastles, play in the water, or walk along the beach. There’s nothing quite like a romantic moonlit stroll. It’s really the kind of thing that would fit a getaway for couples.”

He noted the nostalgic look in her eyes and the wistful tone in her statement. Perhaps that was one of the things she had done with her husband. Well, he didn’t need to let her linger down memory road. He picked up the paper and moved onto the next question. “What are your friends like? Do they know people who might like to travel?” He threw that last one in since she caught him earlier trying to sneak in a question that wasn’t relevant to her job.

She blinked, as if surprised by the change in topic. “To be honest, I don’t believe in asking my friends to send business my way.”

“Really? Why not?”

“Because I think it’s wrong to use people. If my friends want to refer someone my way, then that is fine, but I never ask them to do that. Don’t you have an advertising department to attract customers?”

Her answer impressed him. He hadn’t figured that his question could be interpreted the way she did, but it told him more about her than he hoped to glean. And that information

Ruth Ann Nordin

was all he needed to conclude that she would make an ideal wife. But turning his attention to her question, he decided to answer it. “Of course, I have an advertising department, but word of mouth is more effective. Friends happen to have a tremendous influence on where their other friends go for business.”

“My friends and I don’t use each other for a sales pitch. I have one friend who sells cosmetics, but I don’t like to wear makeup. She doesn’t try to convince me to buy her product, and when she went to a competing travel agency last year for her cruise, I didn’t stop her.”

He straightened in his chair. “She didn’t go through us?”

“Why should she? The other place offered a 20% discount.”

He laughed. “It’s too bad you don’t work for that company.”

“Well, you offer more pay and more vacation time.”

That made him laugh even harder. “It’s good to know I have one redeeming quality.”

She chuckled. “It’s not like I tell my friends not to do some travel through this company. Most of them do buy tickets here. But I don’t tell them to do it. They choose it.”

“Because of your charming personality?” He sorted through his stack and pulled out her statistics. He glanced at her record as an employee. “You have a better customer service reputation compared to the other employees on your level. Are you aware of that?”

“No.”

He looked back at the facts and figures written out on the paper that he had Tyler make up for him on all the single women in the company. In some ways, it would be a shame to lose her as an employee. If this was a business decision, she would get promoted. But this wasn’t a business decision. It was a personal one. He needed a wife who would give him a child, and that was

## What Nathan Wants

much more important than moving a hard working employee through the company ranks.

He stood up. "Thank you for your time, Ms. Watson."

She frowned as she eased out of her seat. "Is that it?"

"Yes. I only need a few minutes to make a decision."

Now that he knew what to look for. And thanks to his ex-wife, that was easy enough. He just needed someone who was the complete opposite of her, and Amy was a startling contrast to Victoria. Just their names alone signified how the great the gulf was between them. While Victoria was all things fancy and superficial, Amy struck him as simple and honest. And simple and honest suit him perfectly.

"Oh. Well, thank you."

He wondered if she'd be thanking him when she realized exactly what her new role would be, but then he decided he'd find out soon enough. There was no sense in making the announcement until he had time to select her ring. Instead, he led her out his office door. "Have a good day, Ms. Watson."

Tyler's eyebrow rose but he waited until she made it to the elevator before turning to him. "You saw her out?"

"Yes." He glanced at his secretary. "Cancel the other appointments."

Tyler followed him as he went back to his desk. "So that's the one you want?"

"Yes. She's cute, don't you think?"

"Did you tell her what her promotion really is?"

He shrugged. "She'll find out soon enough." He retrieved his jacket and slipped it on. "May is a good month for a wedding."

Tyler sighed. "I'll get ready for lunch."

As he departed, Nathan quickly dug out his appointment book and sorted through it. A week ought to be enough time for Ms. Watson to get her things in order so she could marry him. He penciled in the 23<sup>rd</sup>. There. It was Memorial Day weekend.

Ruth Ann Nordin

Three days before he had to get back to work to meet with Jack Bently. Three days was plenty of time for him and Ms. Watson to enjoy a mini-honeymoon.

He exited his office and told his secretary to call a wedding receptionist, a florist, and to book the trip to Destin, Florida. He figured that his new wife might like to introduce him to her parents.

As he finished concluding the 'to do' list to the overwhelmed older woman, Tyler came up to him and shook his head and told her, "While you're at it, why don't you get him a clue."

"What woman wouldn't be happy marrying into money?" Nathan asked.

"One who didn't ask for it," the secretary stated, peering up at him over her bifocals.

"She'll be fine. What I'll offer her is better than a job."

"That depends on who you ask."

"Right," Tyler added. "You can be a real ogre at times."

The woman chuckled.

"Ha ha," Nathan said, hiding his amusement. "Come on. I'm famished. Interviewing for a wife is hard work." He pressed the elevator button and turned to Carmen. "Oh, I need you to also order a dozen roses and a wedding ring."

She gave him an exasperated look.

"You have until five," he replied. That should be plenty of time to make those phone calls.

Once he and Tyler stepped into the elevator, she called out, "You're right. I'll just wait for tomorrow to call your doctor about that fungus."

He gasped.

Tyler burst into a round of laughter.

"It's athlete's foot," Nathan clarified. "And I just need some cream to clear it up."

## What Nathan Wants

“That’ll teach you to mess with her,” Tyler replied, still amused.

“Well, I guess she deserves one slip of the tongue. But she better not make it a habit,” he yelled so that she could hear him.

While the doors closed, she pretended to yawn.

Nathan sighed. Considering how well she did her job, he figured he’d let her off the hook—just this one time. Besides, he had his future to think about, and he couldn’t wait until May 23<sup>rd</sup>.