

Chapter

1



As the cloud of gray mist enveloped the valley, the air inside the crowded Eastern Washington airport was heavy, dense and frenetic, reflecting the suffocating atmosphere outside.

Travelers bumped and scurried and yelled and demanded. Some were frantically punching their cell phones, others yelled above crying babies, all trying to remedy a very bad situation. Every flight was canceled, indefinitely, for the weather service had issued a dire forecast. Every hotel, booked.

Erika Crawford, young textile executive, who had left an 80 degree, sunny day in her Southern California home, wondered how life could possibly get worse. Even she, a perpetual optimist, began to wonder if this entire mad idea of hers could possibly be the biggest mistake of her life.

Carefully maneuvering herself between the cranky and harassed fellow travelers, Erika finally found the ticket desk where private flights into Priest Lake, Idaho, a picturesque lake on the Canadian border, were handled. The attendant was harassed and Erika knew from a lifetime of travel, she wasn't likely to get a lot of help. One glance outside where runway lights eerily highlighted the soup-like fog smothering the Northwest town, she plastered a smile on her face and hoped for the best.

"Excuse me, but I need some information. I had scheduled a private flight to Priest Lake this evening..."

"Miss, all flights have been canceled until tomorrow."

"Well, I know that but what I'm asking is ..."

"That's all the information I can give you. Do you have a hotel room booked for the night?"

"No, I..."

"Then you'll just have to make do with one of the benches. There is a big convention in town and the rooms have been booked for ages. Not a hotel room in town. Next!"

"Wait," she replied more forcefully.

"Sorry lady, you're stuck with the benches. We can't even fly into the lake at night ... you're out of luck! Now, move aside so the others can get through," she barked.

"Can you at least tell me how far Priest Lake is from here? Do you have a map I could purchase?"

Growing angry over the pandemonium reigning at the airport and at Erika's persistent questions, the clerk became belligerent. "I said I can't help you! Just come back in the morning! Next!"

Tired and disillusioned, Erika carefully made her way to the least crowded corner of the terminal. Never one to give up, it went against her nature to relinquish the idea of getting out of here, of *not* spending the night in the dirty airport. But practical as she was, knew her options were few.

Slowly, Erika sank onto a nearby chair. She felt weary and dispirited ... and her head was beginning to throb, making it difficult to plan an exit strategy. Was it only this morning that she had confronted the mess she had made of her life? Was it only this morning she had broken the news to the CEO of her company, who also happened to be her devoted uncle?

As she closed her eyes, the image of the tabloid newspaper, now branded into her memory, surfaced. At first, with crystal clarity Erika saw the image of herself ... then with a sadistic twist brought on

from exhaustion, the image spiraled and blurred beyond recognition. Squeezing her eyes shut, Erika inhaled a deep, sultry breath, willing the past to the far reaches of her memory. Bracing herself for the challenge ahead, she called on her iron will to manage this chaos.

Erika walked determinedly toward the baggage acceptance carousel, just down the terminal from Private Flights. Focus, she told herself ... over and over again. First luggage, then place to stay, don't think ... don't think ... don't even think about this morning. The luggage carousel slowly circulated very few pieces of luggage.

Gazing at the few beleaguered pieces of luggage bumping along the carousel, Erika bit the inside of her cheek until she could almost taste blood. It really couldn't be happening, she promised herself. And then a giggle, that could almost be described as sad, bubbled to the surface, effectively freeing her mind of the previous mantra ... don't think. Her luggage simply could *not* be lost. Not on top of everything else! It would be too predictable ... and recently, her life was anything but predictable. The week had been excruciating, culminating in changes that would not only affect her own personal life, but that of her family, and thousands of employees. Really ... it was almost more than she could take.

Waiting ... waiting. With the hum of the baggage carousel drumming a weird rhythm in her head, Erika started talking to herself ... not even caring if anyone else heard.

With a deep sigh, she realized her dream getaway ... her escape from the mad world she'd created, wasn't adding up to the paradise she'd hoped. In fact, it wasn't adding up to anything at the moment.

Squeezing her forehead with slender fingers, Erika tried unsuccessfully to ease the tension. Glancing around the dirty airport, she steadfastly determined she wouldn't spend the night here ... and she absolutely *wouldn't* catch the next flight home and admit defeat!

Finally, like a bright ray of sunshine cutting through the dismal fog, her luggage popped up from the conveyor belt below the carousel and came, wobbling and a little worse for wear, toward her. Feeling a giddy delight, Erika quickly grabbed the pieces ... too many she was sure, and proceeded carelessly toward the center of the northwest airline terminal, congratulating herself on her good fortune. And then she did what came naturally ... she followed the crowd. No idea where. But at least ... she was moving toward ... something.

Before she knew what was happening, she felt intense pain. She couldn't breathe as she felt everything grow black. Seconds later she felt herself hurled through the air, landing firmly if not painfully on her feet, and the pressure of a huge pair of hands squeezing her elbows like a vise. Furiously blinking her eyes, she saw mildly curious faces glance her way. Then strangely, before even noticing the large breadth of chest looming near her face, Erika's eyes stared at her baggage, which had been knocked clear across the aisle, tripping a child whose mother sent a chilly look Erika's way.

Struggling to reorient herself from the impact, and subconsciously not wanting to face the person now shaking her none too gently, Erika again closed her eyes, successfully dismissing her assailant.

"Excuse me, I didn't see you, Miss," the man said, roughly squeezing her arms one more time. "You need to watch where you are going instead of daydreaming in this kind of crowd. Are you all right?" he asked, brushing the sleeves of his jacket with seeming unconcern.

"My luggage," she whispered.

"Oh, right." In seconds, he had accumulated her luggage and stacked them neatly beside her.

"You're okay," he said again, obviously in a hurry to resume his journey.

"Oh, um, no ... I mean, yes ... Actually, sir," Erika felt herself answering sharply while a sweeping anger finally cleared her foggy brain, successfully rescuing her earlier resolve. "I wasn't daydreaming. You were the one who wasn't looking where he was going. And, by the way, Mister, I know how to handle myself in a crowd just fine. I could have been seriously hurt and you would have had a lawsuit to deal with," she said, juvenily poking her finger at the expansive chest. "I guess you're lucky this time. I'm **not** hurt," she said brushing off the seat of her pants.

The retort drained some of her anger. Erika's cheeks then grew flushed and pink as the man silently scowled at her. She hadn't yet made eye contact with him and at this point, she didn't intend to. Her overreaction was plain ... but she wouldn't let him know it. Her plans had gone completely awry and her behind hurt something awful. And this ... man ... had gotten in her way.

After the incident, the crowd seemed to thicken around her again, stifling the very air she was breathing. She couldn't see her assailant, which was just fine with her. People crowded between them, looking for breaks in the crowd. Suddenly a path was cleared. His subliminal control irritated her all the more.

"Your suitcases Miss," he said in a deep, husky voice.

"Thank you," Erika said jerkily. Reaching to retrieve her bags from the passenger, her fingers brushed against his, sending electric warning signals, revitalizing her tired body. Her hand recoiled from his as if burned.

Slowly, Erika raised jewel colored eyes framed by soft black lashes to the cool, icy blue eyes of the stranger.

Everything became strangely surreal as she stared at the dreamlike man looming over her. In one sweeping glance, she

noticed his massive shoulders, the arrogant, chiseled chin softened by a tiny dimple, golden skin, and a sardonic smile, which kept her temper within easy reach.

Her eyes warmed as she noticed how his wavy black hair curled peculiarly over the collar of his jacket and she couldn't help but notice his hard, muscular thighs encased in designer denim.

Erika felt the beginning of a crick in her neck as she continued her observation of the man, towering over her five and a half foot frame. Big men had never intimidated her, but she did feel herself stretching her spine as tall as she could make it. Desperate measures ... and all that, she consoled herself. No wonder crowds part for a man like him. He was built like a bear!

With gathering impatience, the man said sharply, "If you're quite through with the inspection, I will move your things to the outside aisle while you decide which direction you are heading."

Erika nodded demurely, again turning her face so he wouldn't see the pink telltale sign. It irritated her beyond belief that she had any reaction to this man, let alone the blazing heat and quickening heartbeat. No man ... ever ... had made her pulse race like that. And she lived in a city full of fabulously good looking, successful, and wealthy men. Shrugging off the peculiar feeling, she consoled herself that it was just the flight ... the week ... absolutely just a lapse in equilibrium.

An unwelcome, inner voice whispered how ridiculously false her excuses were. Steve, the bane of her existence right now, had always been known for his handsome face and physique ... yet she had never responded similarly to him.

"Are you sure you are all right? You're acting disoriented."

T.J. Morgan looked down at the petite woman standing so helplessly at his side. He looked at her face for the first time since their encounter. Normally, he was attracted to long, sun-bleached

hair and brown lanky bodies. This woman was the complete opposite. But there was something about her that strangely called up emotions in himself that he believed were long forgotten.

Her beauty was breath-taking; her presence demanded a man's attention. But that was hardly unusual for T.J. as he was around many beautiful women. In his world, they were almost a dime a dozen. There was just something ... different about her, alluring. Studying her, he couldn't shake the feeling, the uncanny feeling he had seen her somewhere before. Shrugging, he wished he could shake off her effect on him as well.

Familiarity was strong, yet he knew they had never met. Something about her attracted his attention ... it reminded him of the youthful dream that true love existed in the world.

With little warning, T.J. softened. He was in a hurry; he needed to get on the road before it became impassable. Yet, there he stood; stupidly staring at this strange woman who invoked in him unwanted feelings ... emotions that came dangerously near a heart encased in ice. Ice, he had thought, that would last a lifetime.

Her eyes reminded him of some raw sapphires he found in Africa during his wandering youth ... a time when he tried to "find himself," only to find that what he really wanted, what he was really searching for was waiting patiently at home.

Because this woman was so small, she seemed young. Although, after a careful inspection of her perfectly formed face, he knew she was older than she appeared. T.J. instantly recognized character and substance shining through her clear eyes. Character and substance weren't usually traits he attributed to many women. Well, he would do what he could for her to salve his conscience, and then make his journey northward.

"Listen, I feel bad about running you down. The least I could do is carry these to your car. Where are you parked?"

"Um, thank you for the *gracious* help," she replied sarcastically, "but really, I can manage all by myself. Just set them down here."

"Well, but you look bewildered . . ."

"I said, I was just fine," she responded sharply. "Just set them here."

"No, I insist. Did you park in the garage or is ... someone picking you up?"

Erika saw his icy blue eyes blaze a trail down her body. Her face reddened perhaps from the burning trail his searing gaze had created. She realized that her muddled and convoluted actions made her appear vulnerable and unable to take care of herself. She knew she could take care of herself, but vulnerable? That was a new feeling, she admitted.

"Well," she began slowly, willing to set her personal feelings aside to accomplish a seemingly insurmountable task ... getting to her destination. "I am on my way to Priest Lake, Idaho. I'm trying to decide whether I should rent a car or just wait until morning when hopefully this fog will clear. The problem is ... well, all the hotels in town are booked and I've never been ... that is to say I have never driven myself to the lake before. I'm not sure how far it is from here and at this hour ...," she stammered while quickly consulting her black leather watch.

Mortified, Erika realized she was rambling, making an idiot of herself. But, she was desperately trying to right a world that had suddenly been turned topsy-turvy by the light in this stranger's eye and his burning touch. Why she should even care what he thought of her was beyond comprehension.

T.J. considered her options. She could rent a car and probably make it to the lake with no problem. Yet, an uncanny fate was dealing an unexpected hand. Their destinations were the same.

Perhaps he should suggest she follow him, or better yet, he could give her a lift to the lake himself.

It was T.J.'s common practice to seize unexpected opportunities. This occasion wouldn't be an exception, he decided. Always one to follow instincts, he decided to take the matter into his own hands. That way ... he could prove to himself, once and for all, that women were all the same ... untrustworthy. Why he wanted to put himself through that torture, he couldn't say.

"You're traveling alone, I presume?"

She nodded. "Do you know the area? Could you help me with directions?" she asked with surprise. Assuming the lake was quite a distance from Spokane, the idea of driving hadn't really taken form until seconds earlier. And ... he didn't really seem like someone who would know the area. Not at all like someone who would be familiar with the sleepy mountain area of Priest Lake. He seemed ... experienced. Out of place in this farm subsidized city.

Erika was embarrassed by her uncharacteristic hesitancy. The flustered behavior was very unusual and somehow she really didn't want this man to see this unfamiliar side of herself. She was always decisive, which accounted for her unequivocal success in business.

"Look, ah, Miss," he said running a dark hand through his wavy locks, "I happen to be going there myself. I suppose I could give you a lift. My car is in the garage ..."

"Oh, no, that won't be necessary. I will just rent a car," she said, quickly making up her mind, "And actually, I'm sure they have a map. Thank you anyway," she quipped.

He really should just let her go. It would be so much easier. No strings. No curiosity. He wouldn't even give her a second thought.

"Uh, I don't think you understand. The lake is several hours north of here through some treacherous mountains passes and in weather like this ... Well, lady, I think you should take my advice and

ride with me. You would never make it on your own. And besides, renting a car can be pretty expensive if you are planning to stay for any length of time. It's not like you can just turn it in after you've arrived," he said with a chuckle, amazed that his mouth had a mind of its own.

Erika's eyes narrowed suspiciously at the last remark. He was right, the cost wouldn't be justified. She didn't plan on using a car during her month's vacation. Her eyes began searching the airport as if looking for an answer to her dilemma.

T.J. wasn't completely sure she agreed with his advice and for some reason, he was determined to drive her to the lake. Taking matters into his own hands, he grabbed her overstuffed luggage, swung his own lightweight duffel over his shoulder, and quickly walked away toward the garage where his car was parked, instinctively knowing she would follow.