

Excerpt: The Ice Hotel Wedding Test

Jess studied Derrick sideways from the deckchair on his veranda. Her boyfriend of twelve years had his eyes closed, his head tilted to the setting sun. A brush cut left dark stubble on his scalp, matching his weekend beard. As always, the weekend had ended too soon. It was almost time to head back to her Johannesburg flat. She dreaded the four hundred miles she drove every weekend to the game lodge near White River where Derrick was a ranger.

“I wish I didn’t have to go.”

He stretched. “Me, too.”

“If we were married...”

Derrick opened his eyes to look at her, a weary light in the chestnut depths. “It’s not that I don’t love you. I’m just not ready yet.”

They had been high school sweethearts, for crying out loud. “How much more time do you need?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “It’s not a button I can press on or off.”

This conversation wasn’t new. Jess knew exactly how it would play out. She was going to give him all the reasons why she wanted to settle down, and he was going to counter argue that he wasn’t quite *there* yet. Whatever *there* was supposed to mean. The truth was, she was tired of the commuting, of living apart and of hoping. Jess loved children. She was long since ready for her own. Attending her friends’ babies’ baptisms and anniversary parties left her aching for that missing part of her life.

A new rebelliousness rose inside of her. Maybe it was desperation sprouting from the ticking of her biological clock. How she hated that clichéd expression. Jess tried to bite her tongue, but it had a will of its own.

“I won’t wait forever,” she said finally.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She had sworn she’d never do this, but she had reached the end of her patience. “I’m giving you an ultimatum.”

“Whoa!” He got to his feet. “Are you telling me if I don’t marry you, you’re leaving me?”

“I’m telling you it’s time for us to be honest about what we want from life.” She took a deep breath. “I love you, Derrick. But I want a family. Do you?”

“Of course I do.” He moved to the rail, peering into the bush where a grazing giraffe raised his long neck above the thorn trees. “I just have to be sure.”

She threw her hands up. “Of what?”

“That you’ll make it out here.”

This was no new dispute either. Derrick was an adventure junkie, an outdoor explorer. She was a city girl. And he hated that about her.

“I can make it,” she said, lifting her chin. “I make it every weekend.”

“A weekend is not the same as forever. It’s as different as going someplace on holiday or relocating there.”

Jess regarded him quietly. The argument was as worn out as a hollow mattress. Enough. She had allowed him to keep her on a string for too long. Either he used that string to tie her to him, or they were going to cut it. Today.

“It seems you have a decision to make, Derrick.”

His hands clutched the wooden sleeper. “Slow down, girl.”

“That’s the problem. We’ve been slowing down for too long.”

He pursed his lips. “You’re not giving up on this, are you?”

He knew her well enough. Once her mind was made up... “Nope. I want to know before I leave tonight.”

“Alright,” he said slowly, turning to face her. “Tell you what. Let’s go to Lapland, and I’ll give you your answer.”

“Lapland?”

He smiled. “Yep. Swedish side.”

“Why?”

“My dad used to say, before you marry a girl, take her on a trip abroad, and you’ll know if you’re doing the right thing. No better compatibility test.”

Derrick was a black and white kind of guy. He never did anything on impulse, and he only believed in what he could see or what could be proved.

“But why Lapland?” she said.

“Because it’s covered in snow.”

“I didn’t know you had such a passion for snow.”

She couldn’t say the idea didn’t fascinate her. Being born and bred in Africa, the only snow she’d ever seen were the pictures her aunt had sent from Canada.

“Here’s the deal,” he said, “we backpack to the Ice Hotel in Sweden. If you make it to the end, I’ll marry you.”

She stared at him in disbelief. “You mean like making a bet?”

“More like a test.” He supported his elbows on the rail.

“If I don’t make it?”

“If you don’t make it,” he held up a finger, “or you complain *once*, or you exceed the daily travel budget, I don’t have to marry you, and we carry on as we are now.”

“And if I make it to the end without complaining or overspending?”

“Hell,” he laughed, “if you can do that, I’ll marry you right there and then in the Ice Hotel.”

Jess narrowed her eyes at him. She could be tough. She could hike and carry a backpack. She had done it many a weekend on the game farm, after all. How hard could it be doing it in snow? If Derrick needed this silly test to convince himself, to overcome his unfounded fear of tying the knot, she’d give him that.

She lifted her hand for a high-five. “You’ve got a deal.”

“Sweet.” He slapped his palm against hers. “We leave in February when the holiday season is over, and the farm is quiet.”