

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROPOSAL

“You’ll be the prince and I’ll be the princess.
It’s a love story, baby, just say, ‘Yes.’”

— Taylor Swift, “Love Story”

“So, no matter what I say, what I believe, and what I
do, I’m bankrupt without love.”

— I Corinthians 13:3

“When somebody loves you,
It’s no good unless he loves you — all the way.”

— Frank Sinatra, “All the Way”

I don't know about you, but I am a real sucker for love stories. I enjoy snuggling up on the couch with a hot cup of tea and watching a romance movie that's a complete tear-jerker, and it's even better with a group of girlfriends. Just imagine it, girls all snuggled up together crying, Kleenex flying, and of course, bars of chocolate being eaten as if they had never been tasted before!

There is something about romance that takes my breath away—a man fighting for a woman's heart, and a woman fighting not to give it away too easily.

What is it about love stories that just gets us ladies all worked up? I think it's because we all hope for true romance. I think we put ourselves in the would-be lover's shoes, wondering how we would respond if we were in that situation. We each end up contemplating: "How would I respond if it were me ... if it were my heart being fought for ... oh, if I were the one being swept off my feet or rescued?" I have never met a woman who doesn't dream of that day, the day she meets Prince Charming, falls deeply—no, *madly*—in love, and lives happily ever after.

Every time I watch or read a love story, I cannot help but think back to my own love story. When I met my real life Prince Charming and fell deeply, madly, head-over-heels in love, I got the love story I had always wanted. So, snuggle up and grab a box of Kleenex as I tell you all about my love story ... and don't forget the chocolate.

Now, fellas (it's Joel here), this is no time to check out! As we share this story, you will find some indispensable gear you'll need, if you plan to successfully win the woman-of-your-dreams! So, lean forward, grab a Slim Jim and down a caffeinated beverage (or two), because you'll need every ounce of mental muscle to grasp how to capture and keep your dream girl's heart.

Several years ago, I was in California on Christmas vacation meeting Joel's family for the very first time. It had been a long two weeks

and I was ready for a little time away. Joel's friends and family were amazing, but you have to understand, I was Joel's very first girlfriend, so you can imagine how nerve-wracking it was to meet his family that first time.

Believe me when I tell you, I felt like all eyes were on me. Joel was a 26-year-old, extremely handsome, very available (until I came along, of course) man of God, so there were many people who could not wait to meet the girl who had, finally, captured his heart. Wow ... I felt there was so much to live up to! It was exciting, yet exhausting.

So, after nearly two weeks of meeting every one of Joel's family members and friends, I was in need of a break. Joel had thought of this, too. He had planned a little road trip with a group of friends, so we loaded up the car and headed to the beautiful beaches of Santa Barbara. Now, if you have never been to Santa Barbara, it is one of the most gorgeous places in California—perfect weather, perfect beaches, and perfect outdoor malls! We spent the first day shopping, shopping, and yes, more shopping (you've got to love those after-Christmas sales). I think I wore Joel out, so we took a little movie break and ended a perfect day in a cozy little coffee shop snuggled up by a fire.

(Joel, here again.) Yes, shopping had left me slightly fatigued, gentlemen. Navigating through hundreds of very determined women trying to get the last designer blouse or skirt, 50% off regular retail price (welcome to Southern California!) was enough to weary even the most robust of male mall shoppers. I was able to fight off the kryptonite effects of "bargain hunting" on this occasion for two paramount reasons. One, it was quite enjoyable watching Casey having so much fun and, two, I was madly in love with her and would have subjected myself to almost anything, even this shopping war zone, so that I could spend time with her. At that mall, in a very small way, I realized the precision of Pat Benatar's words, "Love is a battlefield!"

Joel had planned a nice little breakfast for me in Santa Barbara before we headed back to Sacramento. So, I got up early the next day, got dressed up, and we headed out for a little alone time. Now, Joel told me before we left for California to bring a nice dress because he wanted to take me out at some point during our trip. Believe me, I was looking forward to that all week long.

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Our friends dropped us off at this remarkable five-star restaurant located on the beach. Joel, being the romantic guy that he is, pulled the table in front of a large window so we could enjoy the breathtaking view. After breakfast, Joel handed me a card.

Now, Joel had given me many cards throughout our relationship, so I thought nothing of it until I opened it. The card was a Jack Vetriano print, called *The Missing Man*. The card depicts a story you cannot help but get lost in: a woman in a white gown standing beside a woman in an elegant red dress, and behind the woman in red is a man with his arm draped securely around hers. The woman in white gazes into the distance for someone the artist leaves unknown to the viewer. I was immediately captured by the mystery the story told in this painting. Jack Vetriano is one of my favorite artists, so this card struck a heartstring. I could not wait to read what Joel had written inside:

Casey, you are truer than the North Star. You are the Rosetta stone ... decrypting the words of my heart, making sense of the impossible. Your heart is a bonfire; I am a man in the cold. I am so thankful I waded through four months of emotion to make sure I could hear the voice of God before I began pursuing you. I will always follow with a brave heart as the Lord leads and never take a step without Him. I thought I was going to die as I dove deeper and deeper down through my fickle feelings, but I am so glad I did not stop descending, because it was there, in the deep, where I found YOU—The Pearl of Great Price. Casey you are the highest price to be aspired, by men who are reborn. And here you are ... with me ... in my arms. Casey, I care for you with my whole heart. Thank you ... thank you so much for sharing your life with me right now.

*With my whole heart,
Joel*

Wow ... where do I sign up? I'm sold! This man is amazing! Someone pinch me, I must be dreaming! After catching my breath, I tried to say something elegant and romantic in response, but let's face it ... I was pretty much speechless. What girl wouldn't be!? I attempted to describe how much the card meant to me, but failed to adequately communicate how dear the card truly was.

When I saw who the artist was, I started talking about another painting by him. You see, there is another Jack Vetriano painting, my

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favorite painting, *Dance Me to the End of Love*, it's called, which depicts a man in a tuxedo dancing with a woman in a white gown. The man's back is facing the viewer and only a partial silhouette of the woman's face is seen over his shoulder, leaving you to wonder what their relationship might be like. In the background, other couples (men in tuxedos, women in beautiful dresses) are also dancing, but the woman in the white dress is center-stage and is the focus of the painting. The painting gives you the feeling that this couple is all that really matters. You see their reflection in the wet sand they are dancing upon and it just captures you. I think one of the reasons I loved this painting so much, was that it compelled my own heart to contemplate what my special day and romance would be like. As I told you, I am a sucker for love stories!

After my less-than-direct response, Joel mentioned that he had a few last Christmas gifts for me. He gently pulled out a large gift carefully wrapped in silver paper. Now, throughout our courtship Joel would always give me sweet little gifts, most of which were picture frames of me and him, capturing special moments or places we had been. I did not mind the massive amount of pictures of us covering the room, but my roommate was less than amused. I could tell the gift was some kind of picture, and my mind automatically thought it was a giant size picture of me and him. While I was thrilled to receive a life-size portrait of me with the man I was madly in love with, all I could think was that my roommate was going to kill me!

I was as eager as a kid on Christmas morning and wanted to tear into the gift ... but I refrained and opened the gift in a much more lady-like fashion. To my disappointment, I opened it with the picture facing away from me. As I turned the black frame over, I discovered that inside was my favorite painting. Girls, it was THE painting! Can you believe it? It was *Dance Me to the End of Love* by Jack Vetriano. I almost fell off my chair in disbelief. "Is this man real?" I thought to myself. "Better yet ... is this man really mine?"

After, once again, catching my breath, I asked Joel how he had known. He said when he first met me I had mentioned the painting and how much I loved it. Well, he took mental note of it. Guys, pay attention ... girls love thoughtful details!

Yes, this is when I (Joel) decided to capitalize on the accumulation of my thoughtful details thus far and said, "Casey, you are that woman in the white dress. You are beautiful, lovely, and

pure." Casey smiled as I stared deeply into her big, earnest, brown eyes.

Just when I thought it couldn't get any better, Joel said he had another gift for me. I was thinking, "Man, this is my lucky day. I LOVE gifts!" The next gift was just as carefully wrapped in silver wrapping paper with delicate silver ribbon and perfectly placed hearts across the box. Once again, I refrained from passionately ripping the wrapping paper off—after all, we were in public—so I carefully opened the box to find a beautiful white dress. I pulled it out of the box thinking, "This is a very strange gift." But I could not help but admire the beauty and simplicity of the gown. I kindly replied that it was a beautiful dress, but I could not keep from thinking that it was sort of a curious Christmas gift. Joel only added to my puzzlement by saying, "I have another gift waiting for you at the back of the restaurant, and you will need to take the dress with you."

At this point, I had no clue what was going on, but I am a sucker for gifts and, thus, anxiously proceeded to the back of the restaurant without further question. Joel has always been an exceedingly romantic guy, and I just thought he was going above-and-beyond on this one.

As I walked to the back of the restaurant, I noticed one of our friends standing in the back, waiting for me. Now, I was extremely confused! Providing no explanation, she took me to the restroom and instructed me to change into the dress. After I put the dress on, she handed me yet another neatly-wrapped gift. I began to put two-and-two together when I opened the silver wrapping paper and found a pair of white flip-flops. I got it ... we are going for a walk on the beach! Oh, if I only knew what was really in store for me!

After freshening up, I musingly walked back through the restaurant toward our table. It was then that I noticed Joel. He was sitting with his back toward me, just like I had left him, only something was different about him.

Forgive me (this is Joel), I have to cut in here, briefly. While Casey was changing, another friend of ours brought out a tuxedo I had rented. I ran to the other restroom and changed. The guy, who was paid to put soap on your hands and give you a towel when you are done washing them (seriously guys!), was staring at me with puzzled eyes. I ignored his snooty looks and ran back out to the table, hoping Casey hadn't beaten me back there. The