



Whitewater's
WISHES

Katherine Robles

A ROMANCE IN THE PARK NOVEL

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Dedication

To my sons. We've been praying for your future wives since you were little. Your love stories are coming.

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1

Bridget rubbed sunscreen onto her face as a drop of sweat ran down the small of her back and into her swim shorts. The cold Yough River would feel divine. She tightened the straps on the back of her red water shoes and started across the parking lot of Whitewater Escapades. On the other side of Main Street, the parking lot for Ohiopyle State Park was filling fast with visitors trying to get in some fun before the heat of the day, but the whitewater parking lot was nearly empty.

A gray sedan blaring loud music through open windows pulled into a parking space near the front of the lot. The driver cut the engine, stepped out of the car, and stretched. When he noticed Bridget, he smiled and waved at her.

“Hey,” called the driver. He gestured at the building before them. “Do you know if they sell swim trunks here?”

Bridget guessed that the man was in his twenties. He had short brown hair and would have been cute if there weren't bags under his eyes. If he was going whitewater rafting, buying shorts was a good idea. The pants he was wearing would get soaked before he got into the raft.

"Yeah," she called back. "T-shirts, towels, the works."

The man nodded and started walking towards the door. Bridget's quick pace soon had her walking parallel to him and she studied him discreetly. He was definitely cute, but something was off. He appeared pale and kept rubbing his face.

"You're pretty early," said Bridget. "The first run doesn't start for another hour."

"That's OK."

He hustled the last few paces so he could get to the door first and hold it open for her. She thanked him and stepped into the Escapades lobby. Her boss nodded to her from behind the large counter of the registration desk. Bridget turned to direct the young man to the gift shop, but his gaze was fixated on a giant framed poster on the wall. It was a great photo of a raft full of people smiling and holding their paddles at the ready as they went over a particularly frothy bit of rapids. A couple of the rafters in the back had bounced up off their seats. The young man appeared even more pale under the fluorescent lights. His hands shook slightly.

"Sir, the river can be dangerous if you're...on anything." Bridget stared at him, willing him to make eye contact. "You need to have all your wits about you. All of your reflexes unimpaired."

They'd encountered visitors like him at Whitewater Escapades before, but not usually this early on a Saturday.

He glanced at her and swallowed visibly.

“Dangerous?”

“Yes, dangerous. But only if you’re not able to focus.” Bridget mumbled, “because you’re high” under her breath.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

He scrubbed his face with his palms then planted them on his hips. “I’m sorry, I’m a little tired. I haven’t slept.” He must have seen her eyebrows spring up because he hurried to explain. “Night shift at the hospital. I’m a nurse.”

“Oh.” Bridget’s shoulders loosened instantly. She observed him more carefully and wanted to kick herself. His t-shirt sported a little Pittsburgh Memorial logo and on closer inspection, his pants were actually navy scrubs. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Nothing.” She gave him a sweet smile as though that would make up for silently assuming the worst about him. She pointed behind her to an open door next to a colorful window display. “The gift shop is over there.”

“The helmets and life jackets are required, right?” asked the young man. He took a step backwards toward the gift shop, but he seemed to have trouble taking his gaze off the poster.

“Yes. It’s a liability thing.” Most young, athletic people didn’t like wearing them because they didn’t look cool or feel necessary. “Once you’re on the water, you’ll forget they’re even there.”

“No, no. Helmets are good. Like you said, it’s

dangerous.”

Bridget laughed. “Right. I was teasing you. It’s really fun.”

He nodded and swallowed again. “To the gift shop.”

She swept her hands toward the window display. “Happy shopping.”

“Fish and an elephant,” he said quietly.

“What?”

He smiled and all the strain in his face disappeared. “It’s a grandpa joke. What do you get when you cross a fish and an elephant? Swim trunks.”

“Oh, right.” Bridget forced a chuckle.

“When your brain is tired, strange things pop into it. Thanks for your help.”

Bridget nodded and hurried across the lobby to the employees only hallway. She clocked in, reviewed the day’s water report, prepped her gear, and joined the small crowd of guides hauling rafts out of the storage barn. The rafts were made of sturdy canvas, about thirteen feet long and six feet wide. Even though they were filled with air, they weighed more than a hundred pounds. The veteran guides stood out because they lifted the rafts over their heads and carried them solo like the pros they were. Newbies like Bridget usually had to pair up, but Bridget was determined to learn the solo carry. She’d been told that the trick was to keep the raft balanced.

Bridget wrapped her arms around the side of a raft and lifted it onto its side. She bent her knees, took hold of the grab rope on each side and straightened. It lifted

too easily. She glanced behind her to see who was helping her.

"I got it now, Bobby," she said over her shoulder. "You can let go."

"I like helping you," said Bobby.

Most guides would hold the back of the raft and give a little space. Bobby wasn't most guides. The shameless flirt was under the raft with her, walking too close. Sometimes the extra attention annoyed her, but charming Bobby possessed tan muscles and chocolate brown hair and it felt really good to have someone like that compliment her every time she picked up a paddle.

"The view's nice from back here," Bobby said.

She could picture his grin and a wink, but didn't dare turn around because her face was red and it wasn't the heat. She wanted to kick him or bat her eyelashes at him.

They reached a small patch of cement between parking lots where half a dozen rafts were already lined up like chocolates in a box. Bobby helped her lower the raft to the ground, and then she followed him to the supply shed. When she returned with an armful of paddles, her passengers had been led out of the preparation room near the office and sorted into groups. Each rafter wore a life jacket and a helmet.

She slowed down to observe her group from afar. Two children, approximately ten and twelve, a boy and a girl. The woman fiddling with their life jackets would be their mother and the man with them would be their father. She watched a moment longer and

decided she was wrong. The man was not part of the family. He shook hands with the mother as if they'd just met. As Bridget approached, he sat on the edge of the raft and bounced a little, as though he was checking its buoyancy. He was on the short side with pale legs and red water shoes.

Bridget pasted a smile on her face and strode confidently around her raft to the front. Their safety would be in her hands this morning but if she did her job well, all they would remember was that rafting was fun. The mother put her hand on the boy's shoulder to stop him from tugging at his helmet's chin strap.

"Hi, I'm Bridget," said Bridget as she rounded the raft. "I-

The man in her group was the swim trunks guy from the parking lot. His eyebrows lifted when he saw her. He recognized her too.

"I'll be your guide today," Bridget continued. "I'll give you each a paddle, and we'll do a few practice moves here on land before we hit the rapids."

All four smiled back at her and she directed them where to sit to keep the raft balanced, adults in the front on opposite sides and children two thirds back on opposite sides. She would sit in the back so she could keep an eye on everyone and watch the river. She handed the swim trunks guy a paddle.

"Thanks," he said. He pointed to her red water shoes and wiggled his own identical pair. "Hey, sole mates."

She froze and then a moment later she got the joke and smiled. S-O-L-E. "We must shop in the same gift

shop.”

She wouldn't tell him that she owned a tank top at home that matched his new swim trunks. Fifteen percent off at the gift shop was one of the perks of her job.

“Sorry for all the bad jokes this morning.” He stuck out his hand. “I'm Drew.”

“Bridget.”

He shook her hand firmly and she didn't mind the butterflies flitting in her stomach. Faint freckles were sprinkled across his cheeks and nose. His eyes were green with brown specks like emeralds that had fallen in the mud. After a few seconds, she realized she was shaking his hand a little too long and dropped it like a hot potato. Her brain panicked and reverted to small talk.

“Are you ready to hit the rapids?” she asked.

It was the question she asked every rafter, every time, before every run, but it felt like a stupid thing to say in this moment to this man.

“Absolutely,” Drew swallowed and nodded but his nods made it seem as if he was trying to convince himself. “I'm loving the life jacket. Very snug and buoyant.”

She'd really freaked him out with her danger warning earlier.

“Don't worry,” she said. “Level three rapids rarely knock anyone out of the raft. If you do go overboard, keep your feet up and try to aim them downstream.”

Her tone switched to “rafting guide” mode, the automated super cheerful voice she used for work, and

she wanted to kick herself. After all, the best way to make a guy aware you're interested in him is to give him a lecture on water safety.

"Yeah, they said that at orientation," said Drew. "It's so you go over the rocks, right?"

"And your feet don't get stuck between the rocks. That can drown you."

She really needed to stop talking.

Drew's face turned a shade paler. "OK."

"You'll be fine." Bridget reached out and laid her fingers gently on his arm almost before she realized she'd done so.

"Live life to the fullest, right?" Drew's shoulders relaxed a little.

"Right."

She moved over to the family and pointed at the boy's sneakers. They were an expensive brand and they looked new.

"You might want to change your son's shoes," she said to the mother. "We'll get splashed a lot. We have a saying at Whitewater Escapades. Rig to flip and dress to swim." She glanced at the boy. "It means be prepared so you stay safe and be ready to get wet."

The boy would need a shorter paddle. She excused herself and made her way back to the shed where an assortment of paddles leaned against the open shed doors like bundles of fancy firewood. Bobby and Zeke were sorting through the stack and glanced her way when she came near.

"Hey, it's my beautiful Bridget." said Bobby.

Bobby had been dropping hints that he wanted to

date her since her first day on the job back in May but he hadn't asked her yet. Not directly. She wasn't sure what she'd say if he did ask her out. So she didn't flirt back.

"Bridget, you need to come do the Upper Yough with us," said Zeke.

"We went last Sunday and it was crazy," said Bobby. "It was a joint bachelor, bachelorette party. Groom and his best man in one raft, bride and her maid of honor in the other. A couple more rafts with the rest of their friends. It was epic."

Zeke nodded. "If I ever get married, it'll be to a woman who picks rafting for her bachelorette party."

"Remember when you called the first 'get down' and the best man started dancing?" Bobby started to laugh at the memory.

Rafters sat on the outer edges of the craft because that made it easier to reach the water with the paddle and the inflated sides made wide comfortable seats. "Get down" was the command to sit in the bottom of the boat instead of on the sides. That moved the center of gravity closer to the center of the raft, making it harder for the raft to tip over. It was a command she would probably never need to use on the class three rapids of the Lower Yough.

Zeke grinned. "I thought I was going to lose him. He's full on singing and dancing when we slide over this rock and he got air. Luckily he bounced into the raft and not out of it."

"Get down. Ba da ba da," sang Bobby. "Get down."

"When's the next dam release?" asked Bridget.
"Maybe I can go as a passenger?"

She was getting comfortable on the class three rapids but the Upper Yough was class four and the guides who led those tours had years of experience.

"June was kind of the end of the dam season," said Zeke. "But there's always next year. And the year after."

"I'm only here for the summer, Zeke."

Zeke grinned. "That's what I said ten years ago. 'Just for the summer.'"

Zeke had been rafting since the summer after high school graduation. With his deep tan, toned body, and full beard, he resembled a mountain man who'd wandered into the valley for a vacation.

"Sliding Rock is next Saturday, right, Bridget?" asked Bobby.

"Yes, three o'clock. Or whenever the last run is put away."

"Are you bringing cookies again?" asked Bobby.

"No, Kim is." She watched Zeke's face when she mentioned Kim, but Zeke was inspecting a paddle. "I'm bringing sandwiches."

"Peanut butter and jelly?"

"Jen's allergic so I'm making ham and cheese." And bringing an extra case of water because most people forgot to bring a drink. She already had napkins and plates in her trunk. "What are you guys bringing?"

Zeke shrugged. "I dunno."

"It's a week away," said Bridget.

"Yeah," said Zeke slowly. "A whole week."

"I don't know how we managed to hang out before you came along, Brig," said Bobby.

"It was rough." Zeke nodded. "We had to gather random people from the park and scrape by on whatever we could buy at the Sandwich Shoppe downtown."

"Funny."

She didn't mind the teasing. The same people who teased her for being prepared were the first ones to ask her for a bandage or a tissue or a bottle of water when they were out on the river or hiking a trail.

"Think you can keep Bookmobile in the raft?" Zeke asked.

"Bookmobile?"

"With the red shoes." Zeke thrust his head in the direction of the rafts and their passengers. "The guy looks like he's never seen the sun. I'll bet you he reads thousand-page history books for fun."

"He's like a ghost who haunts a library," said Bobby.

"Are you trying to make yourself tan by comparison, Bobby?" teased Bridget. "Putting down others to feel better about yourself? You'll never catch up to me, you know." Bridget held out her arm. Her skin was naturally tan but even with sunscreen, afternoons on the water had darkened it to a rich latte brown. Bobby put his arm next to hers and she laughed. "Not even close."

"Is that his family?" asked Zeke. He indicated Drew who was sitting on the side of the raft practicing his paddling moves.

“No, I think he’s here alone.”

“I’ll bet you he came here to pick up girls,” laughed Zeke. “His only options in the library were old ladies.”

Bridget chose a child sized paddle and turned to go. Bobby winked at her.

“Good luck with Bookmobile.”

Bridget figured he wanted her to roll her eyes but she didn’t. She lifted her chin. “I think he’s kinda cute.”

She walked away without looking back. Let Bobby stew on that for a while.

2

So far so good. The raft was floating and he was in it. Drew gripped his paddle with two hands like they'd shown him in orientation. One hand on the T grip on top, and the other hand in the middle of the shaft. They weren't near the rapids yet, but he wanted to be ready. He wiggled his feet in the anchor straps and the nylon pushed back against his water shoes. It was a delightful, secure feeling.

The waters of the Youghiogeny River gurgled gently under the raft. Rounded cobbles and larger rocks passed by a few feet below him. The water was clear with a brown tint, like weak iced tea. Iced tea was a good simile. No one drowned in iced tea.

He glanced over his shoulder at their guide, Bridget. She was seated on the back of the raft, paddling leisurely. Her dark curly hair stuck out of the bottom of her helmet. There was something attractive about her that went beyond her pretty face. She'd been friendly and professional on land. But once the raft left the shore it was as if something inside her lit up.

The raft dipped a bit and he spun back to the front. The river stretched smooth and brown for a hundred feet and then turned white near some boulders. He swallowed hard. He couldn't see how long the

whitewater would last because the river curved out of sight around Ohiopyle's famous horseshoe, an elevated peninsula of rock near the visitor center. Trees, mostly oak, lined both sides of the river, forming green and brown living walls. His fellow adult passenger was seated across from him in the front of the raft and she set her paddle down to take a picture of her two kids who were behind them on each side of the middle of the raft.

Behind him Bridget yelled, "Forward paddle."

Drew sprang forward and thrust his paddle into the water. It smacked the water like a beaver's tail and he had to take a breath and remind himself to keep the paddle vertical. He lifted the paddle and tried again, pushing the tip of the paddle under the water and pulling it towards him. Better. He plunged the paddle deeper, kept the paddle's handle perpendicular to the water, and pulled it toward him again. Better still.

The water under the raft flowed fast and frothy. It was hard to tell if his paddling was making a difference, but he kept at it. The raft sped up past a couple of boulders before dropping a few inches so suddenly that he flung out one hand to grab onto something, anything, but his fingers swept air and he clutched at his paddle again.

"Remember to paddle together." Bridget called.

Drew glanced at the woman across from him. She paddled rhythmically as though there was a metronome in her head. He pushed his paddle down when she did, pulled back fast, lift, out, then pushed his paddle down again almost at the same time she

did. After a few strokes he had the rhythm and could watch the river. He was kind of surprised Bridget hadn't just yelled, "Drew, you're doing it wrong" but he supposed the rafting guides were trained to frame things positively, just as nurses were. It was more effective to tell a patient who was reluctant to get out of bed, "You'll feel better after this shower" than to say "your B.O. is awful, please get up and bathe."

The rocks below the raft were passing by in a blur. The river was spotted with ripples and white caps where the water churned over and around large boulders that crouched just under the surface. In orientation they'd emphasized the importance of not hitting the boulders. The raft could get stuck on top of the boulder or the current could suck the edge of the raft down the side of the boulder and flip it.

Up ahead the rounded tops of three giant boulders poked out of the water on the left-hand side of the river.

Bridget shouted, "Turn right."

Drew froze for a second to remember what they'd practiced. He was seated on the right side of the raft so he plunged the head of his paddle into the water and pushed it forward. To his left, the mother paddled hard off the left side of the raft and the raft turned sharply toward the right bank of the river.

"Forward paddle."

The raft sailed within inches of the boulders, and plunged down a rapid so quickly that his stomach touched his throat. Drew gripped the grab rope with white knuckles. The boy behind him yelled something