



Seeded with precious memories.
growing hope for the future.

Treehouse

Delia Latham

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by

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

TREEHOUSE
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Praise for Treehouse

"I felt like I was actually there, in the story. You also did a fantastic job of giving Ryann and Tim depth in such a short number of pages. I loved Amy, too!"

~ Mary Manners, author

"I loved Ryann, Tim and Amy. I experienced their pain, forgiveness and love, all in these few short pages. A warm yet gripping story. Well done!"

~ Jeanie Smith Cash, Author

"In just a few pages, I was completely sucked in. The characters came to life so quickly, and the relationships were so rich! Especially touching was the interaction between Ryann and her father. When I reached the end, I didn't want the story to be over."

~ Michelle Massaro, Genesis Finalist 2012

Dedication

For my four perfect grandchildren. I pray they all experience the joy, the delicious sense of secrecy and solitude, the “rightness” of a treehouse before they become adults...and even afterward, if they so choose.

Tim Kerschner's attachment to a solitary aspen on property he inherits goes much deeper than aesthetics. Can he make landscape architect Ryann Dean understand his refusal to let her chop down this single tree in a forest of them?

Ryann loves her job in Bliss, Oregon. Junior high teacher Tim Kerschner, on the other hand, she'd be happy to have never met. The man's handsome face loses any appeal in light of his arrogance and obvious inclination to violence—the latter of which Ryann despises for reasons close to her heart.

A visit to what lies within the branches of the controversial tree could give them both a whole new outlook on life...and on each other.

Excerpt from Chapter 1

As one o'clock approached, Ryann watched one after another of the planning committee file into the conference room where she would present her landscape plans for the donated property. Each newcomer nodded in her direction, then sought out a more familiar face and forgot her presence altogether, which suited Ryann just fine. She learned a lot by watching unobserved, usually in settings just like this.

She couldn't wait to unveil her plans. A beautiful, bouncing brook ran through the center of the school's new acreage, affording an opportunity to do something unique with the project. She had sketched out a gorgeous two-mile walking trail on the back portion of the land, taking great pains to retain as much of the property's natural state as possible.

The trail would extend Kerschner's generous gift to the entire community, even those with no school-age children and no active interest in the educational system.

She'd come up with some ideas she considered quite innovative. With any luck at all, her detailed watercolor drawings, along with a well-planned vocal presentation, would sell this group on her proposal. A little tremor of

excitement set a butterfly—just one—aflutter in her tummy.

A stir in the growing assemblage interrupted the introspective moment, and curiosity pulled Ryann's gaze to the door.

He'd been all over the news in recent weeks, but not a single camera had captured the intensity of Timothy Kerschner's eyes. As if connected by an invisible string, Ryann's gaze locked on his startling blue one, and her heart set up an unexpected racket that brought unwelcome and embarrassing warmth to her cheeks.

What a ridiculous reaction! So this man held a good portion of the power to make or break her proposal today. No reason to get emotional. She'd be disappointed if it fell through, but certainly not devastated.

"Miss Dean?" From behind her, a voice reached her ears, but didn't penetrate her brain.

Had Kerschner misplaced his razor? His pale cheeks and chin bore the shadow of a scruffy beard the same color as his sandy brown hair, and even that appeared to be unacquainted with a comb. A man in his current position of prestige ought to make at least a minimal effort to impress.

Ryann drew her brows together, studying the newcomer. He appeared at ease in the spotlight despite his unkempt appearance.

"Miss Dean?" The slight pressure of a hand on her shoulder demanded her attention. Despite the interruption, it took every ounce of effort she possessed to break the staring match both she and the newcomer seemed determined to win.

Sucking in a quick breath, she smiled into the concerned face of Dan Petrie, chairman of the school planning committee. "I'm sorry, Mr. Petrie. I guess I was wool gathering."

"Would you like a glass of water?" He handed her a plastic cup. "It's about time to get started. Everyone's here."

Ryann accepted his offering with a nod. "Thank you. I'm ready."

Petrie approached the podium and tapped on the microphone. The room quieted as little groups of chattering board members broke up and migrated toward the conference table. The chairman bent his lanky frame at an awkward angle and spoke into the mike. "Please be seated. We'll begin in three minutes."

Ryann's gaze bounced back to the newest arrival, startled to find him standing only a step or two away. He extended a hand to shake hers, his piercing gaze traveling over every inch of her face. A perfunctory smile lifted one corner of Timothy Kerschner's lips, but his ice-blue eyes reflected no warmth.

"Tim Kerschner." He slid into the seat next to her and folded his arms over a broad chest that Ryann did *not* notice, then stretched out a pair of

long legs and crossed them at the ankles. "I take it you're Ryann Dean?"

After opening and closing her lips a couple of times like a ridiculous fish, she found her voice. "Yes, I'm Ryann." For some perverse reason, she wished he had mispronounced her name like everyone else, giving her a chance to set him straight. She cleared her throat, wondering why she found it so hard to voice the usual pleasantries. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Kerschner."

"Just Tim." He close his eyes and rolled his neck in both directions before speaking again. "Look, it's been a rough day, and to be honest, I'd rather be just about anywhere but here." He sighed and directed those disturbing eyes her way, slowly raking them over her frozen features before settling his gaze on the stack of drawings turned upside down on the table. "Do me a favor, Ryann Dean?"

He waited and she fumed. Was she supposed to respond? Biting back an angry retort, she forced herself to remain professional. "If I can, of course."

He yawned in her face, making only the barest effort to cover it with his hand, and Ryann's ire rose to a dangerous level. "Just keep your little speech short and sweet, OK? Do that, and you and I will be off to a great start."

She was saved the indignity of losing her temper in public when Petrie chose that moment to call the meeting to order. He wasted no time in

giving her the floor, and she launched right into her plans, managing to forget the obnoxious teacher sitting off to her right—almost.

Experience had made her a fair reader of audience reaction, and twenty minutes into her proposal, Ryann thought she had this one eating out of her hand. But just as she gave herself an encouraging mental pat on the back, Tim Kerschner jumped to his feet and glared at her, those killer eyes of his narrowed to thin slits.

“Wait right there! Just—” He lowered his chin and glared her way. His outstretched arm and forward-facing palm presented a fair imitation of a crossing guard. “Just hold up. That’s not going to happen.”

She swallowed and directed her attention to the man who was quickly becoming a pesky thorn in her side. Calling on every measure of self-control she knew, Ryann schooled her voice to remain pleasant. It came out a little on the cool side, but it was the best she could do. “I’m sorry. Exactly what isn’t happening, Mr. Kerschner?”

“That tree.” He waved an arm towards the drawing projected on a screen at the front of the room. “The one you plan to axe? It stays.” He shrugged. “Is it a choice between the bridge or the tree? Then scratch the bridge.”

Ryann eyed her drawing, which depicted an old-fashioned wooden bridge. The curved structure crossed Bumblebee Creek, which meandered along between the walking trail and

the portion of land on which the administrative complex would be constructed. The bridge represented the only access to the trail from where the visitors' lot would be located, behind the facility.

A huge aspen stood lone sentry where the path ended at the edge of the brook. Nothing special about it as far Ryann could see. It was one of hundreds of trees, though it had somehow gotten separated from its family. Just east of it, the creek took an abrupt turn. It wouldn't be impossible to put a bridge there, but it would be tricky and involve far more expense. To the west, the creek flowed down a scenic rolling grade. Ryann considered it an act of disgrace to tamper with what nature had done to perfection in that area.

"Mr. Kerschner, it's one tree." She forced a smile, knowing it didn't quite pass muster. "I've made every effort to keep as many of them as possible."

The man's square jaw set and his face lost any hint of color. He slammed a fist on the table, engendering a collective intake of breath from the wide-eyed committee members. "I don't care if you chop down every other tree in the forest." His sharp voice sliced through the thick tension in the room. "Just not that one. Not now, not ever. It's not open for negotiation."

He slowly lowered himself onto his chair, his heated gaze locked on hers. "Let's not wage a

battle here. I think you'll find that I'll go along with pretty much anything you suggest—except this. The tree stays.”

Ryann swung around to fix her shocked gaze on the board. All seven members found somewhere else to look, toying with pencils, brushing at invisible specks on their impeccable business suits, twiddling their thumbs.

Refusing to meet her gaze.

So. Kerschner ran the show.

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