

# Rainbow's End: Topaz Treasure

## Chapter 1

Lyssa Quinn clutched a bright-pink folder stuffed with advertising forms against her chest and squeezed her eyes shut. *Please God. Help me be brave.* She squared her shoulders and released each cramped finger individually. She could do this.

Frigid air conditioning laced with the odor of new carpet blasted into the Missouri humidity as Lyssa shouldered open the glass door of Osage Beach's newest shop. This looked like the kind of corporate sponsor the Rainbow's End Treasure Hunt needed, with a name like **Communication Location: Home of Gizmos, Gadgets, and More**—gadgets that included cell phones and GPS handhelds, if the posters plastering the windows were to be believed. Along with a smaller sign that announced *Opening Soon*. Well, she didn't have time to wait, not if she was to have all the advertising and sponsorship in place before the middle of June. Only a month to go.

At least the door was unlocked and the fluorescents blazed down. Stacks of cardboard boxes lined the aisles next to partially filled shelves. Somebody must be around. If she was lucky, somebody sympathetic.

But what if they weren't? Maybe she should come back another day. Or never. How had Noah talked her into this? She glanced at the folder in her hands, covered with decals from her third-grade class. Cute stickers with chalkboards and apples. *#1 Teacher*. If she could face twenty-nine kids five days a week, surely she could face one manager.

A guy in jeans strode out of the back room, his face and upper body obscured by the box in his arms. "Good morning, and welcome to Communication Location. How can I help you?"

That voice. Lyssa froze. Even muffled by cardboard, it shot her straight back to her college days. But it couldn't be. There was no reason her humanities professor would be here in Osage Beach, stocking shelves.

He slid the box across the countertop and appeared from behind it. Dark curly hair and deep blue eyes, just like Lyssa remembered. A dimple appeared as he grinned.

No way. Lyssa sucked in a ragged breath as she white-knuckled the folder. When her good friends, who just happened to be the youth pastor and her roommate, had bullied her into seeking patrons for the church outreach event, this scenario had not remotely elbowed its way into her nightmares. She pivoted and forced herself to take even steps toward the door. No bolting like a frightened deer.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I was practicing my welcome line. I didn't mean to scare you."

Scare her? Yep, shaking. Lyssa halted in her tracks. This was ridiculous. She was a grown woman of twenty-six, for heaven's sake. And just the sight of one of her professors made her flee?

But not just any college professor.

Muffled footsteps approached on the carpet. “We’re not open for business yet, but I might be able to help you anyway. Is there anything in particular you’re looking for? If it isn’t unpacked yet, I should at least know when it’s coming.”

Lyssa forced herself to face him. The temptation to ask for comparisons of various GPS units rolled over her. But no, she had a reason for being here, and that wasn’t it. She braced herself and looked up.

His intense blue eyes crinkled around the edges as he smiled encouragingly. And waited.

“My name is Lyssa Quinn, and I’m here on behalf of Osage Beach Community Church.” She paused for a split second, but his grin didn’t waver—to her shock—so she plunged on. “We’re hosting our first ever geocaching event this summer, and we’re looking for donations and corporate sponsors. Being as you sell global positioning systems and cell phones, both useful in geocaching, we thought you might be interested in sponsoring our event.”

There. She’d gotten all the words out and publicly aligned herself with the church.

He didn’t laugh, though his eyebrows angled down.

Lyssa pulled a sheet of paper from the folder and shoved it at him with trembling fingers. “If you want any further information, please call the number listed.” She started to turn away. Why didn’t it have the church number on it instead of her cell?

“Just a moment.”

The floor gripped Lyssa’s sandals like Velcro. He glanced over the paper then met her gaze. She tried to wrench her eyes free but couldn’t. In humanities, four years ago, she’d found him mesmerizing. Even after he derided her roommate in front of the entire class.

He held out his hand.

Lyssa reached out and clutched it like a drowning woman, sweaty palm notwithstanding.

“I’m Kirk Kennedy, just in town to help my brother get his new business off the ground. Your name is Lyssa?”

She nodded and tugged her hand free. Also her gaze. The arrogant professor she’d once known didn’t seem the kind to help out a sibling. Had she judged him too hastily back then? Not likely.

“Why don’t you come sit down and tell me more about this event? I could use a break. I’ll grab us each a cola, if you’d like.”

Lyssa found her voice. “No, thanks. To the cola, I mean.”

Kirk—no longer her professor—grinned and ushered her toward the door he’d come out of a few minutes before. “We’ve got ginger ale and root beer, too. Just name your addiction.”

Her wooden legs propelled her to the back of the small shop. “I stay away from the stuff. I’ve seen kids in the classroom who drink soda for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, whose baby brothers and sisters get it in their bottles. So unhealthy, with all the sugar and chemicals.” To say nothing of making a teacher’s job more difficult.

He chuckled behind her. “Well then. Water?”

Lyssa hesitated. Probably all he had was bottled, and then she’d feel obligated to get into issues like plastic in landfills and how recycling didn’t work as well as everyone had been led to believe. “I’m good, thanks.”