

Hello. Thank you so much for downloading my free read! This is actually the ending that didn't make it into The Jinx. Still, I loved it so much that I wasn't ready to just leave it on the cutting room floor (so messy!) If you like what you read here, you will like The Jinx because they're all the same guys. This does have a love scene in it, so delete this now if you are not old enough to be reading it! Think of this free read as the parallel universe ending for The Jinx. I'll just decide to call it *The Almost Jinx*. If you do decide to buy the book, you will find one scene that did make it in. Wonder which one??!!

Chapter Eighteen

"I am still the boss here," Rick declared as he looked at each of his employees in turn. Carl looked amused; Eli looked guilty. Denise, who was staring back at him boldly, looked annoyed. "I don't need a babysitter. I can take care of myself, so you all just stop your scheming. If I want to go out on a job, I will go out by myself. Do you hear me? And wherever my tool box has disappeared to, it better make a reappearance and fast."

Rick fixed his eyes on Denise. He knew she was the main one who had arranged for Eli and Carl to show up whenever Rick went to lay pipe for bathrooms on building sites. Braswell Plumbing had been awarded the contract for the Rolling Hills Subdivision – a planned neighborhood of forty upscale houses. The job was stretching Rick's small company which was why they didn't have time to fool around here.

“Rick,” Denise reasoned. “If you work in pairs, then the job goes twice as fast.”

“Then why is it I’m the only one having to work in a pair? Either Carl or Eli has been with me for a week now. I don’t like it.”

Rick’s eyes fell on a bright orange sign on the wall behind Denise’s desk which declared they had been accident-free for four days. It wasn’t a sign which kept track of the safety of Braswell Plumbing; it was a sign which kept track of what a klutz Rick was. He hated that sign. Denise had started keeping track of Rick’s mishaps when he had dived under the fountain six months ago. Until recently, Rick hadn’t had an incident in four months. The sign had just amused him. But as he and Ellen’s wedding approached, things had started happening again. It was like when they had first met. The accidents were escalating. Four days ago, Rick had walked right in front of a car outside of the emergency room. The car had knocked Rick flat. Though he hadn’t broken anything, he was bruised and sore over most of his body. He knew it was his fault. He had taken Ellen some lunch since she was working that day. In her closed and locked office, they had gotten pretty hot and heavy on her couch. It hadn’t progressed as far as Rick would have liked. About a month ago, Ellen had asked if they could abstain until the wedding. She thought it would make their wedding night more meaningful. Rick had acquiesced, but it hadn’t stopped him from seeing how far Miss Muffett would go before she halted whatever Rick had been about to do with her.

In three days, he and Ellen were getting married. Fortunately, he would be wearing a tux which would cover the brown and purple splotches on him. Before the car incident, Rick had gotten his leg caught between two rebars at a building site. He had been alone at the time-out of reach of his cell phone. It had taken him two hours to free himself, and he had destroyed another work boot in the process. Then there was the time he had stapled his thumb with a staple gun or the other time when he and a claw foot tub had slid down a flight of stairs at the Swintzel house. He had also suffered from severe food poisoning after he and Ellen had eaten at one of the nicer restaurants in town. From then on Rick was staying away from places that didn't serve beer in a bottle. Just because they put on airs didn't mean it was safe to eat there.

"Look, Rick," Carl spoke up bringing Rick out of his reverie. "With the wedding so close, why don't you just let us handle things until after you get back from your honeymoon?"

"Because I'm going to be gone for a week. We need to get ahead on Rolling Hills so we don't fall behind while I'm gone."

The three men stood in a semi-circle in front of the secretary's desk. Denise leaned back in her chair. "The forecast is for rain all next week. Nobody will be working out at Rolling Hills. We won't get behind," she concluded confidently.

"I am not taking off work until next Monday." Rick informed everyone ending the discussion. He looked at his watch. "Let's get out to the building site

and work on twenty-two, twenty-three, and twenty-four. I think we can have them finished by quitting time.” Carl and Eli began walking toward the door.

Denise huffed and slammed her hand down on her desk. “Rick, at least take Friday off. Ellen has so much to do before the wedding. You need to help her.”

Rick walked in his office to get his jacket. The February afternoon was brisk enough to need it. He slipped it on. “My mother and Ellen’s mother are coming into town tomorrow. They will have everything well under control, Denise. The best thing I can do is stay out of their way.”

“Chicken,” he heard her grumble.

He may be a chicken, but he was a smart chicken. Martha and Lady Claude should have hurricanes named after them because of their combined ability to devastate entire nations with their matronly wisdom and Martha Stewart inspired ideas. Ellen seemed to enjoy all this wedding crap. She had dragged him to three different stores to pick out china patterns. Rick didn’t care about the design on a plate; he only cared about the food on it. He tried to be supportive. He had taken Eli’s advice to answer “That’s nice. I like it,” or “Whatever you want, honey” whenever Ellen asked him his opinion about the color of bath towels or the type of paper to print the invitations on or any of the hundreds of decisions that involved getting married.

Why did it have to be so complicated? If Rick had been in charge, he would have chosen the first of everything he saw – the first plate on the shelf, the first wedding invitation in that monster book at the printers, the first taco holder at

Denmark's Bridal Gifts, a store in town Rick wished he never had to enter again. Who needed a stupid taco holder? Was there no end to the amount of fancy-wrapped boxes which were being delivered to his house every day? But Eli's advice had worked very well. Ellen was happy. Rick was glad; he loved her. He could hardly wait until they were in Aruba on the honeymoon. He could hardly wait until he could wake up every morning with her lying next to him, on him, under him. He wasn't too picky – as long as they were naked.

Rick tripped over the threshold as he exited his office. He nearly righted himself, but not quite, and landed on one knee. With as much dignity as he could muster, he stood up to find Denise erasing the number on her orange sign.

"That was not an accident, Denise." Rick snarled refusing to rub the pained area next to his knee cap.

"Oh? Was it on purpose?" She asked sweetly as she wrote a zero with her dry-erase marker.

Rick took the marker from her hand and marched to the front door. With all of his might, he threw the offending item into the bushes on the other side of the parking lot.

"They come in packs of three," Denise called after Rick as he slammed the door behind him.

* *

Ellen hummed to the radio which was playing a bluesy tune as she poured egg and sausage into a casserole dish. This was to be for breakfast Saturday morning – her wedding day. By then, Richard's parents would be here staying at

the house. Ellen covered the dish and set it in the freezer. She marked off another item on her “to do” list. Breakfast for Richard and his parents was taken care of. She just loved Richard’s kitchen – more so since she had put some of her own things in here. Bit by bit she was making this her home, too. There was her “sweet memories’ clock on the wall, her “welcome friends’ rug at the back door, her commemorative Elvis tin on the windowsill over the sink, and the snapshot on the refrigerator of she and Richard at Christmas last year.

The door opened and then slammed. Footsteps approached the kitchen, entered, and Rick spooned her as his arms wrapped around her midriff. He nuzzled her ear.

“Something smells good.”

“Sausage.”

“No. You.”

Rick untucked her shirt and slid his hand underneath. Ellen shivered as Rick’s fingers deftly unhooked her front-clasp bra.

“My, we’re feeling frisky tonight, aren’t we?” Ellen murmured as she leaned back against her husband-to-be.

“Not just tonight,” he said against the skin of her neck. “Every night. Every day. Every hour. Every minute for twenty-nine days now.”

Here it was again. The no-sex issue. Ellen had the bright idea not to sleep together until the wedding. Richard had said it was no big deal, if that is what she wanted. She didn’t believe him anymore. They had almost committed two on-the-job violations the last time Richard had come to see her at work.

Shortly thereafter he had come back into the ER as a patient – again. Thank goodness he had been okay. But it could have been worse. A whole lot worse. He had scared her –really scared her this time. Ellen had decided to do the loving thing. The wedding night would be special no matter what. Ellen had decided to give up on abstinence. Her loving fiancé seemed to be so sexually frustrated that he couldn't walk across the street without tripping over his size eleven work boots or walking in the path of a moving car. If they made love, perhaps Richard would make it to the wedding in one piece.

Ellen turned around in the circle of his arms and faced her beloved. She unbuttoned her shirt and shrugged it and her bra off. It was enough encouragement for Rick. He lifted her on the counter positioning himself between her legs and kissed her hard.

“I really love you,” Rick said as he drew back and studied this woman who had come to mean so much to him. “I am dying for Saturday to get here.”

“I know you are, honey. Let's not wait for Saturday.” Ellen began unbuttoning his shirt.

“Are you sure?”

“I'm sure,” Ellen said determinedly as she viewed the discolored skin on his chest. “You have to take your boots off first though.”

“Yes Ma'am.” Rick stuck one boot up on the counter and rapidly untied the laces. Then he repeated the action with the other boot, stepped out of them, and pulled off his socks.

“Pants, too.” Ellen said as she pushed his shirt off of his shoulders. More bruises.

“In the kitchen?”

“Your parents will be here tomorrow morning. I doubt we can do this anywhere until we get to the hotel in Aruba.”

“We’ll see.” Rick said as he kicked off pants and shorts.

Sliding his hands up her arms, over her shoulders, and to her back, Rick embraced Ellen. He kissed her as if they had not seen each other in months. Without moving his mouth away from Ellen’s, Rick slid his fingers into the waistband of her pants and panties and slid both articles of clothing down hips, thighs, legs until she, too, was naked. He loved her as if they had a hundred years to revel in the wonder of each other’s flesh. Ellen could not believe she was living in this moment with this man who intended to love, honor, and cherish her for the rest of his life.

Oh, yes. This was very nice.

Okay. Better than very nice. Richard’s hands were strong and gentle; his callused fingertips traced imaginary patterns on her. Goodness. It was happening. They were happening. Right here in the kitchen. Would Ellen ever be able to walk into this room and not remember the feel of his hot skin pressed against hers, the edge of the counter against her bare bottom? What they were doing certainly wasn’t proper in the kitchen, but it felt mighty good.

Ellen gasped in pleasure. She hadn’t realized her eyes were closed until she opened them and found Rick watching her.

“You like that, do you?” he rasped leaning his head forward and speaking against her lips.

Ellen couldn't speak to say “yes”, “no”, or anything else. She could only feel – the texture of Richard's skin beneath her fingertips, his sweet lips on hers, his essence all around her, surrounding her, inside of her. He took her to a high wonderful place; and they fell together.

* *

Just before dawn, Ellen silently slid off of Rick's bed.

“You're not leaving, are you?” Rick's voice reached her in the dark.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Chris is helping me move some of my stuff out of the storage unit as soon as he gets off from work.” Ellen moved her hand in one of the drawers which now held her clothes. She slipped on underwear, opened another drawer and tried to find a shirt by touch.

“I thought I was helping you with that stuff.”

“No. Chris can help me.”

She heard him sigh and move across the bed. “I'll leave work early and get it done.”

“Richard...I'd rather you not. I've got ...”

Rick interrupted her. “Please tell me this doesn't have to do with your perception that you are about to marry a klutz.”

Ellen found some pants and slipped them on. She moved toward the bed and leaned down and kissed Rick.

“You can’t help it; and anyway, I think it will be better now.”

She started to move away, but Rick grabbed her and held her on top of him. “Why will it be better now?”

Though Rick was under the covers from his waist down, Ellen felt his warmth, the contours of his body through the blanket. Arguing with him was not what she wanted to do. Leaving was not what she wanted to do. Sliding back under the covers – now that was tempting.

“Sweetie, you have to admit that you’ve been a little accident-prone lately. I just thought...you know...if we made love, you could...”

“Oh, Geez!” Rick put Ellen away from him, reached over and turned on the lamp on the bedside table.

She blinked in the sudden brightness. Rick glared at her from where he sat with his back against the headboard.

“Are you serious? You had pity sex? With me? That’s what this was?”

Ellen sat cross-legged at the foot of the bed. “Of course not. Richard, how could you even say that?”

“Maybe it was your comment that my damn clumsiness will be better now. I cannot believe this! There is no Braswell klutz gene.” he railed.

“Okay, okay.” Ellen appeased him. “I believe you.”

“You do not. You had sex with me because you thought it would prevent me from having any more accidents.”

“I made love to you because I love you, and I thought it would relieve some of the stress we are both under right now.” Ellen patiently corrected him.

“I’m not a klutz. The food poisoning was NOT my fault.”

“You are a klutz, but I agree with you about the food poisoning.”

“Maybe I should get sterilized so we don’t pass of my horrible falling down genes to the next generation.”

Ellen crawled up to Rick and straddled his legs. Her eyes bore into his sincerely. “I want your babies – clumsy or not. We’ll just buy helmets and knee and elbow pads. We won’t buy bunk beds or B.B. guns. Our babies will survive to adulthood, just like you did. They’ll fall in love with wonderful people, go to the emergency room every now and then, get married and give us grandchildren. Happily ever after. Does it get any better than that?”

During Ellen’s speech, Rick’s expression went from self-deprecating to amused. He reached forward and stroked her breasts through her T-shirt.

“I think I’m feeling stressed. Maybe you should stay a little longer and practice your stress-relief technique on me again.”

Ellen removed his hands and scooted off the bed. “I promise you will be so stress-free in Aruba that you’ll barely be able to move. But I need to go. If I don’t get that stuff out of the storage unit by Tuesday, they’ll charge me another month’s rent.”

“Well, put on a bra. I don’t like you parading around without one when you’re around other men.”

With her hand on the doorknob, Ellen rolled her eyes at Rick's outrageous comment. "Come on! Chris is harmless. He doesn't care about stuff like that."

"That just goes to show how little you know about men."

"I knew enough to snag you, didn't I?"

"I was too crippled to get away."

Ellen snorted. She came back over to the bed and kissed this wonderful man. "I love you, you clumsy oaf. I'll see you after work. Don't forget we're taking the in-laws out to eat tonight."

"Which in-laws?"

"Yours and mine."

"Just shoot me now," was the last thing Ellen heard Rick say as she headed down the stairs.

Chapter Nineteen

Two days left.

Ellen sat outwardly serene while her mom and Lady Claude chattered like two happy birds about the wedding. Every once in a while one or the other would turn to her. "Have you done this? Have you done that?", "Did you call the caterer?", "Who's getting her hair done first?"

Really everything had seemed under control until the two women had arrived and begun comparing notes, sorting through wedding gifts, opening other wedding gifts, and pouring over the wedding service with suggestions for "better

music.” Lady Claude and big Richard had gotten to town mid-morning; her own parents late in the afternoon. The Braswells had gone straight to Richard’s house. Unbeknownst to Ellen, Richard had neglected to pick up their clothes from the kitchen before he had left for work. Though neither Lady Claude nor big Richard had said a word to Ellen, they obviously thought it a good idea to share the tale of the scattered clothes to her mom and dad. Her dad was averaging a wise crack an hour about it. It was getting old; and she was only in the third hour.

Where was Richard?

The doorbell rang. Ellen jumped up to answer it.

“I’m sure it’s another wedding gift,” Lady Claude said happily. “They’ve been coming throughout the day. It’s just like Christmas.”

“Did you see that crystal bowl from one of Ellen’s doctor friends?” Martha responded. “It’s Waterford, you know. Not that cheap stuff you get at the dollar store.”

Ellen hoped the doorbell ringer was someone who would kidnap her, tie her up, gag her, and lock her up in a nice quiet room somewhere.

When Ellen opened the front door, she noticed that the porch light was out. That was odd. She flipped the switch on and off a few times. Nothing.

“Hi,” Rick said from the shadows of the porch.

Ellen quickly glanced behind her, then stepped out in the dark, and closed the door.

“You’re in big trouble, Mister.” She said sternly as she glared at the man walking toward her.

Rick enveloped Ellen in a tight embrace. “I’m sorry I’m late. I tried to call, but I can’t get service out at the site.”

“That’s not why you’re in big trouble.” Ellen wrapped her arms around Rick’s waist. “You left all our clothes in the kitchen. I swear, if my dad makes one more comment about cleaning the counter tops with Formula 409, I’m going to scream.”

Rick laughed, and Ellen pinched him. Hard.

“Oww!”

“Laugh it up now. Get it out of your system before we go in there. I don’t want you encouraging him.”

“I won’t even crack a smile,” Rick promised solemnly before he lifted her up off the floor, and kissed her.

Ellen kissed him back. She felt the tension of her hectic day flow down her body and drop from her feet which were still not touching the floor. Rick backed her up to the wall without breaking contact.

The front door flew open. Four middle aged people stood in the opening staring at their children. Ellen pulled away quickly and straightened her shirt. Rick ran a hand through his rumpled hair.

“Good gracious, Braswell,” Bill Anderson declared to big Richard.

“Doesn’t your boy know he can use a bed for something other than sleeping?”

* *

The Wedding Day

Ellen wouldn't take any chances with bad luck. She had refused to see Rick all day. No breakfast with her. No lunch with her. No pre-wedding pictures with her. Nothing. She wouldn't even answer her cell phone when he called. "No contact until I walk down the aisle," she had commanded as she bid him goodnight after the rehearsal dinner.

"It's just silly superstition," Rick had chided.

"I'll see you during 'The Wedding March' and not a moment before."

End of discussion.

Rick stood in a Sunday School room at the church. The room was designated for him and the other groomsmen to wait until the service. Because of Ellen's no-see-her rule, Rick was being kept prisoner until the minister came to get him to stand at the front of the sanctuary.

Though he had been accident-free for six days (not counting his fall in the office), Rick guessed he couldn't blame Ellen for not taking any chances. She and both mothers had gone on some wild scavenger hunt yesterday for things old, new, borrowed, and blue. Then his own mother had produced a six pence that she herself had carried in her shoe when she had married Rick's dad. Ellen had cried at the gesture. Geez, his mom was loving this mother-in-law business. She had even remarked that she and Dad were thinking about moving here. It

might not be too bad. Then Martha mentioned perhaps she and Bill should move closer as well. Okay - that was too much.

Carl, Eli, and Dad walked into the room followed by the preacher who motioned to Rick it was time.

It was time. Finally. It was time to marry Ellen, have a bunch of clumsy babies, and live happily ever after. This was it.