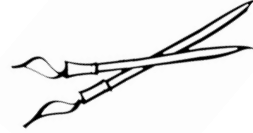


Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

ONE



Ragni

Chicago, June 11, 2002

Her dream had been a lie. When Ragni woke, failure stung in the morning light.

She fought to ignore the pull of the sheets tugging at her arm, dragging her back into the haze of twilight sleep where everything went away. *The dream—what was the dream?* Ah yes, she'd been painting with watercolors, a garden grown wild with bloom.

She heard an alarm ring again, but this time it was the phone across the room, a sound that tore at her nerves like a car alarm stuck in perpetual squall. Bash it, drown it, drop it out of the second-story window. Ragni just wanted to turn off the phone and crawl back in bed, back to her dream.

Through the sleepy haze, however, she recognized that if everything went right she could still make it to work on time. That'd be a nice change. For ten years she'd been known for never being late. Now she had a warning note in her file for tardiness.

She glared at the still-ringing phone. Ignoring the urge to lie back

down, she stomped across the room and stayed standing, thumb punishing the Talk button.

“Yes.”

“My, my, a bit testy this morning, aren’t we?” It was Alisha, her boss’s assistant at Advantage Advertising Inc.—or AAI, which could also be an acronym for a scream. Both fit.

“Are *we* really?” Ragni matched saccharine tone for saccharine tone. This was all she needed—a conversation with Alisha before coffee. Alisha who saw herself more as savior than assistant.

“You will be on time this morning.” The tone conveyed order rather than request.

“Yes.” *God willing and the L on time.* “But not if I stand here visiting.” *Ragni, you must regain the upper hand if you want to keep hold of your remaining sanity.*

“I called you last night to remind you to bring the dog biscuit file, but you didn’t answer and you didn’t return my call.”

The urge to slam the Off button gnawed at her fingers. Ragni never liked the feeling of being in trouble with the principal—and this woman was neither her principal nor her boss.

“I-I’m...” She cut off the urge to apologize and finished, “It’s already in my briefcase.”

Not that the file had ever been out of her briefcase. After arriving home close to nine the night before, she’d collapsed on the couch rather than reviewing the file and preparing for the morning meeting. When she woke enough to crawl into bed several hours later, she’d promised herself to get up early to go over the ad layouts.

“Look, Alisha, if I don’t get off the phone, I won’t make the L, and if I don’t make the L...” She let the sentence run off deliberately.

When Alisha started to speak again, Ragni interrupted. “Got another call, bye.” She pressed the Off button and set the phone back in the stand.

I can do this. I can do this.

Ragni closed her eyes and pictured her dream vacation. In just three days she would walk through the door of the Golden Dreams Spa, greeted by soft music and a heavenly fragrance. A smiling woman would show her to her room and explain the program for the entire week. She’d be pampered with massages every day, pools of this, soaks of that, sea salt scrubs, manicure, pedicure, facial. No cooking, no work. Naps in the afternoon. Workouts every day to magically do away with the accumulated flab. And it was already paid for.

If only she could afford an extra week, surely all her troubles would be over and she’d return refreshed, revitalized, restored, and every other *re* word she could think of. But then the spa brochure promised those same results could happen after only one week. *Most likely they had ocean-front property for sale in Arizona too.*

Ragni opened her eyes and sighed. She would be content with one week at the spa and then two weeks at the cabin she’d rented on the Wisconsin shores of Lake Superior, the cabin her family had frequented many times through the years. Only this year she would go alone and finish mapping out the rest of her life. Or at least get it back on track.

Get yourself dressed and out that door—now! She used to order herself to do something, and she would do it. She shook her head. *Get going! You don’t want to be yelled at for being late—again.*

She headed to the shower and twenty-eight minutes later locked the apartment door behind her. Out on the street, she glanced

heavenward—heavy clouds but still dry. *Go back for my umbrella or take a chance?* she wondered, and then glanced at her watch. A quick dash and she could still make the L—but only by risking the rain.

Once she collapsed into a seat on the train bound for downtown Chicago, she watched the houses, businesses, and buildings blow by as the train picked up speed. Their windows were dead eyes facing the track.

Back on the street, Ragni was headed toward her office when the clouds opened and a biblical deluge soaked the masses before they could get their umbrellas up. Bad-mouthing her own umbrella, safe and dry in the stand by the door at home, Ragni used her morning newspaper to save her hair from turning into dripping strings. As the folded paper collapsed on her head, she picked up her pace. Just another good example of her recent bad choices.

Thank You, God, that I have dry clothes at work. Since her workout clothes had not been used for months, they were indeed dry, albeit not the usual work attire.

“Bad morning, Miss Ragni?” The smiling face of the security guard did nothing to lift her spirits, even though the wide gash of white teeth in his dark face usually brightened her day.

“Yes.” A sneeze caught her before she could cover it.

“You better be getting warm and dry right quick, before you catch your death.”

“I will. Thanks, Norman.” She flew across the marble-floored lobby and smacked her palm against the elevator door closing in her face. Couldn’t those inside see that she was almost there? She punched the Up button with extra force, then punched it again.

“That will surely hurry it along.” The man’s raincoat still dripped,

but his umbrella had evidently been up in time: His hair, face, and shoulders were dry.

“Thanks for the encouragement.” She knew her answer was nearly a snarl, but Mr. Perfect Bradley Dennison always managed to set her off, even when she wasn’t soaking wet and making a puddle on the floor.

He handed her a dry handkerchief. “Here, this could help your face at least.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine.” She sneezed again, and his eyebrows rose.

When the elevator on her right pinged open, he motioned her to go first—which meant she would be in the back of the box even though her floor was only four flights up. She should have used the stairs. By the time she reached the fourth floor, the steam from the effort might have begun the drying process.

Busy people crushed into the elevator before it left the lobby, and sure enough, her floor was the first stop. *Lord, could I have just one tiny break here? Like James comes in late or something? Anything?*

Her stomach clenched, sending the taste of coffee burning back up her throat.

“Excuse me, pardon me.” She shouldered her way out, and the door closed behind her. After the brief warmth of close bodies, the draft in the long hall made her shiver. She paused to push her dripping hair off her face before opening the door to the reception area of AAI. Muted silver-gray walls set off the framed display ads and their awards, all lit by silver picture lights. Bronze football mums stood tall in a silver vase on a table between two black leather love seats, with a matching single mum on the glass desk.

Carmen, the receptionist behind the desk, shook her head in

pretend commiseration. “You look like a drowned rat.” With not a hair out of place, she obviously had come in before the downpour. Ragni knew if she’d been early the way she always used to be, she’d be in the same condition. She felt like slithering along the floor and under the door into her office.

“Thanks a heap. If anyone asks, I’m in the bathroom changing clothes.”

“I’ll let them know.”

Ragni dumped her briefcase by her desk, grabbed her duffel bag out of the closet, and continued on to the rest room.

She went into the last stall and pulled a towel from her bag. She stripped down, then toweled off and pulled on a sports bra, T-shirt, and shorts that now fit like skin, showing every pound she’d gained in recent months. Some people weren’t able to eat when depressed, but she was obviously not of that ilk. *Be grateful for the small things*, she reminded herself. *At least they’re dry*.

She hung her work clothes up to drip and shoved her feet into her lace-up cross-training shoes. After toweling her hair dry, she took her brush and tried to force some style back into her sagging locks. The mirror reminded her that she didn’t need mascara trails to make her pale blue eyes look tired and sad, and the highlights didn’t really bring her dark blond hair to life as her stylist had promised. Even her skin looked tired.

Carmen popped her head in the bathroom. “Ragni, you about ready? James is looking for you.”

Ragni groaned. “Give me two minutes.” *Thanks for nothing, Father. I just needed one little miracle*. What had her boss found wrong now? Once good friends, lately they’d been on opposite sides of nearly

every issue. When had they passed from unanimity and teamwork to dissension? An old song floated through her mind, “Why is everybody always picking on me?”

Grow up, Ragni. You deserve all the recriminations you get. Lately your work stinks. She glommed her shoulder-length hair back into a scrunchy, applied lipstick after making sure her supposedly waterproof mascara no longer ran black tracks down her cheeks, and straight-armed the swinging door.

Three more days and she was outta here.

“You got caught in the rain, I hear.” James Hendricks, head of AAI, glanced up from the advertisement layouts that she’d left on his desk the previous night. Back in the days when she’d been doing the artwork herself, things had never been late. But now that she’d been promoted to team coordinator, she’d yet to meet a deadline. There was always some excuse from her team, but no matter how valid or invalid, the responsibility rested with her. And made her look bad and feel worse. Another cause of the black cloud smothering her.

“Yes. Good thing we’re not meeting with clients today.” She stopped beside him and studied the layout. While the client had approved the tentative design, he’d not seen the finished copy yet. Something about it bothered her.

The way James was studying it, something bothered him too. Excuses pleaded to be said, but Ragni knew sometimes keeping one’s mouth shut was the better part of valor.

“We can’t let it go out like this,” James said.

She barely kept her groan inside. “What changes do you suggest?”

“Pump up the color, take out this...” He slashed through a shadow.

Why didn't I see that?

He turned to look at her. "I'm surprised you let that get by."

Me too. She glanced at him, then back down at the layout. Something was indeed wrong. "Wait a minute. I'll be right back." Heading for her office, she clamped her teeth in a burst of fury. Someone had changed the printout, she was sure of it. *What in the world is going on?*

When the layout on her screen matched the one James had been studying, she leaned back in her chair and jerked the scrunchy from her hair so she could stab her fingers through the damp strands.

I am sure that's not the print I okayed last night. She punched James's extension. "Give me a few minutes. There is something seriously wrong here."

"This was due two days ago."

"I know. But we have some wiggle room with the magazine. I just need to check this out." *Thank You, God, that I am so manic about backups.* After digging in her purse for her keys, she unlocked the lower drawer on her desk, the one where she kept not only important papers but backup CDs.

When she popped the final CD into her computer and brought up the ad, she studied it carefully. Sure enough, while the changes had been minute, the ads were different. This had never been her favorite ad, but it had to go in. She hit the Print button and smoothed her hair back again while she waited.

When she laid the new copy in front of James, he stared at the two layouts. "What happened?"

"I'm not sure." *But you can bet I'm going to find out.*

She spent the rest of the morning making sure the final copy was ready. After she sent it off, she called in her team. Helene, Donald, and Peter took their usual places, coffee cups in hand, and waited for her to start.

“Okay, you want to tell me what’s going on here?” At their blank looks, she continued by holding up the two printouts. “Who made the changes?”

They looked at her, all shrugging, all appearing innocent.

Ragni rubbed her forehead where a headache was past debating whether it should attack and pounded like the bass in a heavy metal band.

“Ragni, the one on the right is the one we finished last night,” Donald, second-in-command, said softly.

“It’s not the one James had for final approval this morning.” She held up the one on the left. “This was. And this is the one now in the computer. Again I ask...any ideas?” *I hate being a supervisor. The extra money just isn’t worth it.* She rubbed her forehead again. *How am I going to find the culprit?*



Too tired to function any longer, and no closer to solving the mystery of the switched ad, Ragni walked out of her office six hours later. Since she’d left work at the traditional rush hour rather than her usual seven or eight o’clock departure, she was forced to stand on the L.

The phone blipped its last ring as she opened the door to her apartment. The answering machine light flashed red, demanding her

attention like everything else in her life. She dumped her briefcase, damp clothes, and coat in a pile on the sofa, and went on to her bedroom to change into sweats.

It was no longer raining, but the wind made it feel more like March than June. Finally getting warm in her gray sweats, she put the teakettle on for herbal tea, although coffee sounded far more appealing. She'd recently banned caffeine after five in hopes that she would find her way into deep sleep rather than the sleep-and-start mode she'd been stuck in. What she really wanted was a hot bubble bath to soak out the cold, relax the muscles still tense from the discussion over the Byers ad, and make her forget the hassles of the day.

Leaving early, or rather on regular time, was not the usual "Good old Ragni, she'll finish it for us no matter how long it takes" modus operandi.

Her list of shoulds had multiplied like dust bunnies on the ride and walk home.

I should call Mother and ask how Dad is.

I should call and cancel the newspaper.

I should ask Susan to water my plants while I'm away.

I should remind James that I won't be at the committee project meeting. While the committee was her baby, she'd already warned the other members that she would be gone for three weeks starting June fourteenth—just over three full weeks to enjoy the spa, the view of the lake, and her solitude. *Please, Lord, let me come back myself and not this vile person who's taken up residence in my skin. I just want my life back.*

Cradling her steaming mug of tea between cold hands, she stared at the answering machine. Ignoring it any longer was not an option. She sipped her tea and pressed the button.

“Ragni, call me as soon as you get in.” Click. That was Susan, brief and brusque. Her only and older sister could give a drill sergeant lessons in giving orders.

She deleted that and waited for the second message. The screen said there were four.

“Ragni, I tried your cell. Where are you? We have to talk.”

“All right, all right. Let me hear all my messages first.” She hit erase again. How could she have forgotten her cell phone? It sat in its recharging cradle.

“Call me immediately.”

Ragni sighed and hit erase again. Surely Susan wasn’t the only one in North America trying to get her. A male voice this time.

“Hi, Ragni.”

The sound of his voice made her grimace and ignore the twinge in her heart region. She’d hoped never to hear that voice again. In fact she’d told the owner of that voice not to bother to call, e-mail, write, come by, or make any attempt at communication two months ago after her painstaking decision to dump their two-year relationship—if one could call it that. Dead-end is what she’d decided when Daren had not been able to commit to the wedding they had occasionally discussed. Or the marriage. She finally made the break to get on with her life. All that said, they’d been friends for a long time, and he’d always been a sympathetic ear. Something she desperately needed at the moment. *Ragni!* She almost deleted but for some reason listened through.

“I wanted to tell you my good news. I met a woman, fell in love, and we are getting married next Saturday. Since you and I were friends for so long, I just wanted your smiling presence at my wedding. Call

me and I'll give you the details. We're not doing a big wedding—you know how I would hate that. Later." The click reverberated in her ear.

This time she did stab the Erase button. Repeatedly. The nerve! The beyond-reasoning nerve of the guy. Hadn't he heard anything she'd said? She felt like pounding both fists on the wall. And perhaps her head. Married! Fell in love! *Yeah, right, Bubba, you got on with your life all right. After swearing that I was ruining yours by cutting off our friendship. The nerve!*

Short of calling him and telling him how she really felt, what could she do? The chocolate almond ice cream in the fridge screamed out her name, as did the white package of specialty cookies in her cupboard. The two united in plotting her further decline into fat-hood.

She thought of calling her best friend, Bethany. *After all, isn't commiserating with you what friends are for?* But then Bethany would give her some line about God's grace being new every morning. She wouldn't recognize a real problem if she tripped over it. *I know God's grace is new every morning. It just doesn't feel like it lately.*

After a sigh she dialed her sister's number instead. Susan would probably turn up on the other side of the front door any minute if Ragni didn't call her back. She gritted her teeth and huffed a snarl. *That creep. To think he called to invite me to his wedding.*

The phone picked up on the second ring. "'Lo." Erika's greeting left plenty to be desired.

"Hey there, sweetie, how are you?"

"I'll get Mom." The phone thunked on the table.

So much for any change in that relationship. Another one that bit the dust—and for no reason that Ragni could understand. She and Erika had been great friends from the time her niece was born until

the terrible twelves. Now fourteen, Erika wore only black, an array of chains and metal, clunky boots, and even black lipstick. Goth was the word, an idea that seemed to preclude any family interaction. Even the sight of her made Ragni shudder. The chip on her shoulder the size of Chicago didn't help either.

Ragni sighed. Being an auntie was, or at least had been, almost as good as being a mother. She jerked her mind back from that track and waited for Susan.

"Just a minute." Susan's voice came on and then left.

Ragni could hear her sister telling Erika to get going on her homework and Erika whining that she didn't have any homework. After all, there were only two more days of school, and why couldn't her mother leave her alone?

Ragni hated whining. She hated—no, intensely disliked—children who had no regard for anyone but themselves, which at the moment fit Erika better than her skin-tight T-shirts. She'd been such a neat kid. Would that person ever return? Susan didn't have it easy, that was for sure. Her husband had taken off with another woman, never to be heard from again, over ten years ago.

"Sorry," Susan said. "Why didn't you answer your cell?"

"Whatever happened to hi, how was your day?" Ragni knew better than to answer her sister like that, but at this point in her awful day, she didn't care.

"Sorry."

Uh-oh, something's wrong. Susan's slipping. She doesn't say sorry—and definitely not twice. "Okay, what's going on?"

"Just a minute." Susan covered the receiver and said something to Erika that brought forth an acid response and a slammed door.

Ragni flinched. She knew her sister hated slamming doors. That had been a bone of contention in their growing-up years. When Ragni knew slamming doors bugged her sister, she'd made sure to do so often. Maybe it was a family trait.

“Okay, here’s the problem.” Susan kept her voice low.

Somehow Ragni knew that Susan’s problem was about to become her problem. *Oh, sure. One more chance to fail.*

Excerpted from pages 1 through 14 of *The Brushstroke Legacy*
ISBN: 1578567890
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