

***No River Too Wide* by Emilie Richards**
Excerpt

Rex had done this before.

At two a.m., as she tossed underwear and socks into a canvas backpack, Janine Stoddard reminded herself this was not the first time her husband had stayed away all night without warning her ahead of time. Keeping her off guard was part of a strategy to keep her from leaving him. Sometimes, by piecing together hints in later conversations, she'd even concluded that Rex had stayed close to the house the whole time to see what she would do in his absence.

It wasn't enough that she obeyed every whim when he was at home. He wanted to be sure she followed his orders when he wasn't, too.

While their son, Buddy, was still alive, Rex had never needed to worry. At the first sign of his mother's defection, Buddy would have called his father. Of course Rex's faith in Buddy had never been put to the test. Janine had loved her son too much to put that kind of pressure on him.

She couldn't think about Buddy. Not now.

It was possible Rex was observing her now. He might be in his car in a vacationing neighbor's driveway, eyes trained on the road to see if Janine tried to slip away. He might even be camping in the woods behind their house, with binoculars and night-vision goggles. Rex considered himself something of a survivalist, and while he was too much of a loner to drill on weekends or join a militia, he collected survival gear the way some men collected fishing lures or model airplanes. He kept all his equipment under lock and key in the same room where he kept an arsenal that included an AK-47, and an assortment of Rugers and Remingtons.

He liked to tell her exactly what each gun could do. Sometimes he gave his lectures with the gun pointed directly at her.

For a moment she was frozen in place, one hand raised toward the dresser, as she thought about those guns. Was she insane? Did she really believe that after all these years she might be able to pull this off? That Rex had really been fooled by her eager attempts to please him, by her waning interest in anything that wasn't centered on his needs, by her reluctance to go out in public without him?

For months now she had carefully waged a campaign to make her husband think his efforts to turn her into one of the walking dead had succeeded at last, that there was nothing left inside her except a desire to please him. The masquerade had given her hope and a reason to live. Having a plan, even a sliver of one, had slowly reinfused her with energy and purpose. As she had pretended to sink lower and lower, she had watched his reaction and gauged his state of mind.

Rex had believed her. She was almost certain. After all, not to believe would have been an admission that twenty-five years of his best efforts to subdue her hadn't borne fruit. He had set out to change his wife to suit his every need, and Rex Stoddard succeeded at everything he set his mind to. He was so superior to those around him that even the possibility he might fail never really entered his mind.

She had known that. She had used that.

But had she really convinced him? If she had, where was he tonight?

One more time, just one more, Janine forced herself to consider other possibilities. Rex wasn't a drinker. Had he been hurt, the police or the hospital would have called her. If his car had broken down on the way home from work, he would have driven home in a rental car, angry at the world and anxious to take his frustrations out on her.

She squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to picture the best scenario. Rex had probably gone off on an overnight business trip, as he was sometimes forced to. Truckers and trucking firms in the Midwest were the primary clients of Rex's insurance agency, and occasionally it was necessary to visit in person to settle claims or sell policies. He hadn't told Janine he was leaving, because he wanted her to think he was still in town, eyes trained on her from some hidden location.

Janine reminded herself she had carefully practiced her escape. Her husband's most powerful weapon was fear. Most likely he would saunter in for dinner in about sixteen hours as if nothing had happened. With luck Rex was sure by now that there was no longer a reason to watch her. As long as she *thought* she was being watched, she would never leave.

No, even though her escape plan hadn't been fully activated, even though she still had weeks before every tiny detail was put in place, now was the time to go. She had been given a chance, something she had prayed for back in the days when she believed in prayer. If she let this moment slip by, there was no telling when she might be given another.

Fumbling in the dark with the assistance of a penlight, she continued packing. She didn't have time to bring much. For months she had made a mental inventory of essentials, knowing it was too dangerous to pack before it was time to go. Instead she had rearranged her drawers so the important things would be easy to find quickly.

Now she mentally reviewed the list as she stuffed items inside a canvas backpack Buddy had once used for scouting. Her watch. A nightgown that was the last gift her daughter, Harmony, had given her before leaving home. Two T-shirts, one pair of pants thin enough to roll. She finished with two letters her parents had written her when she was still in college. For years she had safely kept them in a county fair cookbook that Rex never opened, only daring to move them recently in preparation for this moment. Rex had "encouraged" her to forget her past. Had he found the letters, he would have destroyed them.

Once she was in the bathroom, packing toiletries was easy. She had moved the items she needed into one drawer in the vanity, and now she removed the drawer and dumped everything into her backpack. Then she knelt, reached through the opening where the drawer had been and peeled away an envelope of cash that had been taped to the wall along with a checkbook linked to a secret savings account.

The cash would help her get out of Kansas. The savings account would help her start a new life in New Hampshire, where she had never been and never wanted to go. New Hampshire, which had one of the lowest number of truck and tractor registrations in the nation.

New Hampshire, where she might be safe.

She rested the backpack against the wall and stepped into the closet to dress. The night air was cool, not cold, but she chose corduroy pants, a black turtleneck that she topped with a heavy black sweater and ankle boots. Nothing fit. As part of her plan, she had lost almost twenty pounds. Now when she looked in the mirror she saw a hollow-eyed woman with lank graying hair and cheekbones so sharp they looked as if they might do damage to the skin stretched over them. She looked beaten and defeated.

It was only steps from the truth and would be completely true if she didn't leave this house immediately.