

# PRINCIPAL OF LOVE

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For PVW, a friend like no "other"

*After three months of trying to work with her via phone conversations and e-mails, high school principal Josh Kincannon believed he had an accurate picture of Zeke-Tech's CFO:*

*Conscientious? Oh, yeah.*

*Intelligent? Absolutely.*

*Agreeable? Not so much.*

*Then he caught sight of her wild, vibrant robe and began to wonder what other elements might form a portrait of Vanessa Irish . . .*

"Okay, so we're agreed," Vanessa said, sitting upright and alert. "We'll meet tomorrow after each going over what we learned tonight."

"Yeah, we're agreed," Josh said. "But only because I'm too tired to do battle with you. Let me get some sleep, then get back to you."

She almost smiled. That was a victory, wasn't it?

"We'll meet at the lab site," she said. "Not, uh, anywhere else."

In other words, not her rooms.

"It'll have to be somewhere else."

She stiffened. "Mr. Kincannon, I do not hold meetings where I'm staying, and certainly not ... well, where I'm staying."

"I swear that message said Mrs. Richards'. As for going up to your sitting room, you don't know Mrs. R. if you think we had a choice. . . . Besides, it was interesting." He saw the warning signals not to venture

there; he did anyway. "You're very neat."

"Mr. Kincannon –"

"But tomorrow, we'll have to meet at the high school." He dropped his head so the top of the chair pressed against the tightness at the base of his skull, and muttered, "Sometimes people are a pain in the butt."

"Most times." Her agreement was quick and crisp. "Numbers are much easier. They're –" She searched. "Reliable. They don't lie."

His comment had stemmed from a momentary overload. Hers seemed to flow from something much deeper. He tugged at the conversational thread.

"Numbers can be fudged," he said.

"Not by people who are being honest."

"So, you're back to dealing with people."

"That's the problem."

"You don't mean that. You're a natural."

"Anything but," she said in her measured way. Then came a run of words. "You must get tired of taking care of everybody else."

He looked up, surprised. "That's my job."

Her mouth tightened – disapproval, to hold in words, or both?

"And I like it," he added. "That's what community is about. Individuals helping other individuals."

"Community is the antithesis of individuals."

"Community's a bunch of individuals cooperating," he shot back. "Individuals have to decide to be part of it before there can be a community. It's all up to the individuals."

"Not always."

The bitter edge to those two words sounded like personal experience. And it was the most spontaneous, unguarded comment he'd heard from her.

Like a sudden glimpse of that robe in her otherwise tailored-suits conversation . . .

*from PRINCIPAL OF LOVE*

## CHAPTER ONE

“A woman’s bedroom is the window to her soul.”

Josh Kincannon said nothing in response, not wanting to encourage that topic of conversation from the man following him up this stairway.

Women’s bedrooms were not something Josh let himself dwell on these days – he was a high school principal, a single father of three, and thus, as he ruefully reminded himself, essentially celibate back into misty memory and forward into the foreseeable future.

“It’s a sitting room!” Mrs. Richards called from the foot of the stairs. “Don’t you say I sent you up to that young lady’s bedroom, Malcolm Cottle. That’s the sitting room. With a place to sit while you wait for her.”

“We see it, Mrs. Richards. Thank you.” Josh eyed a spindly-legged settee tucked under the attic room’s sloping roof, and opted to stand for the duration of their wait for the tardy Vanessa Irish.

He would have bet Ms. Irish would be obsessively prompt, especially for this first face-to-face meeting. Another notch on his Wrong About Women belt.

At least this was a minor one.

With what breath he had left after the steep climb, Malcolm gasped a "Beg pardon" down the stairwell toward Mrs. Richards, then resumed his topic. “I read a study on the subject on Wednesday. Or was it Tuesday?”

A study on women’s bedrooms being the window to their souls? That stretched the limits of even Malcolm’s penchant for odd studies.

“The study,” Malcolm pursued, “shows that by observing an individual’s bedroom, strangers more

accurately assessed the individual than long-time associates did. Indeed, assessments by strangers – based solely on a brief observation of what was in plain sight in a bedroom – were more accurate than self-assessments. Truly, a study you would find invaluable.”

Right. Invaluable. For all the women's bedrooms he encountered these days.

“I’m sorry about the inconvenience,” came Mrs. Richards’ voice again. “But I’m sure you’ll be more comfortable in Miss Irish’s sitting room, what with everything in an uproar down here from the painting.”

“We’re fine, Mrs. Richards.” A half step brought Josh to a dormer window overlooking the Drago River. Time to block out Malcolm, Mrs. R, and thoughts of women's bedrooms. Time to refocus on the coming meeting.

“Wednesday. Definitely Wednesday,” Malcolm said from behind him. “It reminded me that Wednesday’s child is loving and giving, which made me think of Zeke, in light of Darcie and the computer lab.”

*Loving and giving.* Wouldn't Zeke-Tech's founder love that? Darcie – Zeke's fiancée and a Drago cop – would tease, while Zeke would become as tongue-tied as when Josh had tried to thank him for providing the site and funds for the computer lab Josh had feared would never become a reality.

Come to think of it, maybe loving and giving wasn't so far off the mark.

So when Zeke insisted Zeke-Tech’s know-how be added to the project in the person of Chief Financial Officer Vanessa Irish, Josh had no problem with it.

Until he’d tried working with the woman.

“. . . provide an uncannily accurate window into the subject’s openness to experience, emotional stability, extroversion, conscientiousness and agreeableness . . .” Malcolm droned on.

After three months of phone conversations and e-mails Josh didn’t need to see Ms. Irish’s bedroom for a

view through that particular window. Conscientious? Oh, yeah. Intelligent? Absolutely. Agreeable? Not so much.

“Ah, and *here* is that very window to Ms. Irish’s soul,” said Malcolm.

Josh turned to see Drago High School’s senior guidance counselor, who should know better, peering in an open doorway.

“Malcolm, Ms. Irish won’t want us sticking our noses in her room.”

“Very interesting,” Malcolm murmured, surveying the room.

Josh crossed to the door, reaching past the older man for the handle. As he did, he couldn’t help seeing in. One dormer held an upholstered chair backed by a lamp, another a desk. A dresser and double bed completed the decor. If Malcolm’s study was right, they were a view into Mrs. R’s soul.

On the other hand, the laptop computer precisely centered on the desk and not another personal possession in sight reflected Vanessa Irish’s.

As Josh started to swing the door closed, a flash of color caught his eye. It pulled his head around to a swirl of blues and greens so rich and vibrant they left peacocks in the dust.

A robe. Draped from the corner of the open bathroom door.

Josh Kincannon – high school principal, single father of three, and thus essentially celibate both back into misty memory and forward into the foreseeable future – felt the rueful humor of that self-description wither like a leaf in the desert.

The robe wasn’t filmy or see-through and, unless Vanessa Irish was seven feet tall, it would cover her from neck to toes. And yet –

“Josh! Your phone!”

Malcolm’s voice brought Josh abruptly to the realization that he stood gripping the knob of the still open door, oblivious to his ringing phone.

“Mr. Kincannon,” came the crisp voice when he’d answered. “I scheduled our meeting for three-forty-five.”

He yanked at the doorknob, slicing the view into the bedroom in half and turned his back on it for good measure.

“Yes, we did, Ms. Irish.” Damn. Was she trying to back out? He added quickly, “If you’re delayed, Mr. Cottle and I can wait for you here.”

There was a slight pause. “Wait where?”

“At Mrs. Richards’.” His gaze returned to the robe. “In your rooms.”

“My rooms.”

The hairs on the back of Josh’s neck went to full alert.

He could decipher all the nuances of a teenager’s “yeah,” from guilt to ecstasy to uncertainty to grief, but he picked up no identifiable emotion in Vanessa Irish’s words. Yet those hairs were at full attention.

“Yes.” He added carefully, “Your sitting room at Mrs. Richards’.”

“You were to come to the lab site. I’m there now.”

He pulled a crumpled pink “while you were out” note from his pocket. It clearly said 3:45 p.m. and Mrs. Richards’ house. On the other hand the message-taker had been a sophomore girl he’d found sobbing over a boy who hadn’t said hello to her during second-period office duty.

“We’ll be there in five minutes, Ms. Irish.”

He ended the call, hustled Malcolm out—ignoring his questions and Mrs. Richards’ surprise—and reached the computer lab site in four minutes flat.

Not waiting for Malcolm, Josh jogged up the concrete steps fronting a row of mostly boarded up storefronts off Main Street and pushed open the door of what had once been the shoe-repair shop run by Zeke’s father.

A figure at the back of the long, narrow main room turned to face him. The woman he’d failed to get any

reading on despite three months of phone calls and e-mails. The woman he needed to work with so this project happened fast and right for Drago. The woman who wore that peacock's robe.

"Mr. Kincannon." Unsmiling, she checked her watch. "Less than five minutes."

She wore a suit the color of tree bark. Glasses were hooked into the high neckline of a matching blouse. She had her hair up, but without any of the visible bands, barrettes or pins he associated with the women at school lamenting a bad hair day. Whatever held this hair didn't show, and it gave every appearance of having been put up on purpose. Smooth and contained.

She matched exactly the woman he'd dealt with so far. If she had any peacock in her, every feather was carefully hidden. Although even this boxy suit couldn't completely mask rich curves.

He introduced Malcolm, as the man who would organize programs at the lab once it was built.

"Mr. Kincannon –" she started.

"Call me Josh." He extended his hand and smiled.

Some women connected with only their fingers. Not her. Her handshake was palm-to-palm and full wrap-around fingers. As businesslike as her voice.

"The contractor should be here shortly. Two Zeke-Tech employees are also coming."

She hadn't invited him to call her Vanessa, hadn't unbent one inch. No matter. He'd make this work. He had to in order to guarantee the computer lab met Drago's needs.

As for the hairs at the back of his neck indicating something was up with her, they didn't matter. And whether Vanessa Irish was hiding something about herself, something he'd glimpsed in a robe, that was irrelevant.

Although it sure was interesting . . .

\* \* \* \*

More than an hour after the local contractor and

Zeke-Tech representatives from electrical and IT had joined them, Vanessa adjusted her glasses and acknowledged Josh Kincannon made her uncomfortable.

Recognizing and acknowledging her reactions to people counted among the elements her executive coach emphasized. A skill she had not acquired, as others did, from family and social peers.

She quelled a useless longing for her former state of complete unawareness of such matters, when she would have ignored such irrelevancies as being uncomfortable with Josh Kincannon.

Josh. What kind of name was that for a high school principal? High school principals were Mr. Castro, maybe Mrs. Albertson. Or Mr. Schmidt.

Not Call-me-Josh. And not – definitely not – accompanied by a smile rippling lines up his cheeks and revealing a triangle of bright teeth. Yet that couldn't be why he made her uncomfortable. She'd gotten over the nonsense of attractive men making her uncomfortable a long, long time ago.

He'd been in her rooms.

No. Absurd. That space was no more hers than a hotel room was.

She straightened.

Recognizing and acknowledging was all well and good, but the bottom line was that he would never know of her reaction, and it certainly would not affect how she did her job.

She consulted her handheld. "Accommodation for wiring is next."

"Looks good," said Larry, the electrical expert from Zeke-Tech. He gave the local contractor an approving nod. "It's got one-hundred percent more space for the big pipe and the radius turns look good."

She fought the urge to cut them short as he and the contractor talked about trench, conduit and coaxial cabling. Larry had given her all she needed in his first two words. If she didn't trust his assessment of the

wiring needs, he wouldn't be here.

But her coach also emphasized letting people expand beyond yes or no.

As inefficient as that was, Vanessa acknowledged that her interactions with employees ran more smoothly now, so logic indicated Cathie knew what she was talking about.

The local contractor had replaced doors and windows, added sprinkler, air conditioning and heating systems, and created a bathroom from a back storage area. To this point Zeke-Tech's primary responsibility had been writing checks. Now that it was a matter of melding the space and the technology, she'd brought in the experts.

That should have been sufficient. She didn't need to be here. Except Zeke wanted her on-scene.

She swallowed a sigh. And encountered Josh Kincannon's gaze.

*That was why he made her uncomfortable.*

He kept looking at her. Not brief, polite glances. Not the bored, uninterested looks of a certain class of male. But long, searching surveys. Like she was a puzzle.

"What about wall space for a blackboard?" the high school guidance counselor asked.

"No blackboard," Vanessa said. "Chalk dust and computers don't mix. A whiteboard. It will double as a screen for an overhead projector." She added a note to her list.

Looking up she met Josh Kincannon's gaze again. She held it, lifting one eyebrow. He didn't look away, returning her look with a shifting of his mouth she couldn't translate into a recognizable smile or frown.

"Excellent," the counselor said. "An overhead projector will be useful."

"A projector brings up how we'll control natural light." Josh gestured toward the original storefront window and a glass-topped door that together occupied

nearly the entire width.

“Remove the glass and make it a solid wall. Replace the door,” she instructed the contractor.

“We don’t want to block the great natural light,” objected Josh. “And then – what? Put in fluorescent?”

His mouth shifted again. A smile, maybe.

“Natural light causes screen glare,” she said.

“Any light can cause glare,” Larry said.

“Artificial light’s easier to control,” she said.

“Natural light’s better. And –” Josh’s eyes glinted with what might have been amusement or challenge or something else entirely. People’s emotions were so ... imprecise. “—it’s free.”

Larry coughed, the other Zeke-Tech employee shuffled his feet and the guidance counselor cleared his throat.

Yes, she had brought them back to costs several times in the discussion. And she would keep on doing it. That was her job.

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about the entry,” the contractor said. “You wouldn’t want the door opening directly into where the computers are because of temperature regulation.”

“Good point,” Larry said.

“And interrupting classes,” the counselor added.

“I could build a wall, about here.” The contractor gestured to a spot four feet from the door. “That would form an entryway, leave room for a desk in the corner for signups or business stuff without interrupting folks working on computers in the main room, like Malcolm said.”

“Great idea, Todd,” Josh said. “What about making the wall solid partway up, then the top part from glass blocks to let light in, but filter it.”

The contractor nodded. “I could do that easy.”

“We’d have to check angles, but it could diffuse the light enough to leave very little glare,” Larry added.

After a few minutes of their pacing off distances,

discussing angles of the sun and predicting effects of glass block at various levels, Vanessa said, “Fine. You—” She nodded at Larry, then the contractor. “—explore this, pull together comparative cost figures and report back to me by—”

“And me,” Josh inserted easily.

“— Tuesday,” she concluded.

If the cost wasn’t more than her solution, fine. And if Josh insisted on an update, fine. She had the final authority.

Her mind zeroed in on another aspect. “There need to be privacy partitions between the stations. Cubicles, with a door to access each.”

The five men – contractor, tech expert, electrical expert, guidance counselor and high school principal – turned and looked at her. After half a dozen seconds, only Josh kept looking.

“Cubicles? Why?” he asked.

“For privacy when a user is at his or her computer.”

“For classes everybody needs to see the instructor. And besides,” he added, “who wants to be cut off from everybody else in a little cubicle?”

“Anyone who’s sane.” Vanessa could have kicked herself for speaking aloud.

But Josh smiled, quick and bright. “Nah. Everyone’ll want everything open, so people can kibbutz.”

She saw two things in that moment: He thought she’d been kidding and he believed what he’d said.

Before she absorbed either observation, movement caught her attention. Three small figures lined up outside the old storefront, the larger two with hands cupped to the window, the smallest pressing its entire face against it.

Josh released a low groan. “Excuse me.” The next instant he was out the door. The three figures moved to him, the smallest hurtling itself at his legs.

“Josh’s kids,” the contractor murmured, and

exchanged a look with the counselor, who said, “Josh has full custody. Nothing comes before his kids.”

Admirable in theory. But unreasonable if he expected everyone to put his children first. Her responsibility was to Zeke-Tech, and the two Zeke-Techers had a flight out of Chicago to catch.

“We have a tight schedule, and more to cover.”

The counselor went to the door, holding a low-voiced conversation with Josh.

With the door open, the children were clearer. The smallest was a genderless blob masked by an oversized jersey and dirt from the window smeared thoroughly over its face. It had one hand wrapped around Josh’s leg and the opposite thumb in its mouth. The middle child, a boy, was thin and wore glasses, peering inside with curiosity. The tallest, a girl, stared directly at Vanessa with the intensity of her father but without any of his apparent inclination to amusement.

Josh stepped back into the building, detaching the smallest from his leg with a smile – definitely a smile – while the counselor stepped out. Before the door closed, Josh said, “Be good, and I’ll see you at dinner.”

He remained watching as the three children and the older man headed off. At last he returned to the group.

“Child-care emergency,” he said. “Malcolm’s pinch-hitting. Now, back to the spacing. Folks need room to put papers and books. And sometimes they’ll want to use one machine together ...”

The others picked up the discussion.

It had not been a long interruption, yet Vanessa felt unsettled. In fact, she’d felt that way since arriving in Drago, Illinois this morning.

If forced to define it, she might describe a sensation of something closing in on her. Which made no sense. This small town sat in the middle of cornfields. There was nothing but space around it.

Yet Zeke had acted as if he’d bestowed a treat by

insisting she come here, saying a change of scenery would be good for her, when the last thing she needed was a distraction from the end of the fiscal year approaching. She'd explained, but Zeke hadn't budged about her overseeing this in person.

So, oversee it, she would.

She straightened her shoulders and weighed into the discussion.

The sooner she wrapped up this project, the sooner she returned to her office.

\* \* \* \*

"This will be great," Josh Kincannon said.

It was after six, and they were the only two left. For the past half-hour, they had thrashed out adjustments to the tight schedule set up earlier. They had just three months before the lab's scheduled grand opening in early December.

"The general contractor has done an admirable job," she said.

"Todd's more of an all-around guy than a general contractor. Did most of the work himself."

He slowly turned around the empty shell coated in construction dust.

His circling stopped. He faced her, as if expecting something.

"It's going to be great," he repeated.

His mouth slowly widened. His lips parted, revealing that triangle of straight, white teeth. Lines echoed up his cheeks like . . . like ripples in a pond overjoyed to have a rock thrown into it. His eyes, shining with fervor, narrowed slightly as his cheeks rose. A grin. Definitely a grin.

He was grinning.

At her.

With delight.

She couldn't begin to think of a response. But he didn't seem to need one. He began another circuit of the space, this one with a wider radius.

She'd had people smile at her, of course she had. From polite to placating to pleased to distracted. And, back before she knew better, lasciviously. She'd also had people laugh around her, sometimes at her, occasionally with her.

But she counted the number of men who had grinned at her in delight on two fingers – Zeke Zeekowsky and Peter Quincy, the third original member of Zeke-Tech.

And neither Zeke nor Quince had ever made her feel as if the delight behind his grin had something to do with her. Her work, yes. Her ability to figure out how to make dimes stretch into dollars, definitely. But her, no.

“This is what this town has sorely needed.” Josh looked over his shoulder at her, then, slowly, turned the rest of his body without taking his eyes off her. “Don't get me wrong. Zeke bringing in a division of Zeke-Tech is fantastic. It'll bring people and business in like Drago's never seen before. But that's from the outside. This – this will let people pick up skills to help themselves. You know what they say about feeding people is nice, but teaching them to fish means they can eat forever. This will let the people of Drago fish. It will give them skills to stay here and still earn a good living.”

She shook her head. “No. It will give them the skills they need to leave.”

His grin died completely.

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