

Sherry Chamblee



Matchmaker,  
Matchmaker



Make me  
a match...

# Matchmaker, Matchmaker

Make Me A Match

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## CHAPTER 1

Jack Adams got out of his truck and squinted in the bright afternoon sunlight. He stood in the dirt and gravel parking lot of Victory Community Chapel, his new place of employment. Technically his new home, as well, since he'd be staying in the prophet's chamber until he found his own apartment.

The city of Paradise was tucked away among pine covered hills of northern California, and if Jack hadn't gotten hired at this church, he'd have never even known it existed. It was truly paradise-like, with trees that seemed to reach the sky, thick groves of red-barked Manzanita everywhere, and a clean freshness in the air.

Through much of the drive up the mountain he had felt like he was heading off into the wilderness. Entering town hadn't been much different, as many of the houses were hidden behind thick screens of bushes and trees, and were accessed by dirt drives. He already loved all of it.

But business first. The principal of the Christian day school that had hired him had said there would be a meeting in the fellowship hall with the church and school staff, sort of a staff get-together before the beginning of the school year. He checked his watch to be sure, but he had arrived just in time. He searched the buildings in front of him for signs of life. One was obviously a church building, with a steeple, a large stained glass window covering one entire wall, and a flower lined path winding around the side to the front doors.

On the other side of a small playground was another building, this one low and long, with small windows lining the one wall he could see, as well as one door. As he headed towards what he thought must be the fellowship hall, the door was flung open.

He breathed in again deeply. The whole place smelled of pine, and lilac...and meatloaf.

*Meatloaf?*

As odd as the scent was among the other woody ones, his stomach grumbled at the hint of available food. Just then, the door of the long building flew open and a lady came bustling out. She bustled very well, quite the professional, and Jack had to stop himself from outwardly smirking. Older, with a puff of white hair carefully twisted into a bun on the top of her head, the woman didn't bother searching the parking lot. She was looking for him, and she had found him. When her gaze focused his direction he suddenly felt like a deer in headlights. For a split second he wasn't sure if he should hide, or meet her head on, but he opted for the latter, slapping a smile on his face for good measure at the last minute.

“You must be Mr. Adams.” She peered at him over the top of a pair of glitzy spectacles, pink with glitter that flashed in the sun. Straightening her already straight jacket, she held out a hand, clearly expecting him to shake and introduce himself. But before he could respond with anything more than just a quick head nod, she had grabbed his hand, shook it once, tucked it into the crook of her elbow, and began escorting him toward the door she had just exited.

The entire short walk, the woman holding his arm hostage chattered away.

“My name is Mabel Pierce. You come right along with me. You are just in time for the teacher-staff get-together, so we’ll have you meet everyone you’ll be working with. I’m just a volunteer in the church office, but Pastor told all of us to just come right along. We’re like one big happy family, you know? I think you’ll love it here, and we’re so glad to have you, but don’t you let anyone pressure you. You just be yourself, ok?”

“Um, ok?”

“We’re a friendly bunch, but don’t let some of these gals talk your ear off. I mean they can just go on and on about nothing. I don’t know where they come up with some of this stuff.”

Jack shook his head, laughing. This lady was a hoot.



Melissa gazed at the gloppy mess in the pan. How could something that looked so awful in the preparation phase, taste so good straight out of the oven? The marshmallows and Rice Krispies had to be mixed a little more, while still being kept warm, and then poured into the buttered glass pan quickly or it would be impossible to clean later.

Noise from the church’s fellowship hall drifted through the closed doors. She smiled listening to it. The ladies were all in a dither just because the new teacher could arrive at any moment. Melissa shook her head as she poured her marshmallow/Rice Krispy goo into the pan, scraping the pot as clean as she could. Hopefully the chaos out in the other room would stay right there – in the other room. She had enough on her mind with needing to make snacks for the Teacher Orientation coming up the next week.

She grimaced as she heard the kitchen door open, but pasted a smile on her face. Mrs. Scott’s high, clear voice took over.

“Melissa, you have to come out here and help us set up these tables. Mr. Adams will be here any minute, and you know we want to be ready.”

“Let me get these in the refrigerator, Mrs. Scott, and I’ll be right out.”

She watched as the older lady backed out into the fellowship hall again, shouting directions to the other ladies already out there taking care of all the setup. Melissa knew she wasn't really needed, they had plenty of help. But Mrs. Scott was well on her way to working herself up into a real tizzy.

She scooted her pan onto a shelf in the refrigerator, having covered it with foil first, and wiped her hands on her jean skirt. Poking her head into the fellowship hall would more than placate Mrs. Scott, so she walked out and perused the well stocked tables. Everyone's meals looked lined up and ready to go. What else did Anne Scott think she needed to do?

Anne did not make her wait long to find out. She had Melissa rearranging every plate, getting better serving spoons from the kitchen, and finding the proper pitcher for lemonade in the cupboard. By the time someone said they saw his truck turning into the parking lot, Melissa was exhausted. Hoping for a little peace and quiet, she fled to the kitchen, where she intended to stay.

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Mabel ushered him into the room that served as the church's fellowship hall, and straight to a small group of men talking by a table laden with all sorts of great smelling food.

As they approached, an older man in the group turned and looked at them, stepping away from the rest. He held out his hand, a big smile transforming his face from scholarly, dignified gentleman to kind old grandpa in one lightning flash.

"Hey there, I'm Rick Johnson, pastor here. I take it you're the new guy, Jack?"

"That's me." Jack smiled back, immediately warmed. This was the first time he had met Pastor Johnson in person, though they'd talked several times over the phone.

The pastor turned to introduce the other men in the group. Jack had already met one of them – Ron Mason, the school principal, who had recruited him to work for the school in the first place.

From that moment on, he was clapped on the back, had his hands shaken (both of them, and vigorously), and hugged by one little old lady barely able to stand except with a walker, who he was told he was to call 'granny.' He met George, Laura, David, Samantha, Susette, another Dave, Dana, and a Missy in there somewhere, too.

He had picked up on the scent of that meatloaf as soon as he'd walked in the room, but for several minutes he was prevented from even reaching the table, much less finding the good stuff.

Obviously his arrival had been far more anticipated than he had considered. Eventually, however, he did at least get to the food table and grab a plate. Just as he reached the bread roll section, a whirlwind in a dress caught him. She was tiny, talked even faster than Mabel Pierce, her Hispanic accent charming but harder for him to understand. She introduced herself as Maria Hernandez.

Just as she was launching into her opinion on which dishes he should try first, a young woman came up beside her and put her arm around Maria's shoulders, squeezing tight.

"Hey Maria, I see you've captured our new teacher." She turned sympathetic, wide green eyes on him, and he felt himself smiling back in return.

"Si, of course." Maria smiled at her indulgently. "Mr. Adams, this is our Angela. She is also one of our teachers, Kindergarten." Then he saw it – the telltale mark of a mother hen pairing him up with her favorite chickadee. Maria sized up Angela's wavy blonde locks, then noted Jack's short, brown hair, and nodded in approval. She had decided. He and Angela were a matched set, according to Maria Hernandez, that is.

"Yes, I believe you two will get along perfectly." She clasped her hands in front of herself, like a little kid on Christmas morning. Angela looked at him apologetically, and he shrugged one shoulder. Angela fell in step behind him, and began gathering her own food, while still chatting amiably with Maria. The two were like a couple magpies.

Jack's overtired mind was focused on only one thing, though – his grumbling stomach. It was currently telling him he had better not miss out on that meatloaf. Then he saw it – one piece left on the plate. His obsession with meatloaf wasn't normal, as most people he knew claimed to hate it. Maybe he'd been spoiled as a child, but his mother's meatloaf was always great, and he'd learned to get as much of it as he possibly could at any function – short of stuffing it into his pants pockets, of course.

So it was that when another fork entered his peripheral vision, heading for that last delectable morsel, not only did his stomach grumble louder, but he angled his body trying to box the other person out and away from his target.

"Hey! Oh, excuse me." He heard a female voice from in front this time. "I didn't mean to come between you and food."

He turned to see a pair of grey eyes this time, in a face that was looking at him with quite a bit of amusement.

“I’m sorry,” he said, turning back to the plate and spearing that meatloaf like it was a prize-winning 12-point antlered buck. “Got it.” The girl heard his mumbling and laughed, actually laughed at him.

“I’m Natalie.” She smiled and stuck out her hand to shake his. “And of course, I know who you are; the brand new 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher at Victorious Christian Academy.”

“Nice to meet you, Natalie.” His words came out muffled, as he had a mouthful of meatloaf that was decidedly not his mother’s, but would do pretty well. Swallowing, he speared another piece and gestured with his forkful. “I haven’t eaten today really, been driving from Arizona and didn’t want to stop. I’m starving. And I love meatloaf.”

“No, it’s fine. I completely understand.” She looked decidedly pleased with herself.

“You made this?” When her grin grew even wider, he figured he’d guessed correctly. “Pretty good.”

“Thanks. My mom’s recipe.” She began picking through the food herself, though staying in the line in front of him. Maria, not to be outdone, began again trying to get him to pick certain things on the table, while Angela and Natalie talked across him. It was then he saw several older ladies coming at them, all with that mother hen, ‘have-I-got-the-girl-for-you look on their faces.

Jack panicked. A door behind the tables looked promising. Maybe it was a bathroom. Before the group of newcomers could make it to him, he scooted around the end of the table, retaining a death grip on his now-full plate, and made a beeline for that door to solitude. Finding he had no free hand to push the swinging door open, he turned and backed through.

As soon as he was through the door he realized he was not in a bathroom, but the kitchen. Those ladies wouldn’t have any problem following him in there. Thinking fast, he planted his feet, bracing his back against the door, and stood firm, his head resting on the door behind him, eyes closed.

“Well, hello there.”

Jack jumped at the unexpected voice – female of course – nearly bobbling his hard-won plate of food onto the floor. Women were everywhere in this church. Opening his eyes, he saw a young woman with short, straight brown hair, and big brown eyes peering at him curiously.

“You must be the new teacher. Is there something you were looking for?”

“What? Oh. This must look silly, right?”

“Sort of, but I wasn’t going to say anything.” She took another swipe at mixing whatever she had in the bowl on the counter in front of her. “You know though, your hiding out in here is the way stories start. Won’t look good. And is that Maria I hear out there trying to figure out why the kitchen door won’t open?”

“Yes, and I’m not hiding.” He felt a shot of guilt at the lie, and knew he had to backtrack. “Well, I am sort of hiding.” The door behind him shook as Maria knocked – hard. “You’ve got to help me.”

“Why are you hiding from them?” She tilted her head, like she was fascinated by his possible answer.

“They’re after me.”

“So you’re hiding from a couple girls?”

“You bet. You have no idea how scary you people are to us men.” Jack planted his back more firmly against the door, hoping Miss Maria would get discouraged and stop pushing on the door.

“Scary? What’s so scary about us?”

“Almost everything.”

“You’re serious?”

“Serious people are stressed out. Those who laugh in the face of adversity have all the fun. I laugh in the face of adversity.” Jack still stood with his back against the door.

“It looks to me like you hide in the face of adversity.”

He cocked his head to one side and grinned crookedly. “Are you one of those people who argue about everything?”

She frowned at him, then rolled her eyes. “No.”

“You just proved my point.”

“I did not.” She was frowning, but he still wasn’t sure if she was annoyed by him, or found him amusing.

“You’re funny. I’m Melissa, by the way. Not that you’ll remember. You’re meeting practically everyone in the church today.”

“Yes, yes I am. But it’s nice to meet you, Melissa. And I’m sure I’ll remember.”



Melissa stared at the new teacher who had just intruded into her territory. Well, sort of her territory. It had been given to her for the duration of the Welcome-to-Town fellowship, Mrs. Scott having asked her to head up the crew. Not until she'd arrived had she realized she was the entire crew. She also hadn't realized Mr. Jack Adams would walk right in to the kitchen and stand there in an obvious attempt to hide from some of the more zealous members of the congregation.

He had a nice face, with an interesting hairdo, but attractive. When his wide brown eyes met hers, she felt a shock go through her system, which she did her best to ignore.

"Look, the best thing is always to face your fears." She gave the lemonade another stir, then placed the pitcher on the counter – a little too hard, meaning she had to wipe off that counter as well – and dried her hands on the towel at her waist. "We have a great church family here, but some of them can be a bit overwhelming."

"Just a bit."

"Still, I don't think you'll be able to hide in the kitchen the whole time you're here. People will wonder."

Then Mr. Jack Adams smiled, and Melissa wasn't sure she'd ever seen a better one. There would be lots of young girls swooning over the new guy this year.

"Come on, let's get you out there again. I'll run some interference for you."

Melissa turned and led the way back out to the fellowship hall.

The people of Victory Chapel could indeed be overwhelming, as she'd told Mr. Adams – Jack. Still, they meant well, and she watched as they gathered around their guest of honor. Mrs. Scott and Mrs. Hernandez – Anne and Maria – both kept pushing dishes on him, and it took her a moment to realize why. Anne kept trying to get him to try the meatloaf again, while Maria tried to foist the macaroni and cheese on him. Each was convinced he'd love theirs.

They were turning the potluck into an Olympic sport with Jack's opinion the gold medal prize.



## CHAPTER 2

Jack could not possibly eat another bite, but the lady before him was very persistent. She had introduced herself as Anne Scott. Her wispy red hair was pulled up tight into a bun at the back of her neck, and a pair of thin glasses perched on her thin nose.

Anne had cornered him at the drink table when he tried to get himself a cup of coffee. She held a plate of that meatloaf, and was just adamant that he try more. He kept shaking his head no and pushing the plate away.

Finally she got the hint about the food, but her talk still hadn't quieted at all. She stood in front of him, sandwiching him between herself and the wall near the table. He was completely penned in.

"You know, you are so blessed, Jack. You've landed at a church with not just one, but two eligible young ladies. You met my daughter, Natalie, earlier?" He wasn't sure why this woman was so obsessed with him, but he didn't want to offend her, even as he realized her math was a bit off.

"Only two young ladies?" He'd met at least three.

Right then Melissa walked by, checking the lemonade pitcher to see if it needed refilling. Anne focused on her for a millisecond, watching as she began to turn away.

"Oh, I forgot about Melissa. We all sort of do, I guess."

From his vantage point, he could see Melissa's face clearly. He saw her hand hesitate at Anne's words, her eyes dart to the side, and her head tilt just a little. She had heard the older woman's words. Jack hoped for both their sakes that Mrs. Scott was done talking. She wasn't.

"I don't think she's too interested in being eligible, you know. She's an independent one."

"I'm sure she has her reasons. And it's good to be able to do things on your own."

No one else would have noticed, but Jack saw the little tug at Melissa's lips. He wasn't so glad to see her quickly swipe at the corner of her eye. Could Mrs. Scott's words have hurt her so badly?

Anne nodded her head so hard a lock of her wispy red hair came loose and fell across her forehead.

"Yes, yes, I know. That's so true. I wouldn't mean anything else, of course. I tried to help her

once, set her up with a perfectly nice young man, but she refused. Said she didn't date teachers."

He tried to ignore the tiny stab of disappointment as he watched Melissa recover her poise seamlessly, as if nothing had happened. She acted so natural he began to wonder if he had been mistaken, and she hadn't overheard Anne's words. The fellowship hall was on the small side, and pretty full of people, so Melissa had to weave in and out of conversations in order to make her way back to the kitchen. As she did, she greeted everyone with a wave and a pleasant word, leaving smiles behind her like a wake in the ocean.

Interesting girl.

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Finally the pastor put his arm around Jack's shoulders and had mercy.

"Ok folks, I know you all want to get to know our new friend here, but I think Jack is getting all tuckered out. I'm going to show him to his rooms. Everybody say bye now!"

The pastor seemed like a down to earth, reasonable man, and one who Jack could really enjoy working with. Upon meeting him, Jack had been surprised to see he was at least in his 70s. Over the phone he had sounded like a much younger man. It would be almost like working with his father again.

"Well, Jack, what do you think?" Pastor Johnson was walking him across the parking lot. The fellowship hall was in its own building on the other side of the parking lot from the church's main building which also housed the school where he would be teaching. Jack nodded his approval.

"Very nice group of people you have here."

The pastor beamed. "Yes, we're a family, with all that brings with it. Sometimes we get on each other's nerves of course, but we always wind up working it out in the end."

They walked into the main lobby, and stopped at the double glass doors leading in to the auditorium. A long hallway stretched in both directions, wrapping around the auditorium. The pastor turned left and led the way down the hall to the end, before it turned the corner.

“Would you like to see the rest of the building?” The pastor spoke eagerly, obviously hoping Jack would want to see the rest of the place, so he agreed. Pastor Johnson walked him through the halls, pointing out whose offices were where, what each room was usually used for, and where he could find any supplies he might need for the coming school year.

The building housing the church was built like a “U” – with the auditorium taking up the curved middle space, and two wings for offices and classrooms.

A few minutes later they made their way back to Jack’s new room. The Prophet’s Chamber was at the far corner in the bottom of the ‘U’ of the church wing, and away from most of the school classrooms.

Many churches had prophet’s chambers – a room, or guest suite, set aside for visiting preachers or missionaries who needed a place to spend a night or two. Sometimes a visiting speaker would rather stay right there than get a hotel room, and Paradise’s hotels were pretty scarce.

This one was nice, for being in such a small church. The door opened straight into a small sitting area, black leather couch along one wall with a small television on a stand in the corner, and another door next to the couch, leading to a small bedroom and attached bathroom. He absently glanced around the little living room, noticing a few pictures on the wall, most featuring the young blonde woman he’d met at the fellowship, as she pointed out various features of the church buildings.

Pastor Johnson pointed out one of those mini refrigerators set up in the bedroom, and he opened it. “There’s something in here already, Pastor.”

The men took it out, and Jack read a little post-it stuck to the top.

*“Welcome to Victory, from Natalie Scott.”*

“Oh, the Natalie that made the meatloaf, right?”

“Yes, that’s the one.” Pastor Johnson looked amused. “I’m guessing you’re going to be popular around here. Already pulling out all the stops, aren’t they.” He paused, then thoughtfully turned to Jack, rubbing his temple with one hand. “Look, Jack, I think it’s only fair to warn you. We have a couple ladies who like to think of themselves as matchmakers.”

“Really?” Jack held off from rolling his eyes. He hadn’t reached the ripe old age of 27 years as a bachelor without having had a few ladies trying to set him up before now.

“Yes, well, you’ve never met these ladies.” Rick Johnson sighed. “Anne Scott and Maria Hernandez have been trying to raise the art of matchmaking to an Olympic sport level for years

now. They've been only hampered by the scarcity of unmarried people in our church – because, believe me, the only criteria they have is that the person isn't already married.”

“At least there's that.”

Pastor Johnson laughed, and Jack shrugged, grabbing one of the cookies off the plate and downing it in one bite.

“I figure I can handle anything they can dish out.”

“Thing is, I've never yet seen them face off against each other, and I get the bad feeling that that's what's happening here this time. Just be aware, you could be in for more than you bargained for.”

Jack clapped him on the back, trying to reassure the pastor that he was more than prepared, though he wasn't at all sure it was true.

Both men went to get the rest of Jack's things out of the truck. As soon as all his bags and boxes were brought inside, Pastor Johnson took his leave, begging off for an evening of study to make sure he was ready for the next day's sermons.

He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

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Maria Hernandez was having a busy day. Jack saw her leave Melissa sitting at the front of the auditorium the Sunday after he arrived in town. The little Hispanic woman made a beeline for him, next. He felt a quake in his spirit, and considered running, but realized he was acting like a little kid caught in some wrongdoing by a strict aunt.

“Mr. Adams, Jack?” Maria grabbed his big hand with both of her small ones, and squeezed and shook until he grimaced. “It is so good to have you here with us finally. Did you sleep well? Did you like your rooms?”

He nodded, but she didn't give him a chance to really answer.

“How about the pictures on the wall? Aren't they lovely? Angela makes a pretty tour guide, doesn't she?”

“Of course.” Jack realized all the pictures in the Prophet's Chamber were of some part of the church, with Angela standing in the foreground somewhere, pointing artistically. She was a pretty girl, with long flowing blonde hair that fell smoothly down her back, and big, bright green eyes. Very polished, like the girls he had known at Bible college the last few years.

“So you like the pictures?”

“They’re very nice, Miss Maria, thank you. I take it you decorated the rooms?”

“Oh yes, just for you. So glad you like them.” She patted his hand again. “Such a nice young man you are, too. Angela is a nice young girl, you know. She graduated from Bible college just a couple years ago, and her students just adore her. Plus she plays the piano! We’re so glad she came here.”

Maria gathered a deep breath, probably preparing to launch into even more praise about Angela, but right then Melissa walked up next to her and laid a hand on her shoulder.

“Maria, how are you today? I’m sorry to interrupt, but I think Pastor is looking for you in the bookstore.”

Maria left, nodding her goodbyes, the look of regret on her face not lost to Jack. He smiled at Melissa.

“Seems you’ve saved me again.”

She watched Maria walk away for a second. “Yes, I do believe you owe me one for that.”

“Is Pastor Johnson really looking for her?”

“He’s always looking for her this time on Sunday morning. She’s the one that opens the bookstore, but sometimes she gets distracted. She’s a wonderful lady, really.”

“I’m sure she is. She certainly does think Angela is wonderful.”

“Well of course. Angela is one of my best friends, actually.” Melissa stepped back as another man whose name Jack didn’t remember walked up, shook Jack’s hand and welcomed him to town.

As the other man left, Jack turned to Melissa. “So how long before I’m not called ‘the new guy’ any longer?”

“Oh, I suggest you settle in with that title for awhile. You’ll be the ‘new guy’ until we hire someone else. Then you’ll be the old new guy.”

She smiled at him brightly again, then walked off to greet other people coming in. He watched her go, and noticed again as people smiled when she walked by. Though she didn’t seem to notice, she appeared to be as well liked as Angela.

Jack looked around at all the people streaming in through the double doors in the back. There weren't many, maybe 60 people or so, but they all greeted him warmly and shook his hand. He remembered a few from the meeting on Saturday.

He also got the chance to meet several of the kids who would be in his class starting the next day. Only a few came from the church, several other kids came from other churches in town, and some even came up from Chico, so he had quite a few left still to meet.

That night Jack read in his Bible for a long time. The next day he would be entrusted with a class of fifteen boys and girls, kids who he would be responsible to teach not just basic academics, but hard work, finishing what they begin, and any number of other lessons. He could be a teacher who made a difference to these kids, and the task before him was daunting. He was humbled with the thought that God would give him this honor.

When he finally fell asleep, he was a bit more prepared to face the next day, having gotten strength from the One who knew just what the days ahead would hold, and would help him handle them.



## CHAPTER 3

The next Monday was the first day of the orientation week, and getting ready for school. Melissa ran the school library, so she had to be there to help the teachers sort through the books they would need for the coming year, catalog the books she would have in the library, clean, sort, clean some more, make new bulletin boards for 'back to school' spirit, and all sorts of other little things that everyone would expect the school librarian to take care of simply because they didn't have time to do it themselves.

So she got to the school early, opened up the library, and began stacking books in order of which teacher would most likely be coming in first, but eventually wound up helping Angela put up a bulletin board in her classroom.

Angela, or Miss Berry as she tried to remember to call her during the school year, was only a couple years younger than herself, having graduated from college and come straight to work at Victorious Christian Academy the year before.

"I'm so excited about the beginning of the school year again! Are you looking forward to your second year teaching kindergarten?" Melissa paused to take one of the stick pins out of her mouth. "You should let me be up there on that chair, by the way, Miss Teacher. We don't want you breaking your neck right before school starts."

Angela smiled at her from on top of a chair on the other side of the room. She was stapling a big blue train engine to a white background. The words on top would read '*All aboard the Reading Train*', but for now she was still struggling with getting the engine on the board while not falling off the chair.

"It's amazing I can understand you with all those pins in your mouth, but if you were up here on this chair you'd have already fallen off at least once – we both know it." Melissa laughed with her, shrugging her shoulders, knowing Angela was most likely correct. "But to answer your question, yes, I am excited. I just love teaching, and kindergarten is such a fun age. They don't know what they're doing, but they usually want to learn, and are so excited to be out doing grown up things and being a big kid, going to school and everything. And they get such a charge when suddenly they can look at a word and know what it means. It's amazing, the look on their faces." Angela finally got the train's engine secured and began tacking up the other cars.

"I can imagine. I just love helping them when they come into the library, too. They're all so eager to get a book and find out what adventures are in it."

Melissa grinned mischievously, her eyes glowing. "So, what do you think of the new guy?"

"I have no idea, I hardly know the guy." Angela shook her head. "He's been all anyone could talk about for the last two weeks, and now he's arrived he is still the main topic of just about every conversation."

"Well, I heard he took a few years off after high school, went and travelled or something, and then went to a Bible college down in southern California somewhere. That's where Mr. Mason found him. Or really he was recommended to Pastor by a friend of his, and now he's here."

"Maria certainly likes him." Angela leaned back a bit on her chair as she talked, still adjusting the train cars.

"Of course. Maria likes everybody."

"No, I mean she thinks he's perfect."

"Perfect?" Melissa stabbed at a letter with the stick pin, but apparently wasn't paying close attention and wound up sticking herself with it. She sucked in a breath and squeezed her finger until the pain went away, only half listening to Angela.

"Yes, for me. She's already got us married with two point five kids."

"Oh, I see." Melissa laughed, shaking her head.

"She talked to me about it Sunday, kept bringing him up like she thought we'd make the perfect couple. She was going on and on about how our hair matched, and we had the same shade of eyes or something."

"So what do *you* think? Shouldn't you be the one deciding if he's perfect for you or not?"

"I don't know. He seems like he's so serious. He hardly cracked a smile, like he's too old."

"Too old? He can't be more than 27, and you're what, 23 or 24? That's not too different."

"True, I'll be 23 in a couple weeks." Angela turned toward Melissa, staying on the chair, but barely in her stocking feet, having left her shoes on the floor. "Still, I don't know. I guess there wasn't really a 'spark' when I met him." She waved her hands in the air to try to simulate sparks flying around.

"Just get to know him. Be friends. What could happen?"

"Don't say that. Whenever someone says 'what could happen,' something unexpectedly terrible always happens."

Angela teetered on her chair, shrieking just a bit, and both girls began laughing as she righted herself.

“What about you, Melissa? Got any plans for becoming ‘friends’ with the new teacher yourself?”

“No, I don’t have any plans at all. Sounds to me as if there’s already enough competition for the poor guy, as it is.” She smirked, just wondering what Maria Hernandez would say about her perfect match. Probably someone else with their nose stuck in a book, wandering stuffy library stacks somewhere, or trading for old comic books online, all things Melissa had actually done herself at one point or another in her recent past. She sighed as she stuck the last pin in the bulletin board, then stepped back to survey her work.

“Looks good, ladies.”

Melissa jumped at the male voice from behind her. Angela did the same, but from the top of her chair it had a much different result. She startled, one foot wobbled on the chair, the other slipped out from under her, and down Angela went with a crash and a scream.

“Oh man, I’m so sorry!”

Jack Adams, the man they had been discussing just moments earlier, rushed all the way into the room and gingerly helped Angela to her feet. With a flush of embarrassment, Melissa wondered how much of their conversation he had heard. Angela didn’t seem too worried about it, though, so she chose to believe he’d heard nothing.

“Miss Berns is it?” He reached out a hand to shake hers.

“Berry, it’s Miss Berry.” Angela corrected him quietly, but Melissa could see she didn’t really care what the man called her. Then she saw her friend mentally shake herself, gather her shattered dignity about her, and stand straighter. “Angela, actually. We met at the fellowship the other day.” She held out her hand and shook his again, just for good measure.

“Oh, of course, you made the Mac ‘n cheese.” That’s when Melissa realized why Maria Hernandez had been so big on getting Jack to eat the macaroni on Saturday – it was her way of showing him what a wonderful cook Angela was.

“Yes, I’m the great macaroni chef, plus the Kindergarten teacher.” Angela was flirting now. Melissa wasn’t sure she wanted to stay and see this much longer.

“Hence you’re decorating the Kindergarten room.”

“He’s observant, too.” Melissa couldn’t help herself.

Angela giggled, then righted her chair, gathered her spilled stick pins, and nodded to Melissa.

“And this is Miss Barnes...”

“Melissa, yes, I remember.” Jack had turned to look at Melissa when she spoke, a hint of amusement on his face. She smiled into his eyes, remembering how he’d said he would remember her name. And he did, even with pretty Angela right there.

“I was walking by and heard all the laughing and good times in here, so I thought I’d stick my head in and see what I was missing. However, I’m also looking for the school library where I’ve been told I need to get to as soon as possible to pick up all my books I’ll need. Either of you ladies able to help me out?”

Melissa nodded while she swiped her hands together, getting rid of imaginary chalk dust. “I can show you. I’m the librarian.”

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Jack walked down the hall with Melissa, the librarian who was like no librarian he’d ever met before. He was tall, and from his vantage point he could look down and see the uneven part in her brown hair. She probably didn’t even realize it was uneven.

She wasn’t quiet, or withdrawn, not that all librarians were withdrawn or mousy, but this Melissa definitely wasn’t. The entire short walk she kept up a running commentary about which classes met in each room they passed, the name of the teacher, and how long she had been at the school. Turned out he was the only male teacher in the lower grades.

The Kindergarten room was close to the library, so they didn’t have long to walk. He had passed the door several times without realizing what it was, as there was no label on the wall next to the door.

She opened the door and stepped inside, leaving it open behind her so he could follow. The room was larger than his living area, but still small for a library, of course. It was basically one long area, with shelves lining three of the four walls, and several long tables sprinkled down the middle where students could study and read books.

She made her way immediately to a low, grey metal desk and indicated a pile of books near the edge.

“These should be what you’re looking for.” She smiled brightly, and Jack couldn’t help but grin back. “So, are you settling in to your rooms?”

“Very nicely, thanks.” He flipped through a couple of the books in the stack she’d handed him. “People have been real good to me so far. I even had some housewarming gifts left. A plate of cookies in the fridge, a basket of fruit left at the door yesterday morning. It’s been great.”

“I’m glad.”

“There’s just one thing, though. Everything seems to be from or about either Natalie or Angela. Got any idea what that’s about?”

“You noticed that, did you?”

“Yes, you did once ascribe to me great observational skills.”

“True. Even then, I thought maybe you wouldn’t catch their clues quite so quickly.”

“I have caught on; rather good for just being a guy, wouldn’t you say?”

Melissa laughed out loud then. He figured he had guessed exactly what she’d not wanted to say out loud, thinking she didn’t know him well enough yet to be quite so ornery.

“Thanks for the books, Melissa.” She looked startled, then a slow smile spread over her face again. It was like the sun rising over the ocean, leaving her face all glittery. He had no idea where the metaphor had come from, but it stuck.

“You’re welcome, Mr. Adams.”

“Mr. Adams? Jack is fine.”

“We have students in here. So you’re Mr. Adams, and I’m Miss Barnes.”

He hadn’t even noticed the students sitting at the far end of the room.

“Oh, oops. Of course, Miss Barnes.” He looked over at the kids sitting quietly at their table.

“What are they doing here? School hasn’t even started for the year yet.”

“A couple of the teachers have children, and they bring them here during the orientation week. They sit and read or write letters, or sometimes go play out on the playground. It works, because I spend most of my time in here anyway. I can watch them, and they aren’t a bother at all.”

“That’s nice of you.”

Melissa just shrugged one shoulder and started flipping through some of the other books absentmindedly. He suspected she was trying to cover a self-conscious moment. She recovered quickly.

"I've got to get some other books out still. Did you get what you needed?"

"I think so, yes." He kept watching though as Melissa walked to the other side of the room and began searching through the lower shelves. He absently turned back to the desk and picked up a notebook, flipping it open to the front. On the inside cover, in small, slanted handwriting was just one sentence:

*"If you are reading this, then I'm just going to say you won't find anything incriminating in this notebook, reading private property should be illegal, and I can deliver a pretty mean uppercut."*

Laughing quietly to himself, he placed the notebook back exactly where and how he'd found it, then backed away from the desk, the stack of books in his arms.

"Hey, I'm going to get these put away in my room. Thanks again for the help."

She half turned to wave at him. "Bye, Mr. Adams."

He smiled his way out the door. Life at this church was going to be very interesting.

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## CHAPTER 4

Just one more stack of books to put away for the night, ready for the next day to begin. Melissa was exhausted, and the school year hadn't even started. Though, to be fair, the exhaustion would be easier to handle this week than next, so she was glad she always had orientation week to get back into the school year schedule.

Only after the last book was put away did she realize she still had a shelf full that should be empty – Jack had missed a few of his after all. It wouldn't be too big of a deal to just walk them two doors down to his class, especially as he wouldn't be in there at this time of night anyway.

Making up her mind, she grabbed the armful of sixth grade readers, gathered her purse, locked the library door behind her, and let herself into the classroom two doors down.

The shelves all looked full, some with books, but at least two contained only board games, maps and puzzles. Unable to find any room anywhere else for her burden, she finally settled on arranging them on top of a bookshelf, which meant having to find a bookend to prop them up, which meant she wound up digging through a desk drawer to find something heavy.

The man had nothing – no candles, which every seasoned teacher knows is essential in a room full of kids, no heavy paperweights, no framed pictures of his mother, even.

Just as she had given up and was vainly trying to get them to stack neatly up there on the top, having to reach and stretch onto her tiptoes, the door flung open, Jack burst into the room, yelling at the top of his lungs and wielding a gigantic bat over his head.

Melissa screamed, fell over backwards, grabbing anything she could to stop her fall and failing in an epic fashion. She landed hard on her rear end, sixth grade readers raining down on her head.

“Are you trying to kill me?” Her voice sounded shaky as her heart felt like it was beating right out of her chest.

“No, no, I'm sorry!” Jack came farther into the room, a sincere look of concern creasing his brow as he stood, bat in one hand, the other running through his already disheveled hair. Then she realized he was holding a Nerf bat, hardly an effective weapon.

“What were you thinking?” She still sat on the floor, trying to minimize the damage to her dignity and figure out if anything was broken, besides her pride.

“I heard a noise – a few noises, actually. You're not very quiet. I thought it was an intruder.”

“And that was your weapon of choice?” She indicated the Nerf bat he was still holding.

“Um, no.” He looked down at the makeshift, completely harmless, bat, then back up at Melissa, a sheepish grin taking over.

“Do I look like an intruder?”

“No.”

“Are you going to only say no, now?”

“Um, no?”

“Ok, Batman...I’m going to stand up now, but promise not to kill me. I see that letter opener on your desk there, and I do not want to die that way.”

He laughed then, a deep, rich chuckle she thought was a very nice sound. He reached down to help her up. It was then it registered on her mind that he had changed out of his normal work dress shirt and slacks, into a dark green T-shirt and old, comfortable looking jeans. He looked way too good to be standing so close. Quickly backing away, she banged into the desk behind her, and yelped in pain, reaching down to hold her stinging ankle. It was like she was an awkward teenager all over again.

“Are you ok?” He looked at her like she’d lost her mind.

“Sure, sure, I’m good. I’m always a clutzy mess when I’m perfectly fine. You should see me when I’m flustered – that’s when I’m downright elegant and poised.”

Jack threw his head back and laughed.

When he’d recovered a bit, he asked, “Why are you here this late, Melissa?” He began picking up the books scattered all over the floor.

“I guess I lost track of time. School starts next week, and I just like to have everything in place before then.”

He grimaced. “I can’t imagine how I’ll be ready myself. I don’t feel prepared at all.”

He leaned the bat on the desk and sat down in the chair behind it.

“You’ll do fine, don’t worry. The kids will love you.”

He looked up at her gratefully. “Not if I scare their favorite librarian to death before the year even starts.” He laid his head in his hands. “I really am sorry I came in here loaded for bear like that.”

“It’s okay, I get it. No harm done.” She smiled back at him, feeling a very pleasant warmth spreading out from her insides. Suddenly she realized they were the only ones in the building, and she ought to get going.

“Well, you’re probably tired. I’m going to get on home.” She grabbed her purse off the desk where she’d laid it, then paused at the door, waving one hand.

“Jack, like I said, you’ll do great. And you’ve got plenty of help here in case you need it. Good night.”

He waved back at her. “Night, Melissa.”

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## CHAPTER 5

The next Monday was the first day of school. Melissa arrived early because she loved to see the kids arriving so excited to see their friends, and to be starting a new year. There were always some kids who enjoyed school for the sake of learning, and then others who weren't real sure. She tried to pull a couple of the unsure ones in under her wings, and give them encouragement through the year.

Lots of preparation from her, but the real business of the first day of school all happened in the classrooms, so once the kids arrived and made it inside, her job was basically done until they had a break, or had library time.

By the end of the first day, she was ready to go home and recuperate with a nice book and maybe a bath. In her eagerness to get out the door, she had loaded one bag with everything she wanted to take home, hoping for just one trip to the parking lot rather than four. That was a mistake.

With each step she realized the bag was winning the struggle with gravity. She stopped just inside the front door, and let the bag drop to the floor. Stretching her back out helped a bit, but she still had to manage the rest of the way to the car. Just as she was about to give up and ask for help, she heard a step behind her, and turned to see Jack watching her.

"You haven't quite made it away with all the loot, I see."

"Nope, this is as far as I got this time. Next time I hope to make it as far as the parking lot."

"Need any help?"

She shook her head, wanting to give it one last try. "No, it's ok. I've got everything handled." She bent to retrieve the strap she'd dropped and stretched it up, trying in vain to lift it again. It barely budged, only shifting around a little and managing to make her face flush red in embarrassment as much as in the effort. With her lips tightly shut, she worked to pull it forward, getting the door open ahead of herself, and backing through to the porch outside, dragging the big thing behind. Jack watched, arms crossed, trying to hide a big grin. He was downright patronizing with his wide shoulders and big muscles all going to waste over there.

She put one last mighty tug in, and wound up pulling a shoulder muscle, grunting in a very unladylike fashion, and giving herself a headache in the process.

“Ok, fine, you can try.” She dropped the handle she’d been tugging on, and threw her hands up in surrender.

Without saying another word, he grabbed the short handles of the bag, and hefted it up to his shoulder as if it were filled with downy soft kittens.

“Show off.” She smirked at him, and he did nothing but leave that big, lopsided grin on his face.

Before she began staring at his shoulder muscles and acting stupid, again, on top of already being a helpless damsel in distress, she turned and led him across the lot to her big, brown Chevy Suburban.

“This is your car?”

Melissa looked from Jack to her truck, back to Jack again. “Yes, it’s mine. Why is that so shocking?”

Jack shrugged, still holding her bag on his shoulder. “I don’t know. It’s even bigger than mine is. What do you do with all this room? And can you see over the steering wheel?”

“First, yes, I can see over the steering wheel. I have little blocks duct taped to the brake and gas pedals, and I sit on a booster seat like a five year old.” She rolled her eyes when he nodded his head like he believed her. “Ok, not really, Jack. I’m not that short. And I use this truck for lots of things – picking up stuff, giving people rides to church, you know.”

“Ahhh, I see now.” He grinned, opened the back end with a flourish and went to toss the bag inside, then stopped when he saw what else she had in there.

“Why do you have a cage in here? Are you secretly holding elves hostage at night?” He waggled his eyebrows up and down at her.

“Very funny.” She indicated the medical bag alongside the animal cage. “That’s my animal rescue kit.”

“You have an animal rescue kit in your car? What is that, and why?”

“You know, just in case I come across any random, wounded animals lying in the middle of the road. A blanket or two, some hydrogen peroxide, bandages, paper towels...things like that.”

“So you’re an animal Good Samaritan.”

“Or people. I mean if I saw a wounded person I would stop and help them, too. I wouldn’t just pass by and say, ‘Oh, you’re not a cute little puppy, so I’m not stopping’.”

“You know, this sounds like something only the town’s crazy cat lady would do?”

“How do you know I’m *not* the town’s crazy cat lady?”

“You can’t be.” He shook his head, closing his eyes in conviction. “You’re too...” he stopped in the middle of whatever he was about to say, his eyes opening in panic. “Umm, well...” Suddenly he seemed way too uncomfortable.

Melissa decided to rescue him from himself. “So, do you like cats?”

He looked relieved she had given him an out. “It’s not that I *don’t* like them, exactly. It’s just that, when I look at a cat, I get this weird feeling. Like it’s looking at me and thinking, ‘Don’t let the fur covering my entire body, rows of sharp teeth, or razor sharp claws stop you; come closer. See if I’m friendly.’ Very eerie.”

She chuckled and leaned in to rearrange the bag so the contents wouldn’t spill out all over the place if she took a corner a little wonky.

“Personally I like cats, and dogs and horses, and animals in general.”

“I take it you have at least one cat at home?”

“Yep, Pepper. I’ve had him for seven years, ever since I moved here after college.”

“Pepper, huh? A big, grey and black tabby?”

“No, oddly enough – he’s red – some people say orange, but no tabby.”

“That is odd.”

They smiled at each other then, and Melissa felt the rare camaraderie between friends. Though they’d only known each other a few days, he seemed comfortable. She didn’t have to try around him, it was an easy fellowship.

“Thanks for helping me with my bag, Jack.”

He nodded his welcome, then waved goodbye and headed over to his own truck. She watched him walk away, and felt just a tiny twinge of...something she wasn’t ready for yet.

Slipping into her own truck, she headed home, ready to face another week ahead.

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## CHAPTER 6

Jack wandered around the tiny little town for ten minutes before he finally found a fast food restaurant. It had been a great first day of school, but he'd been so preoccupied he hadn't bothered with lunch, and now he was famished. Sadly he had no meatloaf, or pie, or anything else in his little refrigerator, so this would have to do until he went grocery shopping later.

He stopped and went inside to wait in line, pondering very carefully which two or three of the meals he would get. Someday he'd have to switch how he ate – his mother said very soon, as he was no spring chicken anymore. Moms can say things other people can't get away with. But for now his eating habits were usually healthy, just with the occasional side of terrible-for-you from the local fast food place.

Just as he opened his mouth to order a Number One, and a sandwich on the side, someone stepped up beside him.

"I thought I recognized you coming in here." Anne Scott, from church, stood there, hands on her hips, her purse securely shut at her side as she pointedly did not place an order. He wondered absently if she had ever had the fries at a place like this. She might just change her tight-lipped, disapproving attitude.

"Hi Anne, how are you today?" He smiled at her, then placed his order with the teenage boy behind the counter and stepped to the side to wait.

"I'm fine." She sniffed the air a little like she thought something might bite her and she had to watch out for danger. "You are actually going to eat here?"

"Yes, actually." He grinned again, crossing his arms over his chest and swaying a little on the balls of his feet. He had the perverse urge to tell her this was a stomach emergency and he was heading right out to the grocery store for vegetables, fruit, and only lean meats, made especially for teachers who were supposed to be a good example for young minds.

Anne gave him an unsure glance, then patted him on the arm. "Alright, Jack, you eat here today. Just wait and we'll get you fixed up for the rest of the week." She turned away from him, waving over her shoulder as she walked back out the door. "Take care."

"What did she mean by that?" The kid behind the counter shrugged, handing him his bag of food.

After he opened the bag, and smelled his burger with bacon and special sauce, he totally forgot about seeing Anne at the restaurant, much less what she had actually said to him. That's why the next afternoon he opened his door in answer to a knock, and was surprised to see Anne standing there, covered dish in hand, and Natalie at her side.

"Mrs. Scott, Natalie. What a nice surprise." He stepped back to allow them inside the sitting room of his little apartment. Anne placed her dish on the table and took off the lid with a flourish.

"Well I told you we'd cook homemade meals for you the rest of the week, Jack, didn't I?" She nudged Natalie in the ribs, not very discreetly because even he saw it.

"You did?" He wracked his brain trying to remember her saying something like that. "Oh, you mean at the restaurant yesterday?"

"Yes, of course, if you can call that place a restaurant." Anne laughed, then began searching through the cupboards for plates and napkins and silverware. She was opening drawers and digging through shelves quite happily. He didn't have the heart to tell her he hadn't yet bought real plates. He'd been using paper and plastic forks and spoons he'd gotten from the fast food places around town. She'd probably be mortified if she knew.

"Mom. Mother. He's got plates right here." Natalie grabbed the stack off the microwave and pulled one out, smiling at him apologetically. "We really did want you to have something better than fast food. So we made you a real meal. I hope you enjoy it." Natalie smiled at him with one of those warm sincere smiles that make you know you're welcome, very welcome.

"What is this? It smells wonderful." He breathed in the scent of the food in the dish, getting chicken and spices that smelled so familiar.

"It's chicken a la king – just how you like it. I called your mother to get the recipe perfect." Natalie smiled up at him, her grey eyes sparkling.

"You called my mother? Wow, how... nice."

He started scooping out the food onto the plate. The fact she'd gone to the trouble to call his mother was a little weird, but it was chicken 'a la king' – done right. Couldn't very well pass that up...ever.

He said his thanks to Natalie around a mouthful of chicken, and watched both Natalie and Anne beam back at him, not at all offended by his lack of manners.

They stayed and watched him eat the entire plate, which, again, was a little weird. It was sort of like being one of the baboons at a local zoo – on display for all to see. He'd always felt bad for the baboons in particular.

When he was done, he pushed back from the table, rose and said, "Well, that was wonderful. Thank you both so much for stopping by."

He held out a hand as both ladies rose, looking a bit surprised. They must have been expecting to stay and watch him eat dessert, too. Both ladies were standing outside the door before they'd realized what was happening, and he thanked them again before closing the door.

He sighed, rubbing one hand through his hair, and leaning on the closed door while finally relaxing. What had he gotten himself in to?

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Melissa walked into church Sunday morning, only to be waylaid by Mrs. Maria Hernandez, widow extraordinaire, before she'd even gotten halfway through the front lobby.

"How are you this morning, dear?"

Melissa smiled, patting Maria's hand on her elbow, and trying not to make an obvious attempt to get around the older woman.

"I'm really good, Maria. Thanks for asking. It's been getting colder already, my cat thinks it's full on winter and has been insisting on sleeping with me each night now. He curls up right at my feet and keeps them warm. How are you today?"

"Fine, fine." Maria's black-as-night hair with just a smattering of gray, was pulled back at the front, only to be left in curly abandon around her shoulders, her bright green dress standing out against the red of the church's lobby carpet.

"I'm glad." Melissa smiled again and began to walk around her, but Maria held onto her elbow a little tighter still.

"Oh, but I have to ask you something."

Melissa stopped and looked back at her again, amused at the woman's tenacity. Maria didn't normally want to talk to her so urgently.

"Are you busy two weeks from now, Saturday afternoon? I'd like to have a little birthday party for Angela and I was wondering if you might come. I'm just getting things together, so you're of course the first person I thought of."

“I’ll have to look at my schedule. You know school just started and I have to be there all day every day now. Saturdays are my only day off, besides Sunday.”

“Come on, Melissa. You don’t have family around anymore. You’re all alone, so I’m sure you have nothing else – we’d love to have you. You’ll come, yes?”

“Well, when you put it that way...” Melissa had to close her eyes to keep from rolling them at the woman’s words, her heart sinking at the reminder of how alone she was now that her mother had passed on.

“Good, good.” Maria patted her arm again, clearly not noticing the crestfallen look on Melissa’s face.

Melissa tried not to take Maria’s thoughtless words to heart, but it was hard to do when she was correct. With no family in town, and only her cat waiting for her at home, Melissa’s Saturday afternoons were almost always free and clear.

Her shoulders just a bit more slumped now, she made her way to the front where she always sat, three rows back on the left, near the piano. She usually tried to talk to a few people on her way in, but this time Maria’s words must have sunk in enough to hurt. She sat and watched others as they sauntered in, each coming in two’s or three’s, moms and dads with kids, quite a few older ladies, and a couple older gentlemen. *God, why am I alone now? Is this all you have for me?*

Then an arm went around her shoulders, and she smelled the flowery perfume Mabel Pierce always wore.

“How are you, dear?”

Melissa gave her a wobbly smile.

“I just knew you needed a little hug today.” Mabel punctuated her words with a squeeze around Melissa’s shoulders, then plunked her Bible down next to Melissa’s.

“How did you know I needed a hug?”

“Oh, a little bird told me.” Mabel readjusted her sparkly pink spectacles, patted the white hair on the top of her head back into place, and settled in to the seat. “I watch people. I know what’s going on. I may be the grandma of the church, but I know a thing or two about what’s in young people’s minds these days.”

Melissa looked at the older woman gratefully. Mabel had a way of brightening her day, even if she was a little confusing at times. She usually found that Mabel's words made sense at some point later, rather than right at that moment.

She quickly sent up a prayer of thanks to God for Mabel, and others like her, who could come along at just the right moment and say just what needed saying. Mabel's presence and words were like a little present from God at just the right moment, to keep her going.

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The next several days flew past in a whirlwind of new experiences. Jack had gone to Bible college for four years to prepare for this, but the thought of actually being the sole teacher, responsible for an entire class of little 6<sup>th</sup> grade minds, was daunting to say the least.

He hadn't really done much with his own bulletin boards – certainly not like Angela – Miss Berry. But hers were for a Kindergarten room. His was on the opposite end of the lower grade spectrum. Kids wanted to feel grown up, not like they were little any longer. So his bulletin boards consisted of white space, prepared for showing off excellent papers, and some history timelines along the top of the chalk board.

Maybe later in the year he'd think of something better and add it, but for now that was all there was. Each morning they had some sort of meeting with the pastor regarding the school policies and rules, or how to handle difficult situations. While the church that ran the school was small, they had opened it up to any likeminded churches in the area to send their kids to, so the school was larger than the church itself.

Still, the school only required five teachers in the younger grades, so he was getting to know the others quickly, glad to have some new friends. Thing was, being the only male teacher meant all his coworkers were older married ladies, except for Angela Berry. Maria Hernandez hadn't yet let him forget that detail, either. Every day she had brought a hot lunch in for Angela, and conveniently brought enough for two – only two – and insisted Jack eat in the fellowship hall with Angela. All the other teachers were there, as well as one industrious librarian named Melissa, but Maria was adamant Jack and Angela needed to be at the same table, since her meal was to be shared between them.

Melissa had managed to look bemused each and every time she walked in and saw him sitting there eating Maria's hot meals. Angela had beckoned to her to join them, and she'd obliged, though Maria did a good job of huffing and puffing about what she must have seen as an intrusion.

Jack enjoyed the food – always something Mexican. How could he say no to that? He couldn't, there was no way. Mexican food would always win out over good sense.

Monday it had been tamales, Tuesday Maria brought tacos, and Wednesday something she called chimichangas. After three of those, it was then Jack realized he had a problem – and it wasn't just the indigestion all the spicy food was giving him each night. That was why Thursday afternoon he determined to stay in his classroom through lunch. He couldn't keep giving Maria – and Angela – the wrong impression. Maria was obviously trying to set him up with the kindergarten teacher, and while Angela was nice, he wasn't yet ready to declare himself a contestant, much less that the contest was over.

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## CHAPTER 7

So instead of heading over to the fellowship hall Thursday at noon, he stayed in his classroom, trying to figure out a good schedule. Then, just as he was heading out to grab something to eat from his room, he heard them. Maria and Angela were coming for him, chatting animatedly as they approached the door to his temporary home.

Rather than continuing on to the front doors as he'd intended, Jack abruptly turned on his heel and headed back toward the other end of the school wing.

He strode purposefully down the hall, hoping to look like he was on a mission and not running away, which he was. He was big enough to admit that, just not big enough to stop. Heart pounding, laughing at himself, but not repenting, he searched desperately for an unlocked door. Finally he spied the library, knowing it should be open this time of day, and maybe even relatively empty.

Quickly, and as quietly as possible, he turned the knob, backed into the room, and carefully held the door tightly, leaving just enough of a crack so he could peer out with one eye. From the library he could see his room door, though the library was at the opposite end of the long hallway.

Maria and Angela stood at the prophet's chamber door, Maria knocking sharply and Angela bearing some tin-foil-covered gift in a dish. Who knew what that might be?

With a quick movement that made him jump and almost lose hold of the door, Maria turned away, shrugging. She gestured to Angela that they should head down the hall – his direction. Apparently they were going to search the premises. He quickly closed the library door all the way, knowing he couldn't lock it, and desperately hoping for an excuse to come to his mind.

"Don't lock that door this time."

He nearly yelled, his heart pounding, still hanging on to the doorknob with a death grip.

"Are you trying to kill me?" He rolled his eyes at Melissa standing behind him, and held one finger to his lips. "Please, don't give me away. They're coming for me."

Melissa laughed. "You're hiding, again? Aren't you being a little overdramatic?"

"They're after me, Melissa. What am I supposed to do?"

"Who is after you now?"

“Miss Maria, and her favorite for the winner – Angela.”

“And what’s so bad about Angela?” Melissa crossed to her desk and began stacking books to put away. Jack followed her, noticing the couple of students seated at the tables in the center of the room.

“Nothing’s wrong with her, I suppose.” He scuffed his shoe on the floor, feeling like a kid just caught in a store with a candy bar in his pocket. “I just don’t particularly like having someone pushed on me.”

“Honestly though, what could be the harm in seeing what they want today? What’s the worse they could do?”

“You have no idea what all her Mexican food has been doing to my digestive tract.” He grabbed his stomach in mock pain. “Yesterday was the kicker. I don’t think I can take it much longer.”

“Why don’t you just say no?”

“How can I say no to Mexican food? It’s impossible, I can’t do it.” He closed his eyes and shook his head.

“The scent of Mexican tamales, green chiles, and tacos wafts over you...and it’s all downhill from there?” She waved her hands in the air, pantomiming scent floating along.

“Something like that. Only thing worse would be if it were meatloaf. You’ve discovered my only weakness – Mexican food and meatloaf.” When Melissa laughed out loud at that he gave in. “Okay, maybe not the only weaknesses, but they’re right up there on the list. So the only option is to take myself away from temptation.” He slashed a hand through the air to punctuate his words.

“Hence hiding in the library.” Melissa’s eyes twinkled.

“Yes, hence.” He smiled down at her, and suddenly wasn’t sure what he had been saying.

Melissa turned away as the door to the library opened again. Jack groaned inwardly when Maria and Angela walked in.

“Oh, there you are, Jack.” Maria grabbed onto him by one arm, while throwing a reproachful look at Melissa. Angela was looking over at him apologetically. Melissa turned away, leaving Jack feeling just a bit abandoned.

“You didn’t eat lunch today?” Maria didn’t leave him even a second to make up an excuse. “We came to find you to give you this.” She handed him an envelope. “Angela’s birthday party, of

course. Everyone's invited, but you get a special invitation because you're our new teacher and we want to make sure you can come. Melissa said she would help set it all up, too."

Jack saw the look of shock on Melissa's face and wondered if maybe this was the first she was hearing about the part she was expected to play. He grinned, and shrugged.

"Sure, I'll come. Thanks for the invitation."

Maria beamed. "It's still several weeks away, but we want to have plenty of time to plan everything. I'm glad you'll be there, too."

Angela handed him the covered dish and said, "This is for you."

She squeezed Melissa's hand, and the two ladies made their exit.

"See? What'd I tell you?" Jack lifted the lid, to find Spanish rice and carne asada, still steaming, and still very spicy. "They're out to get me."

"I think they are out to get you, actually." She watched the door thoughtfully, but didn't say anything more enlightening.

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From that moment on, Jack and Melissa had a sort of camaraderie, like they were facing the world side by side. Nearly every day Jack managed to slip in to the library to say hi, tell her something funny one of his students had said, or just to share their lunch together at one of the tables.

On the days he didn't show up, for whatever reason, Melissa found she felt the absence keenly. She wasn't at all sure that was a good thing, but she didn't want to tell him to stop coming in. She enjoyed his visits, and already valued him as a friend. He really listened to her, made her believe he cared what she thought, even if it was just about which Batman was better – (live action of course) – either Christian Bale or Michael Keaton. She preferred Christian Bale, but Jack insisted Michael Keaton did the voice switch better. At least they were able to agree to disagree on that point.

The only thing to mar her days was the little tug of a nagging, unreasonable guilt at her own friendship with Jack, when Anne and Maria so clearly wanted her out of the way. She tried to shrug it off, tried to give it to God, but that's the trouble with unreasonable – it doesn't always listen.

.....

Once a month the church family had a buffet meal together after the Sunday evening service. It was never anything too fancy, just enough to get the kitchen dirty and require cleanup for an hour or so afterwards.

Melissa was content to quietly wash the pots and pans and listen to the friendly chatter of the other ladies around her. Sometimes she was the only one in there, but this time there was plenty of help.

Five other ladies stood at counters or sinks, peeling, chopping, rinsing and washing dishes. She sighed happily, glad everyone was getting along so well.

“Remember the old church building? That kitchen was so tiny. We couldn’t have gotten six ladies in there, no matter how hard we tried.” Mabel Pierce stood at the cutting board chopping onions and talking to no one in particular.

Anne Scott nodded her head. “True, and there were two dishwashers, but most of the time only one worked. And sometimes that one didn’t work either.”

“Then there was the sink that barely trickled out water.” Another lady named Gina spoke up from her sweeping the floor. “Took me two hours to make a jug of lemonade once.”

The ladies chuckled at Gina’s words, but Melissa knew she was only slightly exaggerating. It really had taken a long time to get a simple jug filled from the old sink.

“We certainly are blessed with this new building and nice modern kitchen.” Mabel could see the silver lining in everything.

“Speaking of which, what do you think of our new teacher?” Anne put her washcloth down and turned away from the stove she’d been wiping clean.

“Now, I don’t think we were speaking of him, Anne. How did you get from the kitchen to Mr. Adams?” Mabel pushed her hot pink spectacles back up her nose, and readjusted her apron strings as she stared pointedly at her friend. Both women were about the same age, and the younger ladies tended to just stay out of the way of their friendly banter.

Melissa laughed quietly to herself and shook her head. Mrs. Anne Scott could switch subjects in a conversation faster than lightning, and would usually claim it was all part of the same topic in the end. She was quite skilled at justifying herself when challenged, too.

“We were talking about the new kitchen, how nice and convenient it is, and how it’s big enough for all of us to fit in here. It’s even got room to let a strapping young man share it when he needs to, and of course that would be Mr. Jack Adams. So there, see? We were too talking about him.”

Mabel threw her hands up in surrender, the rest of the ladies laughing.

“So anyway....” Anne rolled her eyes at Mabel’s playful mocking and continued. “What do you all think of him?”

“He seems nice enough. “ Gina surrendered her broom for a mop while she talked. “We don’t know him very well yet, but my husband asked him over for dinner tomorrow and he accepted.”

“Oh, what a wonderful idea, Gina. Thank you.” Anne had a gleam in her eye that always made Melissa suspicious.

“What idea?” Gina was sweet, but entirely too unsuspecting when it came to Anne and her schemes. Melissa was not.

“I’ll just invite that nice Mr. Adams to my house for dinner. It’ll give me a great reason to have Natalie over, too. After all, she’d make the perfect match for Jack. She’s already independent, has been out there in the world just like he has, and knows how to be a wonderful role model for all those kids he’s teaching now.”

“Natalie?” Melissa couldn’t help her outburst. First Maria Hernandez wanted to pair him off with Angela, and now Anne was trying to get him together with Nat? Poor guy didn’t stand a chance. Melissa shook her head and smiled down at her hands in amusement.

“Oh, Melissa.” Her smile suddenly became forced as she realized her one exclamation had brought Anne’s formidable attention her way. “I can’t possibly do a dinner party alone. You wouldn’t be too busy to help me with it, right?”

“Anne, do you think a dinner party is...”

“Mabel, don’t you fuss. You heard me say I’d invite him over for dinner, and Natalie too. I can’t very well just have the two of them, now can I? So that means it has to be a dinner party, with other guests, of course.”

“Of course, what was I thinking.” Melissa grinned at Mabel’s conspiratorial wink, nudging her elbow as Mabel passed on her way to wipe off the counter.

“So Melissa, what do you say? You’ll help me, right? You’re so good with these things, and I need a younger set of hands helping out. I’ve got so much planned already. I just know they’ll love it.”

“Sure Anne, I can help you.” Melissa felt the flush on her face as Mabel squeezed her waist just a bit. She had a fleeting thought that perhaps someday these ladies would see her as

something besides their own personal assistant. Then again, she always said yes, so maybe it wasn't entirely their fault.

Fine, she'd help Anne with this dinner, but then she was done. She didn't want to be seen as the go-to girl for everything any longer.

Anne clasped Melissa's shoulders and air kissed her on both cheeks. "Thank you dear, you're such a blessing! Be sure to clear your calendar for a week from this next Saturday. Sound good? Good. It's a date."

Melissa squeezed her eyes shut tight and smiled as brightly as she could.

It wasn't until quite a few hours later, alone in her dark bedroom, she had a sudden flash of memory, causing her to jolt upright in bed and yell so loud her cat jumped down, protesting at her sudden movements.

"Oh no, Pepper. A week from Saturday! That's the same day as Maria's birthday party for Angela. Now what will I do?"

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## CHAPTER 8

“Oh no, look who’s coming.” Melissa muttered to herself as she entered the school building the next Tuesday morning. She was planning on getting the library really scrubbed clean and working on her own bulletin boards, but it looked like Maria Hernandez might have other plans for her.

“Melissa Kathryn Barnes, what were you thinking?”

“Maria, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Come on in the library and we’ll discuss it.” Melissa quickly unlocked the door, scooted her book bag in, and gestured for Maria to go in front of her. She waved at the heads peeking around doorways all down the hall, but tried to avoid Jack’s questioning eyes from his classroom two doors down. No need to get him worked up, too.

“I bet you do know.” Maria was in rare form, hands on hips, as she stood to her full 5’1” height. She barely came to Melissa’s nose, but she seemed much taller at the moment. Her black eyes snapped in indignation as she tapped one toe on the floor. No, Melissa would not be getting much work done until Maria had calmed considerably.

“What is it that I know?” Melissa plunked her bag on a stool and went to sit at the table nearby.

“You let that Anne Scott schedule her dinner party for the same day as my birthday party for Angela.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly ‘let’ her. It’s not my party. Plus when she was making the plans I didn’t realize it was the same date. I didn’t think about it until much later, and I haven’t had the chance to speak with Anne about it yet.”

“But you will then, right?”

Oh great, what had she just agreed to do?

“Speak to Anne? Why don’t you talk to her about it?”

“Oh no, it’ll come across much better if you do it, Melissa. I mean what will Anne say? If I go to her and demand she change the date, she’ll think it’s just so I can get him for Angela first.”

“Well, isn’t that what you want, after all?”

“No, absolutely not! Next Saturday is Angela’s birthday. I can’t very well change the day the girl was born, right? So Anne is the one who ought to change her party. After all, Mr. Adams can only be one place at a time. So why not change hers so he can be at both parties?”

“I’ll try and talk to her for you, Maria, but I can’t guarantee anything.” Melissa was sure she’d regret agreeing to it, but Maria had a point. It would be far better for a neutral person to point out the conflict, than for the two ladies to start getting in a fight over their scheduling issues.

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“Absolutely not! I can’t change my dinner party date, Melissa. You ought to know that. These things must be planned to the last detail, and we’ve already gone to so much work. We can’t possibly change it now – not just a week from the party.”

Melissa had decided to talk to her at church on Wednesday, but now she was wondering if she ought to have gone to Anne’s house, or at least talked to her in a more private area.

“But Anne, you didn’t even plan the party until three days ago, so I don’t understand why it would be so difficult to change the day. Just make it Monday, or Thursday maybe.”

“Are you on her side?”

Melissa stared at Anne, her mouth open, as the older woman stood in the church lobby, arms crossed, indignation written all over her face.

“What do you mean, on her side?” Melissa hated confrontation, and was now being subjected to two of them over this issue. Talking with Anne about this had not been her first choice, but she’d promised Maria she’d help, so she continued. “I didn’t think there were ‘sides’ on this. I thought Maria was having an innocent birthday party, and you’re having an innocent dinner party. How could there be sides?”

“You aren’t that naïve, Melissa. You know I need your help, and you know why. Those two would be perfect together – Natalie and Jack Adams. She’s been through so many difficult things, and God brought her through them. Natalie is strong and independent, a tough lady, with a heart for God. She’d be the perfect one help to Jack in his ministry with children. How can you even question it?”

“Anne, I don’t know anything about that, except he’s an adult, and so is Natalie. Why not just let them get to know each other naturally? You don’t know what will happen.”

“Naturally? Don’t be silly.” Anne gripped her Bible and purse tighter, shaking a finger at Melissa as she spoke. “Young people these days need a little help. We can’t just leave things to ‘nature,’ of all things. It just isn’t...well, it isn’t natural. Plus you promised to help me.”

“I’ll help you with your dinner party just like I promised, but I also promised to be at Maria’s party. I can’t be two places at once. I heard Maria already invited Jack to the birthday party, and he said yes. Anne, you need to change the date of your party. He can’t be two places at once, either.” Anne still didn’t look completely convinced.

“You don’t want him to break his promise, do you? I mean, he already committed. You don’t want to make him feel like he’s between a rock and a hard place.”

Finally Anne lowered her head and shrugged her shoulders. “Oh, I suppose you have a point. We can’t always have our own way, after all.” She sighed like a proper martyr, and fiddled with her long pendant necklace. “I guess Thursday of that week will have to do.”

“Thank you, Anne.” Melissa reached over and hugged the older woman. Anne relented and hugged her back after a moment, and Melissa knew things were mostly smoothed over – for now.

After her confrontation with Anne, Melissa was exhausted and shaky. Suddenly she felt a thin arm reach around her shoulders and squeeze. She smelled the familiar flowery fragrance announcing Mabel’s presence.

“How are you dear?”

She nodded she was fine, but could tell Mabel didn’t believe a word of it.

The older woman made a tsk’ing sound and shook her head in disapproval. “Melissa, young lady, you are doing too much.”

“I just want to help, Mabel. It just seems the more I try to do, the less I’m able to do right.”

“That’s because you’re helping more than you need to be. You’re taking too much on yourself. If you keep at it, you’ll find you can’t survive this way.” Mabel looked very thoughtful for a moment.

“You understand that serving God is not the same thing as being close to God.”

Melissa thought about Mabel’s statement for a moment. The older woman was right, of course. Had she been trying to take on too much? Everything she’d agreed to do was something helpful, something someone else wanted her to do for them, or felt as if she were the best person for the job.

She’d have to do some serious thinking about her schedule, and soon.

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The birthday party planning was taking up more of Melissa's time than she had ever thought possible. The whole week of orientation, when she should have been only concentrating on preparing for the upcoming school year, she was instead distracted with calls from Maria, and sometimes visits – on top of all the texts and calls from Anne over the dinner party.

Then Anne had what she considered her best idea ever.

*“Melissa, this will work. I just need you to do this one little thing for me.”*

Melissa held her phone to her ear a bit tighter, feeling the all-too-familiar sinking in the pit of her stomach, and the flush when she knew she should just say no.

*“What is it that you need, Anne?” What’s one more thing, after all?*

*“I need you to call Jack’s mother and ask her a few questions.”*

*You’ve got to be kidding me. “Are you sure I’ve got to?”*

*“Melissa, you are so funny.”* Anne did one of her affected laughs that made Melissa feel like tearing her ears out and replacing them with tiny little plastic models that were completely decorative.

*“Yes, I’m sure, dear. It’s just one little phone call. Mrs. Adams would know all of Jack’s favorite foods and exactly how to make them.”* Anne paused, waiting for Melissa’s answer. *“Please?”*

Melissa closed her eyes in frustration. Why did she feel so obligated to this? She was a grown woman. The notion she had to make this phone call for Anne was ridiculous. She wasn’t being paid for it; Anne wasn’t her employer, or *her* mother, after all. Why not just say no?

*“Honestly Melissa, I’m not asking you to do any great thing. Just a little phone call.”*

*“But Anne, it seems like such an intrusion.”*

*“You’re part of his new church family, and you’re just trying to make a nice dinner to help welcome him, and you want to find out what sort of things he likes. We want him to feel welcomed, right? He can’t possibly think badly of that, and I’ll bet his mother would completely understand.”*

*Then why don’t you call her yourself?*

*“I just have so many details to iron out, Melissa. Can you do this one little thing for me? It shouldn’t take you more than five minutes, and I did just change the date for my dinner party for you, now, didn’t I?”*

“Oh, all right.”

Melissa sighed, knowing she was giving in too easily. However, Anne was right. Mrs. Adams would probably want her son to have a nice welcome party – and she might not mind telling her all of his favorites. She just had to find out the woman’s number.

Turned out things were far easier than she had anticipated. Instead of trying to find a phone number, she wound up just looking up his Facebook page and contacting his mother after finding her in his friends list.

Looking through Jack’s pictures on his Facebook page felt like she was stalking him.

However, the next day she woke up to find a massive message from Mrs. Patty Adams, Jack’s mother. She had written out a list of twenty of his favorite foods, listed in order of choice, with tags like ‘would kill for this one’, or ‘would walk twelve miles barefoot through snow for this.’ Melissa’s favorite of these tags though, was the one that read, ‘to get this dish he would actually cook it himself – now that’s dedication.’

Melissa couldn’t stop laughing. His mother was a hoot. She enjoyed talking to her so much, they had set up a time for her to call back again. She hung up with Mrs. Adams feeling warm and fuzzy down to her toes, until she stopped and thought about why.

She didn’t dare let herself have such warm feelings for Jack’s mother. That was just one step away from having warm, fuzzy feelings about Jack, and if that happened, she could send two very loud, boisterous, and influential women in her church into tailspins. Did she dare risk that? She wasn’t sure yet.

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## CHAPTER 9

Finally the day of Angela's birthday party had arrived. Maria had been in a dither since Friday, calling, texting and emailing until Melissa was ready to pull her hair out. She had decided on a party at the park, with decorations, long tables set up under a big tent, and caterers bringing food. Of course the food had to be kept hot, unless it was cold food in which case it had to be kept cold. They didn't provide drinks, so Melissa had been in charge of all the soda, water, and a special fruit punch Maria insisted upon having fresh made.

Melissa began to wonder where Angela was in all this. She had hardly spoken to her friend in the last week, the party having turned into something so big it was all anyone had talked about at church on Wednesday.

The park was a beautiful little place, rolling hills dotted with some of the biggest pine trees in town, a massive carpet of needles on the ground, and thick stands of red-branched Manzanita in the low places. The public pool was right next to it, and a few kids still splashed in the water, having fun on one of their last warm weekends. She had always loved how the park smelled, pine and a little bit of chlorine from the pool – barbecues from the picnic spots, all smells and sights and sounds of an Indian summer coming to an end.

When Melissa arrived at the park, the tent wasn't set up yet, and she was getting frantic phone calls from the caterer who couldn't seem to find the place. At least the tent was there, having been dropped off earlier by a couple men of the church, so she began struggling with it, trying in vain to figure the thing out.

"This should not be so much trouble." She mumbled to herself, sure she was about to have an aneurism.

"Here, let me help you." Jack had arrived. She smiled over at him gratefully as he grabbed one of the canopy legs and showed her how to lengthen them.

"It's easier with at least two people – better with four, but I think we can handle it."

After a great deal of huffing and puffing, they managed to wrangle the canopy tent into place under two huge pine trees. By the time they had it all set up, a truck full of other men from the church had arrived, along with the long tables Maria had asked to use.

"We're setting up those, too?"

“Yes, we are.” Melissa shrugged and shook her head. “This whole deal has turned into something huge – much bigger than I’d anticipated.”

“And you’re doing all of it?” Jack shook his head, and Melissa felt a stab of guilt for letting him think she was doing so much of the work herself.

“No, I’m not doing all of it. There’s others helping, I’m just the first one who got to the park this time.

“And you work late at the library, and you clean up in the kitchen most nights, and you organize parties for other people.”

“It’s not like that. I guess you’ve just seen it that way the last few weeks or so. It’s not normally just me.”

Jack looked at her and grinned, as he grabbed one end of a table. “Sure, sure.”

They set up four of the six tables before anyone else came over to help, though Melissa wasn’t complaining.

About thirty minutes before the party was supposed to begin, Angela arrived. She drove up in her tiny, ancient, powder blue Pinto hatchback that was secretly the love of her life. Melissa held one hand up to shade her eyes from the sun as she watched her friend walk up.

“Hi Angela. Happy birthday.”

“Hey, ‘Lissa. Thanks. Looks like you got here extra early today.”

There was something different about Angela. She wasn’t her usual perky, friendly self. Then Angela turned to Jack and her face lit up like a Christmas tree. Melissa felt her stomach sink to her toes.

“Jack, thank you for setting all this up for me.” Melissa flushed red and bit her tongue, not wanting to point out she had set it up for her. How ridiculous would that be?

“You’re welcome, Angela, but Melissa’s the one doing all the work. I’m just here for the food.”

Melissa squelched the urge to snicker. Angela had never snubbed her, so why she was starting now Melissa wasn’t sure – except that outside forces were creating a stir where there’d never been a stir before. Either way, she was grateful for Jack’s subtle support.

“That’s our Melissa, always the busy bee.”

Melissa looked at her quizzically, seeing Angela flush red with what she hoped was a little embarrassment at being patronizing.

The moment remained strained, so Melissa turned and walked away, knowing there must be something else she could get ready. Of course, now she wanted a distraction, other people were there to help. A couple carloads of parents with kids pulled up, the caterers arrived and began setting out food, and some of the teenagers started a game of soccer in the big field next to the tables.

Once Maria showed up, the real party began.

She brought a huge piñata with her for the littler kids – Nerf bat in tow, and Melissa had to laugh at the memory of Jack bursting in on her with that bat, ready to do battle when he thought she was an intruder in his classroom.

As she stood on the sidelines, her plate filled, she watched Jack. A swarm of kids surrounded him, as if they were naturally drawn to his presence. He had played in the soccer game for a little while, and all the younger kids had teamed up against him, trying to get the ball past him. Like a horde, they had grouped around the ball, each one trying to kick it beyond the new teacher, while he lunged and feinted different directions, trying not to make it look too easy for him to outmaneuver them. She had laughed, watching him, until she spied Maria eyeing her. Then she'd quickly turned away.

Maria walked up to her and stood with her own plate in her hand, eating quietly for a few moments. Then the older woman turned and looked her directly in the eyes.

“You know, dear, sometimes young men are nice to girls and they don't really mean it. You understand, yes?” Maria glanced at her out of the corner of her eye. “Men – you never can tell with them. They are good to you one moment, and the next they are asking another girl out, you just have to move on and not be upset.”

Melissa had no idea what to say in response to that, so she chose to just keep eating and smiling, and hoped Maria would think she hadn't really understood her implication. Anyway, she didn't know why Maria would say anything to her. Jack had no interest in her, not like that. Maria patted her on the arm and walked away, ignoring Melissa's confused look.

Suddenly, all the good food on her plate didn't look as good anymore.

“Well, I see the piñata was a great hit, literally.”

Melissa jumped, bobbling her plate around so badly all the green beans spilled into to the mashed potatoes, and she nearly lost the steak completely. She turned to see Jack standing next to her.

“You really are out to get me, aren’t you.”

Jack laughed, helped steady her plate, and apologized, all in one smooth motion.

“So will there be cake at this shindig?” He smiled down at her.

“Cake is another of your foodie downfalls, right?”

“Yes, but you knew that already.”

She closed her eyes, mortified before he’d even said anything.

“My mom loved talking to you. Said you sounded like a very nice girl.”

“Look...”

“No, no, I understand.” He held up one hand to stop her sentence. “You all have to make the new guy – otherwise known as Eligible Bachelor Number One – feel welcome. I tell you, if I feel any more ‘welcomed’ it would border on stalking.”

“Anne just wants to make a few of your favorites for her dinner party, that’s all.”

“So you helped set up Angela’s birthday party, and you’re also working on Anne’s dinner party? Is there a special guest at that party, too?”

“Well...”

“Oh, don’t tell me.” Jack looked downright perturbed, maybe even upset. Melissa didn’t want to put a label on it, even in her own mind. The easy banter was slowly shifting into something else, and she had the distinct feeling a bomb was dropping right in her lap.

“So, who is Anne trying to set me up with? Or is it you trying to set me up with other girls?”

“No, I mean, that’s not how it is. The ladies asked me to help them with a party, that’s all. I swear, I have no other motives.”

He shook his head, closing his eyes and sighing deeply. “I’m sorry, ‘Lissa. I don’t mean to go off on you. I’ve just got a lot of pressure right now. School is starting to get into full swing, and my class is really all I should have on my mind.” He stopped to take a bite of the steak. She noticed he had a few green beans, but only enough to be able to say he had tasted them – a little.

“Seems like a couple other people have different opinions regarding what I should be thinking about right now.”

Melissa felt a twinge of guilt at his words. “Jack, I’m sorry for the part I’ve played in all this then. I hadn’t even thought about it that way – you’re new, wanting to get settled in, and figure out everything it’s going to take to set up your class – and then starting a new class. More than enough for you to handle without the ladies working up a new...focus...for you.”

“No really, it’s ok.”

“Well, it might be ok, but it’s not over. You’ve still got the dinner party to go to in a few days.”

He groaned and looked up at the sky in surrender. “True.” He smiled at her ruefully. “You’re going to be there, too, right?”

“Sort of. I’m just the help. I won’t be a guest at the party.”

“Hmm. I might have to change that.”

“Oh, that’ll go over well.” She let her voice drip with sarcasm.

Jack chuckled, then said, “Hey, if I’m a guest of honor, I should be able to have my own way about something, and I will be insisting you get to sit at the table and eat. You are not hired help.” Then he stopped. “Wait, you aren’t the hired help, are you?”

Melissa laughed, outright, and shook her head. “No. But promise me you’ll talk to Anne gently.”

“I’ll do my best.” He laughed too, and they went on to finish their meals in companionable silence, until some of the kids came and dragged Jack back to the soccer field.

Testimonies about Angela

A few minutes later, just as she was finishing her meal, Maria stood up and banged a fork against her glass, calling everyone’s attention to the front.

“We have a few people who would like to say a word or two. First off...” and Maria began introducing people who were apparently giving speeches.

Immediately she felt Angela at her side.

“Did you know anything about this, Melissa?”

“I absolutely did not. This is one thing Maria kept to herself.”

Both the girls stared in shared horror at the front of the group, where Maria had people standing to talk. She had a handheld microphone which she passed to the person as soon as they came up.

“Miss Angela has been a wonderful Kindergarten teacher for going on two years. I can’t say enough about her...” from the school principal, Mr. John James.

“Miss Berry can cook like no one else I know...” came from a small child who was a former student of Angela’s.

“Angela is such a wonderful piano player – I don’t know how she’s still single...” This statement from a little, white-haired old lady named Pearl, elicited a groan from Angela, and made Melissa hide her face behind a hand.

“Sounds like Maria has enlisted a little help.” Melissa patted Angela on the back sympathetically. She saw Jack watching the speakers with rapt attention, a bemused expression on his face. Just as she was telling herself to stop staring, he turned and caught her eye, raising one eyebrow at her. All Melissa could do was shrug her shoulders and clap as the last lady stood to give her little pro-Angela speech. It was like being at a political rally, but one where only half the crowd knew what was going on.

Finally the speeches were over, the cake was brought out, candles lit, song sung and Angela blew them all out in one breath. As the cake was distributed, Melissa noticed Jack had grabbed his piece, an extra large, by the looks of it, and headed off to the swings at the nearby playground. He swung himself slowly with one foot, obviously enjoying a little alone time. Then Melissa saw Anne and her daughter, Natalie, approaching from behind him. She very briefly considered warning him, then decided to just let it go. This could get interesting.

As Anne approached him, Melissa saw her wave and call out to him. Jack got up quick, or tried to, until he got tangled in the swing’s chain and nearly beheaded himself, losing his beloved cake in the process. He thrashed like a fish on a line for a second or two, finally extracting one arm and unwinding the chain from around his neck. When the swinging and spinning stopped, and he saw he was all still intact, he straightened his shirt and stood looking at the two women. Melissa chuckled out loud, glad he was too far away to hear her.

She didn’t have to know what Anne and Natalie were saying to him. He nodded politely, then shook his head politely, then waved and turned to walk away. As he did he tripped on his own feet, stepped in his spilled cake, and went down on one knee trying to recover his dignity. He was not too successful. Melissa could not help it, she had to laugh. Picking up another piece of cake, she made her way over to where he was trying to get himself off the sand, and held it out for him.

“I take it you’d like another piece of this?” She grinned down at him as he finally managed to stand on his own two feet again.

“Thanks.” He took the plate, trying not to grin sheepishly, and began shoveling cake in his mouth. After a couple bites, he cocked his head and looked at her out of the corner of his eye. “How much of that did you see?”

“Enough to feel sorry for you, for now.” She continued staring at him as he wolfed the cake down. He was done in only three more bites. Raising one eyebrow, she looked at him pointedly.

“What? It’s good cake.”

She burst into laughter then. He was so funny, with cake on his face, the swing still moving gently behind him as a reminder of his epic failure. When she straightened, she smiled into Jack’s eyes, then suddenly saw Anne watching them over his shoulder. Her smile faded as Anne stared at her, then slowly turned away.

Melissa felt a chill up her spine, and she hugged her arms around her like warding off an evil spirit. Jack looked at her quizzically, but didn’t ask her about it. He was still working on his cake, very diligently.

Later everyone helped clean up the park, which was a pleasant surprise for Melissa. It might have been because Jack was going around making a game of it with the kids, and all the parents realized they ought to help, too. The trash was picked up and thrown away, tables cleared off and taken down, and the canopy restored to its travel bag in no time with so many hands to help.

Melissa smiled gratefully at everyone, and said her goodbyes, glad to be able to get home and relax finally. Now all she had to deal with was Anne’s dinner party. No big deal, sure.

.....

Melissa was truly enjoying her growing friendship with Jack, except for one sticky point – Maria Hernandez. The woman had begun making pointed remarks whenever she was around Melissa. To the point where people at church were beginning to look at her as if she’d done something wrong that no one but Maria must know about.

Of course, she never made them when Jack was around, and usually never when Angela was around either, as Angela wouldn’t have stood for her friend being maligned.

A few days after the birthday party at the park, Angela had taken her aside and apologized for being short with her. Melissa had readily forgiven her, and the two girls were back to their old friendship, hardly skipping a beat. But Maria was a different matter altogether.

At church two weeks later, Maria saw Melissa coming and instead of her customary cheerful hello, she'd lifted her nose in the air and said, "Oh, here comes that girl. I tried to warn her once, but she doesn't want to listen to me."

Gina, standing next to Maria, looked at her like she'd lost her mind, then shook her head and shrugged her shoulders, sending Melissa an apologetic smile as she made her way past. Maria looked only daggers at Melissa.

She was glad when church was over, and she could relax in ensemble practice.

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## CHAPTER 10

The music director of Victory Chapel was Jay Clayton, a short, thin man somewhere in his late 50s, his dark brown hair graying around the temples. He looked out on the world through kind, brown eyes which sparkled whenever he sat at the piano to play. And could he ever play! His art on the piano keyboard was unlike anyone else Melissa had ever heard, roaming up and down the scales with such joyful abandon it often brought tears to her eyes just listening.

But that Sunday evening after services, Melissa was not overcome with teary-eyed joy. Instead, she was terrified.

Jay was naturally a quiet and unassuming man, but he took his song leading very seriously, and Melissa wouldn't dream of arguing with him – except he was sorely tempting her this time.

“I've picked a great song for the ensemble special in a few weeks. And as most of you have already noticed, our new teacher, Jack, has graciously agreed to be a part of our ensemble. We needed another male singer, and he just happens to sing very nicely.” Everyone, including Melissa, turned to look at Jack and he waved a little from his seat on the front pew. The group was gathered around him at the front of the auditorium, getting ready to practice.

“We're going to try a little experiment here, and have Jack sing this duet here with Melissa. I think they might sound nice together. I like to see how people's voices blend.”

Melissa stood on stage with the rest of the ensemble – two other ladies, and three men, now including Jack – while Jay played through the new song once. It was actually an old song, but the way he played breathed new life into it, making it fresh and vibrant.

Jay indicated the verse he wanted Jack and Melissa to sing, then backed off to listen to them.

As the two began their verse, everyone else fell silent. No one, not even the smattering of people out in the pews, talked at all. They were all to a person speechlessly watching the two of them.

Their voices rose and blended so perfectly together the harmony sent shivers up Melissa's spine. She could see the pleased smile on Jack's face from the corner of her eye, and she knew he felt the same way. It was like soaring through the air, without the fear of dangling over nothingness – being totally filled with harmony and melody, all in glory to God. Melissa heard the catch in her voice as she was overwhelmed.

When their verse ended, the chorus began, but no one else started singing. They remained silent, listening to Jack and Melissa finish out the entire song as a duet, and watching with awestruck looks on their beaming faces.

Melissa had never sung with someone else who was such a perfect match to her voice. Where she had normally found herself faltering at times, she seemed able to push on and sound so much more confident, all because Jack was singing with her, matching tone for tone, always in harmony.

When the song ended, every person in the room began applauding, including Jay at the piano. Melissa felt decidedly uncomfortable, her hand clammy around the microphone as Jay finally spoke.

“I think we’ve found our new regular duet.” The others nodded, and began talking about how a duet would be perfect, while Jack looked at her and smiled.

She flushed, her hands getting even clammier as she resisted the urge to wipe them on her skirt. They went on to practice the song a few more minutes, and every time they sang their duet, it was the same, though the rest of the ensemble did decide to join in at the chorus like they were supposed to.

By the end of practice, Melissa was exhausted. All she wanted to do was get home, climb into some pj’s, and relax with her cat.

Jack had other ideas.

“Hey, Melissa, wait up.” She paused at the front door, turning to look back at him. He was smiling, of course.

“Thanks for singing with me. I think it’ll be great.” He was like a little kid, all excited and full of nervous energy.

“Of course.” Melissa felt confusion cloud her face. “I mean, I wasn’t going to say no, right?”

“Yea, well, I guess not.” Jack’s brow creased in a little frown. She hadn’t seen one of those on his face before, and suddenly regretted being the one to have put it there.

“We sounded pretty good together.” She tried to smooth over her hasty words.

Gina, passing by on her own way home, stopped.

“You sounded *amazing* together – not just pretty good, young lady. I could have listened to the two of you all day long.”

“Hey, we should go get something to eat.” Jack stood next to her, looking at her expectantly. Melissa stepped back at Jack’s words, her face flushing again.

“Oh, umm...ok.”

“Yea, sure, all of us go to Denny’s, or wherever you go to eat around here. Living in the building means I haven’t gotten out much so far.”

The rest of the group began nodding and discussing where they should go. Melissa mentally ran through her wallet, while also covering for her initial reaction to thinking he was asking her out, then the embarrassment at realizing he was suggesting a group outing.

“Come on, ‘Lissa. It won’t be the same if you don’t go.”

There she went again, flustered at his use of her nickname which was mostly used by Angela, and at the fact he’d noticed her hesitation.

She was acting like a schoolgirl, not a woman nearing 28 years old on her next birthday. Gathering her wits back around her like spoiled, wayward children, she ordered them to behave, then smiled at the group and nodded.

“Sure, I’ll go. Sounds fun.”

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The group finally decided on a little restaurant called *Bryan’s Bakery* which specialized in homemade pies, and was owned by an older, semi-retired couple in the church. The owner, Dane Bryan, was a tiny little man, bent over with age, and wizened to the point of his wrinkles having wrinkles, but a hilarious character.

He kept the ladies smiling with his unashamed – and charming – flirting, and the guys laughing, all while making sure everyone knew the real cooking genius was his little wife Hazel, an equally wizened, though much more demure, white-haired lady who flitted in and out of the kitchen when she saw a group from her church sitting in their restaurant.

Melissa finally was able to relax. Neither Anne nor Maria were anywhere in sight, and while she was friends with Natalie and Angela, she was relieved they weren’t there either. All she’d been thinking about lately was either the birthday party for the one friend, or the dinner party for the other. Time for a break.

They’d been seated in a round corner booth, looking over the menus for nearly ten minutes before she realized everyone else had decided what they wanted except Jack.

“Can’t make up your mind?” She leaned over a little to see what he was agonizing over from his seat next to her in the booth.

“It all looks too good – plus it’s pie.”

“Pie is important to you, is it?”

“It’s only beat out by my mom’s meatloaf.”

“So it’s Mom’s meatloaf, pie, and then anything Mexican.”

He stopped and laughed at her, shaking his head. “Yes, if you’re compiling a list, then that would be the correct order.” He absently turned the page on the menu, then flipped it back again to see what he’d just been looking at before.

Jay lifted his water glass, peered across the table at Melissa and Jack, nudged Dave’s elbow seated next to him, and loudly pronounced, “Cake is better.”

“Oh no, don’t get them started on the whole ‘cake versus pie’ thing.” Gina laughed and twirled a lock of her dark hair. She rarely got out either, what with two small kids and a husband to look after, so Melissa knew she was enjoying this night out.

“Jay and Dave have a running debate as to which is closer to the food of heaven – cake or pie.” Melissa felt her spirit lift as she joined in the laughter.

It was then she saw Rease, the tall, willowy redhead that sang soprano for the group, taking a picture with her phone and texting.

“Are you outing us on Facebook already, honey?” Dave leaned over his wife’s shoulder. While they had only been married a year, they teased and joked and laughed like an old married couple sometimes. He playfully tried to take her phone, while she held it out away from him. The normally quiet redhead squealed and said, “Ha! Too late! Everyone knows where we are now.”

“Great.” Melissa didn’t really care who knew where she was, but sometimes it was odd having your location blasted onto everybody’s Facebook timeline whether you wanted it there or not. She still wasn’t used to it.

Right then the waitress came for everyone’s order and the serious business of pie began for real.

Jack had finally decided – on apple.

“That’s what you’re going with?” Melissa clucked her tongue in mock dismay.

“Can’t go wrong with the classics.”

“I prefer something different each time, so today it’s the Razzle Dazzle Berry.”

“Sounds complicated.” Jack handed the waitress his menu over Melissa’s head.

“It probably is, but complicated can also be interesting.”

Jack paused, his hand still in the air, and looked at her differently suddenly. “True, I hadn’t thought of it that way before.”

He looked at her just long enough to make her squirm in her seat. She wanted to ask if they were still talking about pie, but wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer. The easy banter continued around them, but Jack was quiet for awhile after his cryptic statement, and Melissa wondered if something was bothering him.

When the waitress finally came back with their orders, Melissa was relieved. Now the eating would begin, and the talking would stop for a bit.

Then her phone rang. She gazed longingly at her half eaten piece of pie, the purple juice staining the perfectly crispy crust, berries spilling out onto the white plate.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep it safe from Dave.” Jack winked at her conspiratorially, and she had to smile as she answered her phone.

Her smile quickly faded as Jack watched her with concern growing on his face. She was sure he could hear Anne Scott’s strident tones coming from her phone, but she wasn’t sure if he could understand the words she was saying. Desperately hoping Jack, and no one else at the table, could tell what Anne was saying, Melissa quietly excused herself from the table and made a beeline for the back hall outside the bathrooms.

*“What do you think you’re doing, Melissa? Out with Jack Adams when you said you’d help me get him and Natalie together? Don’t deny it – I saw Rease Davis’s post and she clearly put both you and Jack there in that restaurant – together.”*

“Anne, we’re not *together* together. We’re here in a group with the ensemble, that’s all. You can’t possibly have a real problem with it.”

*“Oh, I most certainly can have a problem with it. It’s totally inappropriate, and I can’t believe you’d throw yourself at him like this.”*

“Anne! Mrs. Scott, please, that’s not...”

*"I don't appreciate you undermining me like this, and going back on your word."* She heard Anne produce a long-suffering sniff, and draw in a ragged breath as she tried to pull her composure back together. *"The least you could have done was to call Natalie and invite her, too. She would have liked going out with her friends. You are her friend, still, aren't you?"*

"Yes, of course..."

*"Then perhaps you should apologize to her, right away. I'm sure she's seen the whole sordid post as well by now, and is probably sitting at home crying about it. You know she hasn't had much of a chance yet with Jack, what with Maria hogging all his attention for Angela, and here you are taking up more of his time."*

"Anne, I did no such thing..."

Melissa's words were too choked with tears to come out forcefully, and Anne continued her diatribe as if Melissa had not even spoken.

*"You can't let these things happen, Melissa Barnes. You don't want people to get the wrong idea about what kind of girl you are."*

Melissa gasped at her insinuation, her face flushing in anger as she began shivering with shock at the woman's unkind words.

*"I know, I sound harsh, but I just want to see your reputation protected, is all. Sometimes the truth is hard to hear, but I pride myself on always saying what needs to be said, not just what the other person wants to hear."*

Suddenly Melissa could no longer remember why she was still listening to the woman – beyond the fact that she would have to go to church with Anne Scott every week for the foreseeable future. That, and only that, stopped her from hanging up without another word.

"Anne, I know you're upset, so I'm going to hang up now before you say more you might regret someday – and before I say something I won't regret, but probably should."

With that Melissa tapped 'end' and disconnected the call. She wished for the old days when she could slam the receiver down on a wall unit with a satisfactory bang.

She counted to ten, twice, before returning to the table. Apparently it hadn't been enough to sufficiently get all the angst off her face, because Gina picked up on it right away.

"What's wrong, Melissa?" If they had been alone, Melissa would have been sorely tempted to unload the whole sordid conversation on Gina, but with the table full she was prevented from making a bad situation even worse through gossip.

She settled for just shaking her head and waving a dismissive hand, hoping to make everyone think it was just family drama. “Oh you know how things can get blown up out of proportion. Don’t worry about it. Let’s just enjoy the pie.”

Jack leaned over, shoving her plate back in front of her from where he’d pulled it over to himself when she’d gotten up, preventing the waitress from clearing her plate off the table. “Need me to pound someone for you?”

She smiled behind a forkful of pie, shaking her head.

“Good thing, because being a teacher at the local Christian school, I really should only give someone a severe detention – maybe a hundred sentences – ‘I will not upset Miss Barnes for the rest of the school year.’ How does that sound?”

She giggled then, and the others around the table relaxed. Gratitude towards Jack overwhelmed her right then, and she beamed at him. She knew he suspected something had upset her badly, but he wasn’t pressing her to tell him about it, or bringing too much more attention to it.

She tried to enter in to the easy banter of the group again, but found some of the joy of the evening had been stolen from her. Managing to make it through the rest of the evening, she finally was able to get home, take something for the raging headache assaulting her temples, and crawl into bed, where blessed peace reigned again.

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## CHAPTER 11

After Anne's harsh words on the phone in the restaurant, Melissa had expected the older woman to be cold to her, maybe spiteful and angry. But Anne acted for the most part as if nothing had happened between them. She called Melissa later the next day to be sure all the preparations for her party were in order. Right as they were about to get off the phone, Anne stopped and said, "Melissa, about yesterday on the phone. You were right, I regret saying those things to you. Are we ok?"

Melissa hesitated. Sort of a halfhearted apology, but it was an apology nonetheless. She knew the better thing to do would be to give her mercy. "Yes, Anne, we're ok."

"Good, thank you Melissa." The woman's relieved tones were obvious even over the phone line. "So I assume you'll be just fine with all the plans?"

"Sure, Anne, of course." Only then did Melissa wonder if Anne's apology was more about her party than about a truly repentant heart. But what could she do now?

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Ever since the restaurant, she'd been avoiding him. Two days, and Jack was at his limit. He knew this wasn't right, and he didn't yet know how to fix it. All Jack knew was to face things head on, so that's exactly what he did.

That's why, at approximately 3:05 Wednesday afternoon, he stood at the door of the library, gathered his nerve, and flung the door open, startling the pretty librarian inside.

"Again, Jack? You're trying to scare me to death, again?"

She stood at her desk, one hand over her heart, breathing hard as a stack of papers fluttered to the ground all around her. She obviously had been holding them when he'd opened the door, flinging them up when he'd scared her.

"I came in to get some answers."

"Really? Answers for what?"

"Why are you avoiding me?"

"I'm not avoiding you." She was bent over picking up the papers she'd dropped, and pointedly not looking him in the eye.

“Yes, you are. When I come in a room, you leave it. When I join a group of people, you exit fast as you can. It’s obvious you are avoiding me.”

“It isn’t you.”

“Don’t say it’s me.” Jack threw both his hands in the air.

“I just said...”

“No, I mean, don’t say it’s you.”

“What are we talking about now?” Melissa’s brow creased.

“Are you trying to confuse me?” Jack pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers and closed his eyes.

“No.”

“Are you going to answer my question?”

“No.” Melissa sat down at her desk and began stacking and shifting the papers in her hands.

“Are you just going to answer ‘No’ to everything I say now?”

“No.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Melissa.”

“I’m not avoiding you, Jack.”

“Then what do you call it?”

She stopped shuffling her papers, and finally looked him in the eye. “Avoiding trouble.”

He stood quietly for a minute, not sure if that answer should give him hope, or send him into a pit of despair. He really didn’t care for the whole pit thing. Didn’t sound very pleasant. Not like hope, which always sounds pleasant. Put hope in a pit and you’ve got pleasant again. Now she had gotten even his thoughts rambling nonsensically.

“Trouble? Care to explain what you mean by that? How am I ‘trouble’ to you?”

“You just are.”

Jack walked over to her desk, placed both hands on the edge, and leaned over it, keeping his voice quiet so the students wouldn’t hear him. “Melissa, I thought we had a connection. I thought...well, I thought maybe there was something there. Something we could build on. I

sure wanted to see what it was, what it could lead to. And now, suddenly you're avoiding me. Was it something I did? Or said?"

"No, of course not." Melissa chewed on her bottom lip, something she did only when worried or afraid. What was she afraid of? What was she worried about?

"What has you so scared, 'Lissa?" He took a step back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I like you, Jack. I like you a lot, too much. And imagine what kind of trouble that would cause here at church." She looked up at him, her big brown eyes wide, and he felt something in his chest turn over.

"Someone said something to you...back at the restaurant, the phone call you got. Who was it from?" His eyes narrowed and he got real still, willing her to answer all his questions before he'd even voiced them.

She didn't say another word.

"So you mean to tell me, you're avoiding me because you're afraid of what a couple matchmaking busybodies in the church will think of you?"

"Well, it doesn't sound nearly as good when you put it that way."

"No, no it doesn't."

She sighed.

"You're right, Jack. I know you are. I'd hate to lose a friend over what a few people seem to think about something that's none of their business."

"Exactly right." Jack crossed his arms in front of his chest and ducked his head down to get her to look up at him again. "So we're ok now, right? Friends again?"

She nodded, a small smile playing around her mouth. "Sure, friends again. No worries."

Friends might not be exactly what he was hoping for, but it was a start.

Jack decided they needed a change of topic, and there was something he'd been wanting to discuss with Melissa for a few weeks. So, drawing in a big breath just for fortitude's sake, he plunged in.

"Do you ever tell anyone you can't do something they've asked you to do?"

Melissa looked at him, raised one eyebrow, and smirked.

“I did once, in 1994, I think it was. It didn’t turn out well. Lots of screaming and running around, pulling out hair, and I think a rubber chicken even got involved there for a minute. Wasn’t pretty.”

“Very funny. I’m being serious for once.”

“We can’t both be serious at the same time. It’d cause some kind of cosmic explosion somewhere. The world would end. We have the fate of the entire universe in our hands, and you want me to be serious? What’s wrong with you, man?”

“Come on, ‘Lissa. Listen to me. You can’t keep going like this. You’ve seen it in all those sappy movies, with the girl who is always being taken advantage of? She’s the only one who isn’t happy, at least not until she learns to stand up for herself.” He paused and put his hand on her elbow, just to steer her toward a quiet corner for a minute. “I don’t want to see you be that girl. The one everyone sits in their living room watching on the TV screen, yelling at her to just be herself. The one the guy wishes she’d be...you know, *that* girl?”

She looked at him thoughtfully. “I can stand up for myself.”

“Yes, you could, if you would let yourself say ‘No’ just once.”

Talking about wanting to be a librarian

She lifted her chin, and he could see she was getting riled up. He tried to hide the smile playing on his lips.

“So, Jack, have you always wanted to be a teacher?”

Jack raised an eyebrow at her, understanding what she was doing, then nodded his head. “Yes, I really have. For awhile there I sort of got sidetracked, but then went back to Bible college and realized I do love teaching. All those young minds, ready for molding.” He rubbed his hands together, pretending to be a maniacal genius ready to take over the world.

For a second they were both quiet. Then Jack asked, “Have you always wanted to be a librarian?”

The laughter on her face dwindled down to a wistful smile.

“You know how in a small church people step in and wind up doing things they never thought they’d be doing otherwise?” She looked down at her hands clasped in front of her. “Well, that’s what happened to me, only I haven’t been moved on from there yet. Don’t get me wrong, I love to read, and I enjoy helping the kids learn to love reading, but I never wanted to

be cooped up in the library room all day every day through each school year.” She sighed deeply, looking out the window.

“I’d rather read outside, halfway up a tree, sitting on a branch somewhere, or on a rock by a creek. But what can I do?”

He looked at her sympathetically. “Why don’t you talk to Pastor Johnson about it? I’m sure he doesn’t want you to be miserable.”

“Oh no, I’m sure he doesn’t either, but who else is going to do it? And I’m not miserable; this just isn’t my dream job, that’s all.” She stopped then, looking up at him pleadingly. “Please don’t tell Pastor I said all this. He doesn’t know, and I don’t want him to feel bad. Someday someone will come along who’s better suited, and I’ll gladly give the position over then. For now I’m just glad to be able to help out.” She sighed.

Jack nodded his head again, examining someone’s name carved into the wooden desktop.

“Ok, I won’t tell him. But someday, you’ll have to tell someone ‘no’, and the longer you wait the harder it’ll be.”

.....

Later, Jack’s words echoed in her mind. She wondered if he was right, and how long it would be before she found out.

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## CHAPTER 12

Finally the day arrived. Anne's dinner party was much different than the birthday celebration in the park. Only certain people were invited, and no children, as this was much more formal and dignified. No outdoor barbecue, or impromptu game of soccer being played in the yard. Melissa doubted she would have been invited either if she hadn't been setting up much of the decorations and cooking half the food.

Anne had an elaborate centerpiece planned for the formal dining table, with long reeds sprouting from a tall glass vase half filled with clear glass marbles, all surrounded by fall leaves, golden ribbons, and taper candles on both sides. She had asked Melissa to do that, as well.

Anne had settled on a very fancy menu, filled with dishes Melissa could hardly pronounce, much less prepare.

Melissa spent all day Monday trying to build the centerpiece while also dealing with all the activity happening each day in the school library. By the time she fell into bed that night she was exhausted, but relieved it would all be over by that time the next day.

The next evening she arrived at Anne's house a half hour before the party was set to begin – just like Anne had asked. But as soon as she pulled up outside Anne's sprawling, ranch-style house, Natalie burst out the door and ran down the sidewalk to her car.

"Melissa, oh, I'm so glad you're finally here. I forgot the chocolate fountain at my house, and it's absolutely vital that you go get it."

"Natalie, are you sure the chocolate fountain is really that important?"

"Vital Melissa, vital! Yes, you have to go get it. And it can't be a different one, because that one is special. It has to be mine." She dangled her keys in front of Melissa's face.

Natalie was getting as bad as her mother, and quickly.

"Fine, Natalie, but then I'm done. I'll go get your chocolate fountain." Melissa wasn't happy, but she'd promised the girl's mother she'd do her best, and she would. Grabbing the keys from Natalie, she got back into her car and took off.

The trip took practically no time at all, and Melissa soon pulled up in front of Natalie's place – a little cottage nearly hidden from the road by tall trees and bushes a few blocks from Anne's house, but in a slightly more run-down part of the city. Scruffy plants held on along the edges of the dirt drive, and a few apple trees were scattered around in the side yard. One gigantic

pine tree towered over the south side of the cottage, shading it from the afternoon sun, already hanging low enough in the sky to be mostly obscured by the mountain.

Melissa quickly let herself into the house, noting the little sitting room with a long sectional couch by the door and a wide bar separating the living room from the open kitchen and dining area. There were papers strewn all over a small desk in one corner, with a laptop set up like a personal computer, and knick knacks scattered around. No chocolate fountain there, though, so she went on into the kitchen and began opening cupboards and checking cabinets.

Just as she reached the last cabinet on the end without finding what she was looking for, a pair of strong hands grabbed her by the elbows, pulling them together and up so she stood on her tiptoes. She cried out in fright and pain, but whoever it was clapped a hand against her mouth. She tried to struggle, but whoever had hold of her possessed an iron grip. She couldn't stop herself as the attacker propelled her toward the tiny front closet, opening the door and shoving her face first into the little space. Her head smacked against something hard, with a sharp edge, and she immediately felt dizzy. The door slammed behind her. She vaguely heard scraping as something heavy was dragged over to the door. All light was blocked. She was in complete darkness, alone.

Her heart was pounding, her mind growing fuzzy even as it registered a great deal of noise from the front room, and finally she knew no more.

.....

Jack arrived exactly fifteen minutes early, hungry as a bear, as usual. Mrs. Anne Scott greeted him at the door, ushering him inside as if he were royalty. He'd been in the church for three months, he thought people would be used to him by then, but apparently he was as new and fresh to Anne as if he'd just walked up and introduced himself that very minute.

He saw Natalie was there already, smiling at her and nodding a greeting. Anne, her mother, beamed with pleasure and nudged her in the ribs whenever he looked at the poor girl, so he spared her by not looking at her very often.

The other guests arrived soon after he did; Pastor Johnson and his wife Dana, and the Lamberts, an older couple in the church whom he had only met once so far.

Then he realized someone was missing. "Where's Melissa?"

Anne looked displeased by his question, Natalie looked around in confusion. "Mother, didn't you say she'd be here tonight?"

Anne nodded and patted Natalie on the shoulder. "Well of course at first, dear. But Melissa was just helping me set it all up beforehand. I sent her on home a little while ago. She was tired anyway."

"But Mom, I sent her to get the chocolate fountain like you said. She went over to my apartment, but I haven't seen her come back yet."

Jack turned to look at the big sideboard along the back wall of the dining room and there, for all to see, was a large silver fountain filled with liquid chocolate, already bubbling and ready for fruit dipping. He raised one eyebrow, but didn't say anything.

Anne saw him eyeing the fountain and suddenly her look became strained. "She dropped it off here before she went home. I'm telling you, she was very tired." Anne's voice became high pitched. "Really, why are we worrying about Melissa? She's a big girl. I'm sure she's fine."

Jack's brow furrowed in confusion. He had talked to her just that afternoon about her being at the dinner party. She was supposed to be his buffer. She wouldn't just leave him high and dry, would she? Excusing himself, he found the bathroom and locked the door behind himself as he grabbed his cell phone out of his pocket.

She didn't answer his call. She had always answered his calls before. Maybe her phone was off. Thing is, it rang and rang without going to voicemail. Usually if the phone is off it goes straight to voicemail. An uneasy feeling was growing in his gut; he couldn't stand still, and knew there was something off, something he was missing.

He couldn't stay and ignore the still, small voice nudging him persistently. Only a few times had he ever been this uncomfortable, and each time it had been God trying to impress him to take some sort of action.

Without wasting another moment, he strode into the living room and approached Anne. She looked so pleased with herself he almost felt bad disappointing her; but only for a second or two.

"Anne, I'm going to have to excuse myself here for a little bit. Hopefully it won't take me long, and I'll be right back, but don't wait dinner on me. I just want to... well, I have something I need to check on."

He was about to tell her he would go check on Melissa, but something stopped him from continuing the sentence. That fact made him uneasy as well. The whole thing was just...wrong.

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## CHAPTER 13

Melissa woke with a start, her hands and feet flinging out like she was falling from a great height. Her head knocked into something hard behind her, one arm was engulfed in something soft that felt like a coat, and both her knees banged into a hard surface in front of her – the door.

She remembered being grabbed and shoved in there, but she could see nothing. The only problem was, she could smell something, and it was burning.

She whispered into the dark, “Dear God, help me!”

\*\* \*\*

He already had Natalie’s address in his phone, thanks to her mother insisting on him having it, ‘just in case.’ He’d wondered what that ‘just in case’ had meant at the time, but now he didn’t care. He punched it in to his maps on his phone and set off, thanking God it was only five minutes away. He made the trip in three.

Right before he got to Natalie’s driveway, a thin puff of dark smoke registered in his vision. It was coming from her house.

Tires squealed as he turned the corner, whipping out his cell he dialed 9-1-1, left a frantic message for the operator, and threw it on the passenger seat next to him. He slammed his brakes on, bolting out of the car and throwing himself at the front door. It was solid.

\*\* \*\*

Melissa held one hand over her mouth, coughing and hacking, hardly able to breathe already. The door was only warm in front of her – not hot, yet - but she could hear a whoosh and crackle she dared not dwell on. Smoke trickled in under the door, but whatever was in front of the door must have been also holding back some of the smoke.

As hard as she pushed on the door, it didn’t even budge.

“Dear God, help me!” She stopped, leaning her full weight against the closed door, knowing God heard, but not expecting an audible reply.

She got one anyway.

A boom sounded through the cottage. The walls shook, whatever was on the shelves over her head shifted and something that felt like bedsheets began falling on her head.

Then she heard a voice calling her name.

\*\* \*\*

“Melissa! Melissa, are you in there?”

Jack could hear sirens in the distance. Hopefully his disjointed message to the 9-1-1 operator had been clear enough to warrant sending a fire truck out right away.

A couple neighbors were running down the dirt drive, yelling at him to stop.

“Young man, there’s no one in there.” One older lady in a bright orange housedress with huge white flowers all over it was waving her hands at him as she hurried up. “Natalie lives there alone, and I know she’s at her mother’s house tonight for dinner. Just let the firefighters deal with this.” She put her hand on his shoulder, trying to drag him back toward his car.

“No, someone else is in there. I know she is.”

Jack couldn’t waste any more time. He turned and pounded on the door again, finally able to land a solid kick to the door handle. He was rewarded with a satisfying cracking sound, and the door swung open.

Smoke billowed out at him. He coughed and put one arm over his eyes and mouth as he entered the dark house. The air felt like an oven, though he could only see a few flames around the edges of the room. The fire must have started only a few minutes before he arrived.

“Melissa! Are you in here?”

\*\* \*\*

“Jack? Jack! I’m in here!” She began pounding on the door as hard as she could. Her breath came in short gasps now, hacking and coughing. She could hear him then, pounding on the walls, shouting for her to get back. She heard scraping and cracking, banging and sirens, all with the ominous crackly around her.

Then with a great crash she felt a great rush of air through the cracks in the door. Jack was pounding on the door between them, while she pounded from her side. The lock was either supernaturally being held shut, or they were both being overcome by the fumes filling the air.

Another great crack, and the door flew open, Jack standing there. He was the best sight she had ever seen.

Without another word, he grabbed her, cradling her in his arms and rushed out the door to fresh air. He didn't stop until he'd gotten to the other side of his car, and laid her gently in the passenger seat.

His face was a mess, soot and dirt and wet tracks coursing through it all as tears flowed.

"Are you ok? Melissa, can you talk?"

She nodded, but didn't try. Actually she thought she probably couldn't talk right then. She put a hand to his cheek and looked into his eyes, mouthing the words she should have said days ago.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just be ok."

"I am now."

He wiped her cheeks with his thumbs, kissing her on the forehead and nose, then holding her close and rocking her while she clung to him. He was big, and solid and safe, and everything else he ought to be.

She closed her eyes, breathing in the scent of him, soot and all, and finding it the best thing she'd ever known.

\*\* \*\*

Much later, the firefighters had managed to put out the blaze, saving most of the trees around the house, and managing to not let it spread to the forest beyond.

Melissa found herself lying in a hospital bed. The paramedics had recommended going to the hospital just to be sure her lungs weren't damaged by the smoke, and because she really was having a hard time breathing, she agreed.

While the nurses got her on oxygen, Jack called Anne and let her know what had happened. Anne was horrified, and he had to convince her not to descend upon the hospital, the entire dinner party in tow, to make sure Melissa was going to survive. He clicked end on the phone call with Anne, but stared at the phone for a few minutes with a puzzled expression.

"What is it?" Melissa's voice worked a bit better by then, but she still sounded raspy.

"I'm not sure, yet." He shook his head and put his phone away. "It's not important right now. I'm just glad you're ok." He smiled at her and smoothed the hair back from her forehead.

Jack pulled the hospital chair closer to the bed and sat, holding her hand. For the first time in a very long time she felt safe and warm, protected.

“What happened in there, Melissa?”

“When I got to Anne’s house, Natalie came out and asked me to go get her chocolate fountain from her place. She insisted she needed it, so I went to look for it. I couldn’t find it, though, and right before I was going to give up, someone grabbed me from behind and threw me in the closet.”

Jack put his head down, holding her hand to his forehead. She could feel him shaking as he continued to hold on to her hand.

“Melissa, if I’d lost you...” His voice cracked and she squeezed his hand, hoping he knew she understood. Raising his head, he locked gazes with her. “I would have lost more than just a friend. I would have lost someone who has become very special to me.”

She coughed once, then removed the oxygen mask so he could hear her better. “I know.” She attempted to smile at him, hoping not to cough. “Me too.” She finally let the warm feeling overtake her that had been threatening to grow for some time.

He smiled then, the grin growing slow and staying put.

“You know what this means, right? I’m not calling this ‘just friends’ anymore.”

Melissa smiled even wider. “I wouldn’t want you to.” She was struck with a thought that made her smile fade just a bit.

“What will Anne and Maria say?”

“I don’t care what they say, and neither should you. Don’t let them decide what’s best for you. Let God decide.”

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## CHAPTER 14

The day after the fire, Jack went back over to Anne's house for a little meeting. He'd already called Natalie and asked her to meet him there as well. She was staying at her mom's house anyway, because of the fire damage to her own place.

"Anne, I have something to ask you." He didn't bother saying hi, or any of the other niceties when starting a normal conversation.

She looked sort of like a deer in headlights – or his grandpa would have probably said like 'a calf staring at a new gate.' Anne swallowed hard, and Natalie looked back and forth between her mother and Jack.

"What's going on?"

Jack didn't turn his gaze off Anne while he answered Natalie's question.

"Ask your mother." He stared hard at the older woman, who squirmed under his gaze.

"Natalie, did you really forget that chocolate fountain yesterday?"

Natalie frowned at him. "I didn't think I did, I was sure I had it when I left the house to come here yesterday morning, but the day was so hectic. When mom said she couldn't find it anywhere here, I just figured I must have left it over at my house."

"So you didn't look for it yourself?"

"No, mom insisted I'd left it..." Jack saw a realization dawn on Natalie's face.

"Mother, you wouldn't have lied to get Melissa out of here, would you?" She looked so sincerely horrified Jack finally believed Natalie had nothing to do with any scheme against Melissa.

Anne, though, looked nothing but guilty. She looked at Natalie, stealing a quick glance over at Jack's condemning frown, then back at her daughter.

"It wasn't like I meant to hurt her. You've got to believe me. I just wanted to keep her away from the party for a few hours. It's not fair, the way she's monopolized all your attention, Jack." She turned pleading eyes toward Jack, who looked back without any sympathy in return.

"I just wanted to give you and Natalie a chance, that's all."

“But mother, the fire....what happened? Please tell me you didn’t start that fire.” Natalie sounded choked.

“She could have died, Anne. If I hadn’t gone over there...” Jack couldn’t even finish that sort of sentence. His hands fisted, he kept them carefully bolted to his knees, gritting his teeth.

“I would never hurt her, honest. Natalie, Jack, you must believe me. I only meant to make it look like a robbery. As if she’d interrupted a burglar and they’d shoved her into a closet. You’d have come home that night, found your place a little messy, Melissa locked in the closet, but no real harm done.” Anne nervously picked at her sweater with one hand. “I truly don’t know how the fire started. Maybe when I knocked the lamp over? The wiring in your cottage has been faulty for awhile now. I’ve been telling you to get it fixed.”

“Mom, this is not my fault.” Natalie stood and began pacing the room. Anne stopped talking, looking at her now still hands and breathing heavily as if trying to stop the tears that should be coming.

“Anne, you understand, you have some making up to do. Melissa legally could press charges for assault against you. I suggest you start with volunteering in the school library at least twice a month for the foreseeable future. In the very least, there’s going to be some apologizing happening. So you get your speech in order, and come prepared for a little meeting with the pastor, soon.”

Jack stood, nodded to Natalie, somewhat more sympathetic with her, and sorry for the tears that ran down the daughter’s cheeks, then let himself out the front door.

He had a meeting with Pastor Johnson to get to.

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## CHAPTER 15

The next night, Melissa stood outside the church doors with Jack, tamping the anxiety down and asking God to take it away from her for good. She'd stayed up half the night praying about this meeting, and, while she was tired, she was at peace with the confrontation coming.

"Hey, are you going to be alright? Are you feeling ok now?" He looked at her with such concern in his eyes all her worry melted away. Nothing else mattered but what she saw in there looking out at her.

"I'm fine, now." She smiled up at him to show him she wasn't lying.

A smile spread slowly across Jack's face, then taking her elbow he turned the both of them toward the front doors.

"Once more unto the breach..." Together they stepped inside, through the lobby, and into the double doors of the auditorium.

In the first two rows of the auditorium sat Maria, Angela, Anne, and Natalie, while Pastor Johnson stood facing them. He nodded as the two entered, watching them briefly as they walked down the center aisle together.

"I've called this meeting to clear some things up," he began, clearing his throat. "Apparently there's been some matchmaking going on, and while normally that's perfectly all right, this time it seems to have gotten out of hand."

He paused and looked around. Both Anne and Maria kept their heads down, refusing to look at anyone or anything besides the floor beneath their feet.

"At first it was amusing, I must admit." Pastor Johnson smiled apologetically at Jack. "But things have escalated to the point where now someone has gotten hurt. Melissa could have been killed, ladies. You realize that, don't you?"

Maria stood then, pointing a finger at Melissa, but directing her words at the pastor. "This girl here, she has inserted herself where she did not belong. She deliberately sabotaged things. She went behind my back, and she threw herself at this young man, our new teacher. What will the parents of our kids think? Us having her as our librarian in the school."

Melissa heard what sounded like a low growl coming from Jack, so she put one hand on his arm, holding him back from stepping toward the woman.

“Maria, you must stop.” The pastor looked at her with compassion. “This will eat at your soul, and you’ll become bitter and angry. Let it go. Melissa did nothing like what you’re saying.”

Then Anne stood up.

“I just don’t know how you could do this to us, Melissa. We asked for your help, and you agreed, but then you swooped in and...and...seduced...”

“Mrs. Scott, you will please stop right there.” Jack pulled himself up to his full height and looked Anne right in the eyes. He wasn’t glaring, but his look was hard and unrelenting, and she glanced down after only a second or two.

“You know Melissa did no such thing, and it’s unfair to say that she did.”

Both ladies stood up and began talking and yelling at once. First at Melissa, then at each other, then at Jack, too.

Finally Melissa had had enough.

“No!” She stood up straight and tall, knowing she had to speak up. Both Anne and Maria stopped talking, momentarily stunned by her outburst. She knew she had to take advantage of the silence while it existed. Jack squeezed her hand in support but didn’t say anything else.

“Ladies, this isn’t how Christians should treat each other. But, whether you treat me right or not doesn’t matter. What does matter is that we remain a church family. This could split us apart. You don’t want that on your accounts, do you?” Both ladies looked down at the floor again. “You had the best interest of Natalie and Angela at heart, I understand. But what if the best for them isn’t what you decide, but what God decides? What if...what if God is a better matchmaker than either of you? Because now...this sort of arguing is not in anyone’s best interest. Your good intentions have turned into selfish pride, and now you’ve lost sight of the real reason for matchmaking – finding real love.”

She paused and looked up at Jack, all her feelings in her gaze. Then, looking back at the two ladies, she continued.

“I’ve found it, real love. And I’ve finally realized something. God doesn’t tell us to be doormats. He tells us to do His will. Sometimes that means saying ‘no’ to one person, so you can say ‘yes’ to the right person.”

Anne shifted her feet, but didn’t open her mouth to say more.

“Mrs. Hernandez, Mrs. Scott...Angela and Natalie. Please listen.” Jack squeezed Melissa’s hand again. “It’s not that there’s anything wrong with either Angela or Natalie. These are both

lovely young ladies who will someday find exactly the right match. This isn't about whether or not Angela is a pastor's daughter, or whether Natalie can cook meatloaf like my mother's. And it isn't about Angela's ability as a teacher, or her ability to sing, or play the piano, nor about whether Natalie can set a pretty table."

He took in a breath, his voice quavering.

"This is about me already being in love. My heart belonged to Melissa a long time ago." He squeezed her hand, and looked down at her as she looked up into his eyes. For just a second no one else was in the room.

"What do you mean?" Maria stood up then, casting an accusing look at Melissa and Jack both, now. "You had already met? When?"

He dragged his gaze away, and shook his head slowly. "No, no, we hadn't actually met until I came here. But she had my heart long before. When I first stepped in that kitchen and saw her standing there, I knew. She's my match."

Angela and Natalie looked at each other, chagrined, then both charged Melissa and enveloped her in a huge group bear hug. Jack was unceremoniously shoved aside, but he didn't mind. The three girls were back to friends, he could see it all over their tear-streaked faces.

Anne Scott and Maria Hernandez were not so quick to let go. They looked at each other across the aisle, the rest of the church people finally knowing when to hold their tongues. Pastor Johnson bowed his head in a quick prayer, then looked up and spoke.

"Ladies, isn't it time to put all this behind us? The Lord is in charge here, and I think it's time we started listening to Him a bit better about what's best for those around us. Don't you agree?"

Anne looked over at Maria, then to the three girls still hugging it out up front, then back at Maria again. Maria shrugged one shoulder and raised her eyebrows, turning her hands up and toward Anne as she did.

Anne took a step toward her, and Maria met her halfway. They wound up in the middle of the aisle, each holding a hand out for the other to shake. Anne went to shake Maria's hand, but Maria grabbed Anne's, pulling her into a hug. Both women finally gave in, tears of sorrow coursing down their cheeks as they sorrowfully apologized for the harsh words they had been speaking to, and about, each other.

As Natalie and Angela stepped back from Melissa, Anne and Maria were there. Both of the older women looked at her, Maria with tears running down her cheeks. Anne's face was dry, but she had a haunted look in her eyes.

“Melissa.” She held out one hand, her voice choking. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am about what happened at Natalie’s house. I was so caught up in what I wanted, that I did something I wouldn’t have thought I was capable of. I would have never forgiven myself if something worse had happened to you, and it’s absolutely inexcusable of me.” Anne looked down, fidgeting with her hands a bit. “I don’t know if you can, but I hope someday you can forgive me.”

Melissa tentatively took one of Anne’s hands in her own, turning it palm up and placing it inside both her own. Then she drew the older woman into a warm hug.

“Anne, I struggled a long time last night with this. But God has helped me, and I can honestly say I forgive you.” She pulled away and looked straight into Anne’s eyes, hoping to convey her sincerity. Anne nodded, the tears finally coming.

Maria, still crying, hugged Melissa wordlessly, squeezing and rocking her like she was holding a small child.

“I’m so sorry, too, Melissa. I treated you badly, and I’m ashamed for how I acted.” Maria held her a moment longer until Melissa pulled away.

“Thank you, Maria. I forgive you. Let’s just move on from here now, ok?” Melissa held Maria in a hug for a long time, letting her cry a little more, and patting her on the back in comfort. Finally Maria pulled away, teary eyed, but smiling again.

The meeting ended quickly after that, after Anne and Maria both set up a schedule with her for them taking her place in the library one day each week. Pastor Johnson assured her Melissa would still get paid for those days, as well, at least through the school year.

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Later, after everyone else had gone home except the pastor, Melissa and Jack sat in the back of the auditorium while Pastor Johnson quietly prayed at the front.

“So, is it true? Melissa bumped him with her shoulder. “You knew when you first walked in that kitchen?”

“Well, some part of me knew, yes. I just had to start listening to that part, is all.”

“Which part of you was that?”

“The good sense part.”

“That’s right, you know it, Adams.”

“Yes, I do, Barnes. I sure do.”

THE END

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