



Love in Bloom (Dogwood Creek Matchmakers #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: Hensley Fitzwilliam inherited a wedding boutique from her grandmother. And she's resolute about making Hensley's Wedding Creations successful with her designs, hard work, and determination. But she also daydreams about the day she'll find a husband and be able to have a family of her own. With four unwed sisters, and none of them married, and several broken relationships behind her, she struggles with doubts about her dreams ever coming true. Along comes Blake Sterling, who infuriates her at nearly every turn with his aloof manners and judgmental words. Why does he remind her of Jane Austen's stern Mr. Darcy from her favorite novel?

Blake Sterling, the son of an elite Manhattan billionaire, purchases property in Dogwood Creek to build a log cabin getaway and resort in the heart of beautiful Tennessee. His new investment paves the way to escape his father's corporate aspirations, trading them for his own dreams and pursuits. But when he's unexpectedly thrown together with the beautiful Hensley to work on a community project, why does his past seem to impact the way he interacts and engages with her? Will he forever be opening his mouth only to stick his foot in it?

Is there any hope for these two who seem at odds with each other right from the start? When someone sabotages their project, will figuring out that mystery bring them closer together, or widen the divide?

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Everything I know, I learned from dogs.

—Nora Roberts

HENSLEY JUNE FITZWILLIAM seemed a million miles away as she gazed up at the various displays in her shop windows from where she stood on the sidewalk in front of her wedding boutique, Hensley's Wedding Creations.

One of the wedding gowns captured her imagination with its full skirt made of shiny white silk, its beaded bodice, the square neckline, and its voluminous sheer long sleeves. The dress stole her breath away.

It was so superbly elegant, she could easily imagine herself walking down the aisle at Dogwood Creek Community Church to marry the husband of her dreams, her handsome Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. That is, whenever she finally found him.

She tilted her head to one side, considering it—one of her own designs. Should she remove it from the mannequin and tuck it aside for herself? Would she exchange vows with her future Mr. Darcy in the gazebo in the park beside the church, or perhaps indoors, at her home church before the altar?

Ultimately, the location depended on the season and the weather when and if she married. Which depended upon her Mr. Darcy making his appearance. As one of five unmarried sisters, it would be nice if he made his appearance sooner rather than later.

She could imagine a fall or summer wedding in the gazebo. And if the wedding took place in the winter or springtime, an indoor ceremony just made sense. But she could

certainly have some wedding photos taken in the gazebo.

Of course, she'd be wearing that dress or something equally mesmerizing. The joy of the moment held her captive, far away from Dogwood Creek, her small hometown nestled in the mountains of Tennessee. Population ten-thousand small.

But a car honked, startling her from her daydream. Then a dog began barking. Her pleasant reverie and Darcy's imagined face faded as she whirled around to see what had sparked the disturbance.

Ah! Boscoe. Samantha Braeburn's Golden Retriever. Everyone generally called the hair stylist Sam. She owned The Mane Event salon, right next door to Hensley's wedding boutique. And Boscoe was an escape artist to the max.

He currently stood in the middle of Gooseberry Lane on all four paws, protesting a car that had stopped directly in front of him.

What was Boscoe doing out there in the street in the middle of traffic?

The honking vehicle faced west toward the post office and the grocery store.

Another vehicle, heading east toward the courthouse, had stopped also since Boscoe might make a move in any direction. Oh dear!

A rather nice looking fellow—except for his grungy tee shirt and jeans stained with what surely must be a great deal of dried mud—burst out of the hardware store.

He wore a cowboy hat perched on top of his head.

Hensley would recognize him anywhere! Blake Sterling, who was rumored to be a billionaire's son.

Blake had moved to the area after purchasing some land for a log cabin resort development.

She'd seen him riding around town inside his limo.

In fact, he and his limo were big news around Dogwood Creek.

Everyone was curious about him, especially since he kept a low profile.

He must come from a great deal of money to have his own personal driver and limo.

Occasionally he drove a brand new, shimmery red, pickup truck.

She hadn't been introduced to him yet, but there was a first time for everything.

The handsome cowboy ran into the street toward Boscoe and slowed when he was about three or four feet away.

For an instant, the dog, who was now successfully blocking even more traffic, turned toward Mr. Handsome Cowboy, wagging his tail.

Blake, in his mud-stained clothes and cowboy hat, made a valiant effort of waving his arms to beckon Boscoe out of the street toward the hardware store as he now eased backwards a few steps.

Boscoe's tail stopped wagging. Then he tore off running toward her wedding boutique on the opposite side of the street from the hardware store. He leapt onto the sidewalk and raced toward Hensley. Could she catch him?

"Hey, Boscoe, here boy!" she called out, kneeling down to greet him. She spread her arms open wide to embrace the licks and tail wagging she would likely receive if he

came to her.

But no—Boscoe zigzagged into the street and back onto the sidewalk, evading her.

Not even her familiar smile could stop him on his mission of freedom that spring April morning.

Such a smart but exasperating furry friend!

She sighed, rising precariously to her feet as Blake ran past her to catch the Golden Retriever.

“Boscoe!” Hensley placed her hands on her hips, shaking her head, and muttering under her breath. “You’re going to make us chase after you?”

Ack! It wasn’t the first time, but nonetheless, she joined the chase as Boscoe raced beyond the end of her storefront with Mr. Handsome Cowboy closing in, not too far behind.

Thankfully, her sister, Jenny, was inside the boutique and could handle any customers seeking wedding dresses.

With as many front windows as they had, she wouldn’t be surprised if Jen had seen the whole thing.

But now she found herself in her low-heeled ankle boots, chasing the cowboy who chased Boscoe, her heels clicking along on the sidewalk .

Awkward, to say the least.

Sure, she’d seen the cowboy around Dogwood Creek at church and at the diner with

one of his friends, also new in town, Charles Eaton.

Charles was building a stunning A-frame cabin not too far from where she lived with her family.

She'd overheard folks calling him Bing, and it was the nickname Blake called him too.

Bing probably came from money as well. The idea of chasing the billionaire's son in broad daylight on the streets of Dogwood Creek seemed somehow rather .

.. forward. But there was no time to consider her predicament now.

The important thing was catching Boscoe.

Blake maintained his lead closely behind the dog as the three of them crossed the street at the corner with barely a chance to check for traffic.

Boscoe took them past the courthouse and the bank; then the diner, The Gathering Place; and The Gazette —where her dad, a freelance inspirational columnist, frequently stopped in to discuss or submit his weekly column, The Tennessee Takeaway.

Soon, they were almost as far as the school.

Boscoe raced on, ignoring when they called out for him to stop.

The cowboy must have heard her mention his name, or perhaps he'd met the dog before, because he used it a few times when he called out.

Some folks backed out of their way, and Hensley was thankful the retriever kept to

the sidewalk instead of dodging out into traffic again.

But several folks had nearly collided into them as they came out of the businesses on Gooseberry Lane, their mouths gaping open when they stepped onto the sidewalk during their rescue attempt.

The retriever now turned after the school building and cut across the school's property on the lawn.

He seemed to be heading toward the bridge crossing over the winding creek the town had been aptly named for.

Hensley was growing weary, barely keeping up in her low-heeled suede ankle boots.

They'd seemed like a good choice to pair with her pretty spring dress in its pastel shade of sage green, but she wasn't so sure now.

Her heart was pounding like crazy. And if Boscoe jumped into that creek, she was not going to jump into that icy cold water with him.

Tempted to give up, she hung in there on the chase—now a cross-country marathon.

But her feet were throbbing with searing pain, and she did all she could not to twist her ankle in any divets on the lawn.

It was softer than hitting the pavement in her boots, but she had to slow considerably at times.

Mr. Handsome Cowboy didn't appear ready to throw in the towel.

But then someone wearing a hot pink jogging suit crossed the bridge and headed

toward them while walking a cute little yippy Schnauzer.

Facing this new furry friend, Sam's dog finally slowed.

Boscoe let out several whimpers and came to a full stop, frozen on all four paws, hesitant to proceed across the bridge.

Was that her friend and acquaintance, Charlotte Lewiston, from church, walking the miniature Schnauzer?

Sure enough, it was. Charlotte owned a dog-walking business and lived nearby, so it made sense that she might walk dogs on the school grounds where open land thrived and a walking trail wound along the creek.

Boscoe backed away, dipped his head down, and turned himself about, retreating toward the cowboy. Blake caught up to him and grabbed his collar, kneeling to pat him between the ears a few times, giving him some comforting words.

Hensley sighed with relief. Who would have thought a little yippy dog would stop a retriever in his tracks? Half chuckling and half breathless, she finally reached them.

HENSLEY LEANED OVER to rest both palms on her knees, gasping for air. When she recovered, she reached out to pat the retriever too. "Boscoe! You're such a moron today, but maybe it's why we love you so much."

The cowboy, Blake, glanced at her, his eyes widening. Maybe because she'd referred to Boscoe as a moron. She ought to tell him to lighten up and that it was just a joke. Mr. Handsome Cowboy in his dirty clothes didn't even crack a smile. Well, whatever his problem was, it wasn't her concern.

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Anyhow, she was half-laughing as Boscoe licked her chin when she knelt to give him a hug.

Meanwhile, her friend from church paused at a safe distance.

Charlotte knew Boscoe also. Most folks did, though Hensley still doubted that Blake knew him since he hadn't been in town for long.

At least he seemed to have a heart for dogs, shown by his valiant rescue.

Hensley, still breathless, waved to Charlotte, keeping a hand on Boscoe, as did Blake Sterling. "Hey, Charlotte. Thank goodness you came along."

Her friend nodded and smiled. "Hey there, Hensley. Do you need a leash? My car's parked nearby." She gestured toward her vehicle, parked on the other side of the bridge. "I have an extra one in the trunk. Y'all can keep it ..."

Mr. Handsome nodded. "That'd be great."

"Thank you and yes, please." Hensley turned back to face Mr. Not-Very-Communicative while Charlotte went to retrieve the extra leash.

He hadn't even glanced over his shoulder while she'd been chasing Boscoe along with him, but she was sure he couldn't have missed the sound of her clicking heels all the way to the school.

And now, he wore a cold and indifferent expression.

She would give him the benefit of the doubt.

Maybe he was tired from the chase like she was.

Would he introduce himself at some point when he recovered?

But Mr. Handsome Grumpy Rich Cowboy kept a serious visage, keeping his fingers tucked into Boscoe's collar to maintain a firm hold, just as she did from under Boscoe's neck.

How he had managed to keep his cowboy hat on through all of their running remained a mystery .

What could she say to break through his icy demeanor? Maybe she could comment on Charlotte's helpful offer while they waited for her to return with the leash.

Her eyes squinted in the bright sunlight as she peered at Blake, so she shaded them with a hand over her forehead. "That's the nice thing about small towns like Dogwood Creek; folks are always so kind and helpful to each other if anyone's in trouble."

To her surprise, she earned a smile, revealing the cutest dimples she'd ever seen in his otherwise chiseled face. "A quality I also happen to like about small towns. Are you the owner?"

So, he didn't know that Sam owned Boscoe. "No, but I know the owner. Samantha Braeburn. Her hair salon is next door to my wedding boutique, so essentially, we're neighbors. The Mane Event. Do you know it?" She arched a brow since his eyes lit up.

He cocked his head to the side. "Okay, yes, I know her from my visits to her salon."

“Yeah, she’s the best.” But Charlotte and her Schnauzer returned with the spare leash before she could manage to say anything else.

Charlotte handed the leash to Blake. “Here you go. As I said, I don’t need it back. Nice to see you, Hensley. We have an appointment, so little Duke and I must be off to finish our walk, but I’m sure I’ll see you around at church.”

“Sure will. Thanks again. You’re a lifesaver!” Hensley rose as Blake secured Boscoe while Charlotte waved as she and the Schnauzer resumed their walk.

Hensley fell in beside Blake as they turned back toward Gooseberry Lane, walking at a steady pace across the school’s sizeable lawn.

She eyed him as they went along. Apparently, he had no intention of remembering his manners, so she stepped up to do what he refused, which would have been the polite thing to do .

Irked a little, she drew in a breath before plunging forward. “I’m Hensley Fitzwilliam. Owner of Hensley’s Wedding Creations. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Blake Sterling. Owner of Deerpark Cabins.” He didn’t offer to shake hands since they were walking, but he did nod, rather curtly.

What was his problem, anyhow? “I’m familiar with the property. Very nice cabins growing up there. Good to meet you.”

He chuckled. Had she earned another smile?

Turning toward her with those dimples showing, his eyes seemed to dance as he spoke. “I wish the cabins were growing up, as you put it. It’s a might harder than that though.”

Maybe it explained why he was so muddy. “Are you building them yourself?”

“Yes, but I do have a construction crew helping. Still, each one is a labor of love.” He wrapped the leash around his wrist one more time to ensure a good hold on Boscoe.

They reached Gooseberry Lane and headed toward their right, retracing the path of the chase that had led them there.

“I’m sure it must be, but the progress I’ve seen looks good so far.

” She smoothed her sage green dress, her boot heels clicking softly on the sidewalk.

Her feet didn’t throb as much since they kept walking along at a comfortable pace.

No, in fact, her feet had grown numb at this point.

But at least they weren’t running, and they’d managed to rescue Boscoe.

Blake wasn’t making conversation easy. Boscoe seemed to lead the way on the leash, his mouth open, his tongue showing as he panted. What else could she ask to keep the conversation going?

“And how do you like Dogwood Creek so far?” She stole a glance at the man as he adjusted his cowboy hat.

“I like the small-town atmosphere, the beauty of the rugged mountains and all of the pines,” he offered, glancing toward his right as they drew near the courthouse .

“I do too. They’re beautiful, aren’t they?” She clasped her hands behind her back, enjoying the crisp air.

“They sure are.”

But the walk was almost at an end, and she could now see Samantha Braeburn up ahead, searching for Boscoe, walking toward them.

“There’s Sam.” She nodded towards the petite salon owner. “She’s probably at her wit’s end.”

Spotting Boscoe, Sam ran to meet them before Blake could reply.

“Guys, am I glad to see you! Oh, Boscoe ... what am I going to do with you, boy?” She knelt and hugged the stubborn dog who lavished her with licks and tail wagging.

Rising, she sighed. “He ran away again. I can’t blame him.

Our little fenced yard is kind of boring.

One day, we’ll eventually have a house in the countryside with a bigger yard for him.

I’m so thankful you’ve found him.” Sam glanced from Hensley to Blake. “How can I ever thank you enough?”

“Oh, it’s nothing, really,” Blake replied, handing her the leash. “Just friends helping friends. And I happen to like dogs.”

“Still, it means a lot to me. I need to find a way to properly thank you both.” Her eyes brightened.

“I know! I’ll invite you to dinner at our place this coming Friday.

My treat. Are you two dating? What a cute couple you make .

..” Her head tilted to one side as she peered at them with curiosity and maybe a bit of mischief in her eyes.

Hensley’s cheeks warmed.

“A couple?” Blake appeared to choke back a nervous laugh. His brown eyes widened as he turned to glance at Hensley. Then he shook his head and cleared his throat. “No, no, we’re not together. She’s not exactly my type. Err ... uh, but glad to be of help.”

Hensley’s brow shot up and her hands flew to her hips. Not his type? What exactly did he mean by that? Of all the nerve! “No, we’re not dating,” she mumbled, but her chest heaved.

Maybe he wanted someone who wore muddy jeans and grungy, faded, dirty tee shirts.

That certainly wasn’t her style. She enjoyed wearing classy dresses that were clean, classic, stylish, and pressed.

How dare he sum her up in less than a ten-minute walk!

What did he know about her? Nothing. Exactly nothing. That’s what he knew!

“Oh, well, just come on by on Friday at seven, both of you. We live upstairs above the salon, Blake. I know Hensley knows the way. We’ve had lunch together at my place a number of times before.

I’ll make something magnificent. Do you both enjoy steak?

My husband, Tiff, can grill some steaks for us.

We bought a new grill last summer and it’s sitting on our little patio, begging to be

used. ”

“You don’t have to make us dinner ...” Hensley’s voice faded, weakening her attempt at protesting.

Her heart sank. What was Sam up to? Arranging a way to throw the two of them together?

In fact, the more she considered his remark, the more she began to seethe.

He’d been rude about speaking to her, and then he’d topped it off with that snide remark.

The last thing on her mind was having to sit through a dinner with Mr. Snobby Grumpy Cowboy who did not appear to enjoy spending time with her.

Whatever his reasons were for the statement, she didn’t care how wealthy or handsome he was.

Having a conversation with him was like pulling teeth.

She could find better things to do with her time.

Samantha raised her hand. “No, I won’t hear otherwise. Please, come at seven. I’ll bake lasagna too. You’ve saved my Boscoe! He could have been run over by a car or lost to us forever. I’m so thankful to both of you.”

Hensley risked a glance at the cowboy. Did they both seem reluctant? Blake was shaking his head, but after Sam’s insistence, he shrugged and then offered a nod, tipping his hat. “It would be our pleasure, ma’am.”

Well, well. So, Blake Sterling had a few manners hiding under that firm exterior and broad chest. And now she had to accept the invitation or appear ruder than the cowboy .

Hensley blinked. There'd be no getting out of this pickle.

"I guess we'll be seeing you on Friday then, Sam .

" She placed extra emphasis on Sam's name for a reason.

She didn't relish the idea of having to spend time with the rude cowboy who'd made it clear he had no interest in her.

Hensley crossed her arms over her chest and glared at the cowboy when he turned toward her as she added, "Wouldn't miss it for the world. "

Ha! She'd show Mr. No Manners a thing or two.

Did he consider her some small-town hick from the backwoods?

Is that why he'd said she wasn't his type?

Did he think she was a country hick? And for him to have taken that attitude while wearing muddy clothes and a cowboy hat, which he now tipped in her direction and then Sam's direction again. Well, that certainly took some gall.

He sure was a mess, and especially after all of the running. His brown hair was flattened with a hat line. And maybe the dried mud all over his clothing was from the spring mud. He'd obviously gotten himself into some sort of a tangle, but she'd be certain to dress to the nines for that dinner.

She kept her lips pressed firmly together, refusing to glance at him while Sam said a few parting words.

In fact, the moment Sam smiled and turned away with Boscoe, she spun around, leaving Mr. Rich and Rude Cowboy on the sidewalk as she stomped off toward her wedding boutique, her heels clacking loudly on the sidewalk.

Why didn't he seem as handsome as he had before Boscoe's adventure?

Worst of all, she wouldn't be able to let Sam down about dinner to steer clear of this prideful man.

Her neighbor would be terribly disappointed if she didn't attend.

No, she was stuck, unless she could come down with some sort of disease.

But she wasn't any good at making excuses, so she'd have to go through with it, despite a hundred warning bells going off in her head.

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Another stupid party ... with six people to look on,
and talk nonsense to each other.

—Jane Austen

BLAKE DREADED THE DINNER on Friday at Samantha Braeburn's home. But he'd forced himself to attend, despite the pressure of seeing Hensley Fitzwilliam again. She'd seemed more than a little bristled with him by the end of their first encounter.

He'd gone over it a number of times in his mind, replaying their meeting.

He had to admit he hadn't been all that friendly.

Sure, he'd seen her around at church and maybe a time or two at the diner he and Bing enjoyed now and then, The Gathering Place.

This prompted him to ask himself why he hadn't been friendly.

Despite the fact, he acknowledged it was time to make friends in his new surroundings.

It had been a year since he'd moved to the town and hadn't socialized much, working to build up his new property.

The answer came to him. It was because of rule number one to always be on guard

when it came to women.

He'd adopted the rule after Elise Martin had double-crossed him.

And he had no intention of changing that rule anytime soon.

Secondly, when women discovered his limo and personal driver, women were all too eager to find out more about him, his net worth, and his family legacy.

Unfortunately, many women he'd encountered over the years were gold diggers. One couldn't be too cautious.

He shouldn't have mentioned that Hensley Fitzwilliam wasn't his type.

That's precisely when it had become evident that he'd opened his mouth and stuck his foot in it.

The expression on her face had gone from happy and easygoing to one of pure indignation.

He also clearly remembered her stomping away from him without a word or backwards glance.

He'd obviously upset her. Sam didn't seem to have taken note of this when she'd invited them to a dinner party.

But what was to be done about it now? Climbing out of the limo as his driver held the door, he raked a hand through his hair and buttoned one button on his suit jacket. The fact was, he had no idea how to make up for that faux pas. He'd have to ponder it some more and figure it out later.

That issue aside, he was ready to make some friends and meet other folks from Dogwood Creek if he was going to become a fine and upstanding member of the community.

His father had taught him that much about business and community, even though this was nothing like Manhattan.

Besides, spring was in bloom after the long winter.

And he had been a little stir crazy lately, itching to get out and about.

He'd done his best to read books and work on various projects to keep himself occupied while being cooped up indoors during the colder months.

He and his crew had done a ton of work in his first year of living in the area.

They'd finished building the main lodge and five of the eight cabins.

All two-bedroom cabins with lofts so far.

Plus, his own cabin, a sprawling five-bedroom log cabin for that future family he would have someday.

He'd settled in, unpacked, even decorated a few things, but it was time to break out of his shell.

So, there he stood at the side entrance to the residential quarters for the Braeburns, adjusting his tie.

He'd told his driver it shouldn't be more than a couple of hours.

Since his driver was also his security staff, Blake knew Wickham would do a good job of keeping them safe while waiting inside the limo.

Not that Dogwood Creek could boast of having much crime.

No, the small town had low crime, friendly neighbors, and all of the charm and appeal he had appreciated since the first moment he'd visited the area before purchasing the land for his log cabin resort tucked into the mountains.

He rang the buzzer and waited for a voice to sound through the speaker.

Samantha's voice said hello and buzzed him inside.

He took a flight of stairs to their front door at the top of the landing.

Once he finished the meal, he'd have some dessert, make polite small talk, thank them for the dinner, and be on his way.

It might save him from stirring up more trouble with Miss Hensley Fitzwilliam.

The less he said, the better, at this point.

When Sam threw the door wide open and welcomed him inside with a cheerful hello, he quickly spotted Miss Trouble, seated on the sofa.

It wasn't as if he could miss the beauty with those brunette waves and big blue eyes, but Sam's husband, the one she'd called Tiff, stepped forward and shook his hand.

"I'm Christopher, but everyone calls me Tiff. Nice to meet you, Blake. Come inside and make yourself at home." Tiff rested a hand on a little boy's shoulder.

“Thank you. Nice to meet you too. And who is this cute little guy?” Blake grinned and knelt down to eye level with the youngster wearing a Superman cape and pj’s.

Sam introduced him as their five-year-old son, Noah, who peered at him with great big curious eyes and a shy smile.

“And you already know Hensley.” Samantha gestured toward where the wedding boutique owner sat on the far edge of the sofa, patting Bosco.

Were her feet anchored to the floor? Hensley made no move toward greeting him, but maybe she kept the dog from bounding toward him and jumping up by keeping a hold of his collar. And Sam was still speaking ... so he turned his attention to his hostess.

“Please, make yourself at home. I’ve got to take the roasted veggies and the baked potatoes out of the oven.

The lasagna is ready, and Tiff just brought the steaks up from the grill.

We’ll eat in a couple of minutes. I’m keeping the steaks warm.

” Sam dashed away, asking over her shoulder if he’d like sweet tea or water with the meal.

“Sweet tea will be fine,” he replied.

“Noah, it’s time to pick up your toys.” Tiff steered his son toward the pile of building blocks despite a few groans.

Hensley offered a nod when he gazed in her direction again. “How nice to see you again, Blake.”

“Yes, nice to see you too.” He should say something better than that, but what?

It didn’t seem to matter since she rose from the sofa and followed Samantha into the kitchen, the ruffled bottom tier of her dress swaying as she walked. “I’ll help you in the kitchen, Sam.”

Did she have to appear so pretty in her black dress?

If he wasn’t mistaken, he didn’t know much about women’s fashion, but the dress had a tiny white floral pattern, appropriate for spring.

It matched the cute little white jacket she wore.

Black heels revealed shapely legs and slender ankles.

He averted his eyes to glance around the upstairs apartment above the hair salon. Lots of windows to let in the light.

But now that Hensley had let go of Boscoe, the dog greeted him with fervor, licking his hand, and a generous amount of tail wagging. “Hey there, Boscoe.” He patted the dog to calm him.

“He never forgets a friend,” Tiff remarked, appearing to observe Boscoe carefully.

Noah finished his task and stared up at him as he patted Boscoe.

“What grade are you in, Noah?” Blake’s brow arched.

“Kindergarten.” Noah handed him a Superman action figure.

It had been a while since he’d been around any children, but he’d start with that

action figure and the cape. “I see you must like Superman. ”

Noah nodded. “I do. He’s a hero.”

“That’s awesome. I loved Superman when I was about your age too,” Blake confessed, returning the figure to the boy, who then held his arms out and ran around in a wide circle, arms outstretched as if he was flying.

He smiled, recalling his superhero phase as a young boy.

It sure would be nice to have a few kids someday.

Which led him to ask himself if he should try harder to make friends with Hensley, but then he thought about her career.

How did so many women abandon their children to pursue careers?

No, he shouldn’t pursue a woman who wouldn’t focus solely on her marriage and family.

Sure, maybe some women could juggle both, but he didn’t know any who did that well.

And even his mom, who hadn’t worked a day in her life, had ended up in divorce.

“Time to tuck you in, Noah. Go kiss your mom goodnight and then we’ll say bedtime prayers. We’ve got a big day tomorrow,” Tiff reminded his son. Turning toward Blake as Noah ran toward his mom, he explained, “We’re spending the day at Dollywood and he’s excited about it.”

“Yippee! Dollywood!” Noah let out some hoorays before his mom stooped down to

kiss him on one of his rosy cheeks, her hands full with a plate of what appeared to be roasted asparagus and squash.

The aroma of cinnamon and maybe a hint of brown sugar wafted.

And those rosy cheeks had to be the result of the fresh mountain air around Dogwood Creek.

They seemed like a nice family. Maybe Sam was a shining example of someone managing a career and a family, but he would have to observe and reserve an opinion for later.

“Sleep well, Noah.” Samantha ruffled his brownish-blond hair affectionately after placing the dish on the table. Turning toward Blake, she explained, “He’s already eaten and it’s his usual bedtime. ”

Blake nodded as Hensley drew his attention. She stood behind Sam with a bowl of foil-wrapped baked potatoes. Noah gave the boutique owner a big hug around her legs, making her smile.

“Superman” then sprinted down the hallway toward his bedroom with his arms extended before him and his cape flying out behind him as Hensley called out, “Sweet dreams, Noah!”

“I’ll return in a few. It’s my turn to tuck him in bed this week.” Tiff excused himself and followed his son with an amused grin, calling out, “Did you brush your teeth?”

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“Yes, already done, Dad. Don’t you remember?” Noah’s distant rebuff echoed from down the hall with every ounce of five-year-old exasperation.

Blake loosened his tie once more as the ladies returned to the kitchen to retrieve more food for the dining room table.

He took the opportunity to glance around, taking in the small but clean and cozy home.

The space was updated and pleasant, despite an overflowing toybox in the living room.

The dining room, an extension of the living room, had nice lighting above the table.

Was it a galley kitchen? Maybe two bedrooms and a bathroom down the hall?

Comfortable leather furnishings and rustic coffee tables.

Nice drapes in the windows. A built-in bookcase for an entertainment center lined one wall. Plenty of books filled the shelves.

He took note of a crafting corner at an old-fashioned letter writing desk in the living room.

A framed family photo sat on top of the desk.

Beside it, a basket contained an assortment of what seemed like tools for making

jewelry.

Needle nose pliers, containers of clasps and such.

A little tree-like rack holding some delicate jewelry chains.

The items were arranged in an orderly fashion and well out of reach from Noah.

Did Sam make jewelry of some sort? He could see some finished pieces on display too. Necklaces, from what he could tell.

Tiff returned after Blake had settled into an armchair with Boscoe at his knee, who lapped up all of his petting and attention.

But before Tiff could join him in the pleasant grouping of furniture, Sam announced it was time to eat.

They gathered around the table in the dining room and soon Tiff led them in a blessing as they bowed their heads.

Blake was thankful they remembered to bless the food.

It was something he admired about folks from the mountains of Tennessee.

Most of them seemed to remember to keep God first.

But would the lovely Hensley forgive him for what he'd said?

So far, she continued to refuse to make eye contact, except for when he'd first arrived.

It wasn't going too well, and he didn't have a clue how to fix it.

Or if he should bother worrying about it despite his attraction to her.

What if she turned out to be a gold digger? Or worse, another Elise?

HENSLEY PUT SOME BUTTER , a little dab of sour cream, and some chives on her baked potato.

Then she passed the toppings to her left.

Would Blake Sterling make any other brash judgments about her after this evening's dinner?

Still sore about what he'd said the last time she'd seen him, she spread butter on the potato with more vigor than usual, staring at her plate.

She also had a small piece of lasagna next to her steak and some delicious roasted veggies too.

Unable to cook, she'd brought an apple pie that her mom had baked fresh for their dessert.

"Save room for dessert everyone," she reminded them.

Sam grinned. "Hensley brought an apple pie."

Everyone smiled, but not Blake. Turning toward Tiff, Blake sliced into his steak topped with sautéed mushrooms and onions. "Where do you work, Tiff?"

Maybe Blake didn't typically indulge in dessert. Presently, he seemed focused on

talking to Sam's husband. She sighed and gazed at her plate .

Tiff, reaching for the steak sauce, poured a generous amount on his plate. "I'm a computer specialist at Dollywood. It's how we have a deeply discounted family membership to visit the park as often as we'd like. And you?"

"Nice. I'm building a log cabin resort property for tourists and locals who want to get away into the countryside and enjoy the mountains." Blake drank some of his sweet tea.

"Do you have amenities the locals can enjoy, or will it only be for those staying at the cabins?" Tiff tilted his head to one side as he seasoned his food with more pepper.

"We'll offer fishing, canoeing, hiking, horseback riding on two trails, and archery to locals and those who stay at the resort.

We'll have a year-round indoor heated swimming pool and I plan to build a bunkhouse for youth groups and troubled teens to visit.

They'll be able to enjoy the amenities, the scenery, and the wildlife.

Take their minds off their problems and that sort of thing.

" Blake tasted his steak and sliced another bite.

"I didn't know you work with teens like Sam and I do, but that's exactly the kind of thing they need." Tiff exchanged a glance with Samantha.

If Hensley didn't know any better, she'd guess Tiff and Sam were up to something. Something to do with the youth group they helped at Dogwood Creek's Community Church maybe.

“Yes, I worked with troubled teens in Wyoming too. We’ve finished the main lodge and five of the cabins, but we have more work to get everything ready.” Blake stabbed an asparagus spear with his fork. “Ah, this is great. Everything is cooked to perfection. Thank you, Sam and Tiff.”

“We’re glad you like it. How’s your steak, Hensley?” Tiff turned toward her.

She smiled. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“Good. Sam, is your steak all right?” Tiff arched a brow toward his wife.

“It’s great. How’s the roasted squash and the asparagus? And has anyone tried their lasagna yet?” Samantha glanced around the table.

“Mine is so good. And I can’t wait to try the recipe for those sheet-pan roasted vegetables at home. It sounds so easy and tastes delicious.” Hensley wouldn’t mention that she could barely cook anything that wasn’t microwaveable.

“Yep. Just drizzle some olive oil over the squares of squash and the asparagus. Season and roast it in the oven for twenty minutes. So easy and healthy.” Sam popped a squash cube into her mouth from the tip of her fork.

Then she turned to Blake. “It must have been amazing to work on a ranch in Wyoming. Did they have horses or cattle?”

“Horses mainly, but I also worked with a neighbor who needed help herding cattle a few times. Learned a lot about building log cabins while I was there.”

“How long were you there? Were you close to Yellowstone?” Tiff tasted a large bite of lasagna.

Blake nodded. “I spent almost two years there as a wrangler. The ranch is located in central Wyoming on the edge of a small town called Lander. It’s in the Wind River region and just a few hours from Yellowstone.

We used to bus a lot of folks up to Yellowstone to spend a few days exploring and hiking.

Lots of wildlife, mountains, waterfalls . . . stunning scenery.”

Hensley tilted her head to one side. Yellowstone?

He really was a cowboy. Maybe it was why he had so few manners, but it didn’t excuse his grumpy behavior.

However, he had placed a linen napkin in his lap and used his utensils properly.

He did seem to be in a better mood than the last time she’d seen him.

“I’ve always wanted to see Yellowstone. It sounds so beautiful. One of these days, when Noah is older, maybe we’ll take a family vacation and check it out.” Samantha reached for her sweet tea .

“It’s a great place for families. A far cry from working in a Manhattan office at the headquarters for my father’s company. My siblings and I each served as vice presidents over one of his three divisions. But I had to get out. There’s something to be said for leaving the corporate world behind.”

Something in Blake’s brown eyes told Hensley he was relieved and happy to have left his father’s company.

“I’m sure Wyoming was a big difference from Manhattan,” Tiff remarked. “Did you

adapt easily?”

“Don’t get me wrong, I still help with my dad’s company here and there, just not as many hours.

And yes, I did adapt. We’d spent summers as kids in the Tennessee countryside of Ashford with our grandparents, riding horses, hiking, and wading in the creek.

It didn’t take me too long to blend into Wyoming as if I’d always belonged there.

But I think one of my first loves is right here in Tennessee.

There’s nothing like it anywhere else I’ve been.

” Blake reached for the pepper and seasoned everything on his plate.

“I also had the opportunity to work as an assistant youth leader at the church located on the ranch.”

“That’s something I’ve always wanted to do.” Tiff grinned as he stabbed some of his squash. “Wrangle horses, cattle, and maybe teenagers on a ranch in the rugged wilds of Wyoming.”

They all laughed at Tiff’s idea of wrangling teenagers. Even Hensley.

“It was an experience I’ll never forget.” Blake, with a smile still on his face, sliced into another bite of his steak.

Those adorable dimples appeared on Blake’s face whenever he smiled.

Hensley was surprised that she had enjoyed hearing him speak about his life in

Wyoming.

No wonder he seemed a little on the wild side.

The man had been taming cattle, wrangling horses, learning to hoist logs, and dealing with moody teenagers.

One of her brows arched as she considered it .

Still, he shouldn't make such brash pronouncements on anyone as he had when he'd met her. When he glanced up and their eyes met, she quickly returned her gaze to the delicious food on her plate.

"Do you sometimes miss Manhattan?" Samantha flipped some of her chestnut hair over one shoulder. "I think visiting New York would be fun for us too."

Blake sliced into his lasagna and his brows furrowed. "No, not really. After being born to high society folks, I was glad to leave it behind. It's complicated to mingle in those circles. I'm not so sure I ever really fit in with them."

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Sam nodded as she stabbed another bite of her steak. “Hensley moved here from Spruce Hill, Kentucky with her family when she was about ten. Her family took care of horses, and her dad was a senior pastor at a church in Spruce Hill. We’ve known each other since then, haven’t we, Hensley?”

Hensley nodded, tasting a mushroom that had been sautéed to perfection in a butter sauce. “Yes, we certainly have. I’ll never forget the first time I was allowed to have my hair trimmed at a salon. I wanted five inches taken off. I was what, thirteen?”

Sam chuckled, nodding. “I was new as a stylist. I’ll never forget that time either. Your eyes were big as saucers to see the hair falling to the floor. But when we were done, you loved your new hairstyle. You were one of my first customers back then.”

Hensley smiled at the memory. “I barely went through with it. It’s one thing to say you want to have that many inches cut off your hair, but it’s another thing to see it through.”

“I was so happy for you when you inherited your grandmother’s wedding boutique.

I’m sure she’s enjoying her retirement, and especially knowing her shop is in capable hands.

” Samantha shifted in her seat. “And the fact that it’s right beside The Mane Event is just a huge bonus.

I couldn’t ask for nicer neighbors.” Sam turned toward Blake.

“Hensley has four sisters. All of them are so talented. They’re all involved in one way or another with Hensley’s Wedding Creations. ”

“Yes, I guess you could say I know all about running a family business, but we’re much smaller.

No vice presidents,” Hensley explained. “And thank you, Sam, for saying that about us being neighbors. Granny sure is good to us, and me, in particular.” Hensley tilted her head as she sipped some of her sweet tea.

If it wasn’t for her grandmother, she wouldn’t have Hensley’s Wedding Creations, and her sisters probably wouldn’t have their amazing careers either.

“You are definitely her favorite, but probably because you can sew and make such amazing designs, just like her.” Sam nodded toward a wedding portrait of her on the wall. “My wedding dress was one of Hensley’s creations. I’m saving it in case I have a daughter who will want to wear it someday.”

THAT was surprising news. Maybe Hensley wasn’t a gold digger after all.

Not if she had her own inheritance. On the other hand, Blake could not consider dating someone who had to deal with the headaches of running a business.

What if they ended up engaged, and ultimately, married?

How would she raise their future children if she had to worry about all that went into managing a business?

No, he had to choose wisely. It did seem like the right time in his life to consider marriage, now that he’d built a proper home and settled into his own career, escaping the clutches of his father’s company.

He still helped with Sterling Enterprises, Inc.

, but not as much now that he had his own business venture.

But he hadn't met anyone lately who'd caught his eye, except maybe the pretty lady seated across from him.

Would Hensley give up her inheritance once she married in order to become a wife and mother? Somehow, he doubted it. She seemed married to her job, like Elise. And he knew where that had led. No, he had to find someone who wasn't married to a career.

Maybe he should steer the conversation toward asking questions about the youth group from the Dogwood Creek Community Church. Would they enjoy and benefit from a stay at some of his cabins?

As if Samantha had read his mind about a change in the subject matter of their discussion, she leaned forward.

"I could really use your help on another matter, Blake and Hensley. You see, the youth group at our church are trying to raise enough money to fund their mission trip to the Dominican Republic for later this coming summer. It's only a few months away.

And they don't have enough funds to go on their mission.

I thought maybe you two could figure out some sort of fundraiser to help them and basically manage it from start to finish.

With Hensley's wedding planning skills, and Blake, your heart for working with the youth and your new lodge at Deerpark Cabins—which could be a perfect venue for

the event—would you consider taking charge of this project? ”

Blake didn't have to think twice about another chance to work with teenagers. He'd be stuck with Hensley—who still refused to look at him or speak to him. She must be hopping mad, but maybe she'd get over it, eventually. “Count me in.”

HENSLEY STRAIGHTENED , her mouth dropping open.

She'd helped the youth group with events many times in the past. She couldn't let Blake best her.

She'd be stuck working with Mr. Snobby Cowboy, but it didn't mean they had to be friends or anything more than co-youth leader project assistants for a fleeting youth mission trip.

A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for those teens.

“Count me in.” Had she really just blurted that out?

Horrors! Now she was committed .

After helping Sam with the dishes, why did she find herself exchanging cell phone numbers with Blake so they could get together soon and plan the event—when she should be running away from him like the plague?

Yikes! What had come over her? How would this ever work out? Why had she agreed to take on such a large project with that uppity cowboy who didn't consider her “his type?”

By the end of the evening, she was more curious than ever. What exactly was his type? And more than that, what was so wrong with her anyhow?

There must be something wrong with her since her first real boyfriend after high school, Michael, had joined the Marines and never returned to her side.

Her second long-term boyfriend, a graduate from law school, had dated her for three years and moved away to pursue his promising career in another state.

Jake could have asked her to marry him. She would have followed him to the ends of the earth.

So, what did the Manhattan cowboy find so wrong about her?

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I could easily have forgiven his pride,
if he had not mortified mine.

—Jane Austen

THE NEXT EVENING, ON Saturday, at five-thirty sharp, Blake stood in the foyer of Hensley's family home, a grand, old, Victorian house, turning his cowboy hat in his hands.

He'd never seen a houseful of so many girls, all of them running here and there.

They were talkative, full of personality, and a beehive of activity.

The spacious front lawn along each side of the long gravel drive leading to the house was shaded here and there with enormous pines, sprawling oaks, and glorious maples stretching their branches out in a stately manner.

At the end of the drive, tucked in behind two enormous lilac shrubs on each side of the front porch, flanked by junipers, hollies, boxwoods, and arborvitaes, stood the house.

It was well maintained and seemed to hold its former glory like a time capsule.

The three-story yellow structure boasted a wrap-around porch encompassing the front and one side to the left.

A turret loomed up like a crown on the far right corner.

Lewis Wickham waited in the limo while Blake had taken the three steps up and then strode across the front porch.

A porch swing, wicker porch furniture, white shutters, and window boxes with spring pansies caught his attention.

The shrub beds were bordered with clumps of daffodils, hyacinth, crocus, and tulips.

Though it was likely a century old, the home bespoke plenty of welcoming charm and timeless elegance with its elaborate white carved trimmings and spindled railings.

He took note of the barn and what looked to be an old carriage house for a garage off to the right.

After knocking, he had been welcomed inside by a lady wearing an aproned light blue and white uniform. She wore her salt-and-pepper-streaked hair in a loose bun. The house was so large, he imagined they made good use of some help to care for the lawn and cleaning duties.

“You must be Blake. I’m Sarah. Wait here, honey. Hensley’s expecting you. She’ll be down in a few minutes,” the lady informed him.

He barely had a chance to nod in reply before Sarah hurried away in response to someone calling her from the back of the house.

Maybe Hensley’s mother? He’d only been left alone for long enough to take in the high ceilings, tall windows, and excellent workmanship in the main staircase that led upstairs, door casings, baseboards, wainscoting, and moldings—all of it drawing his admiration.

But it was the family inside that caught most of his interest, a bustle of activity.

“Has anyone seen my book?” A girl about the age of maybe eighteen called out as she bounded down the staircase, one hand on the banister railing, a white poodle tucked under her other arm.

“It’s due back at the bookmobile and I’ve simply got to find it.

I’ve looked everywhere ...” She paused on the landing and snuggled closer to the poodle. “Did you eat it, Ruffles?”

Spotting Blake, her voice faded. She paused in the foyer and peered up at him, pushing thick eyeglasses higher on her nose. “Oh, hello. I’m Kit, Hensley’s sister. You must be Blake.”

“Nice to meet you.” He shook her free hand.

Despite the glasses, Kit was a pretty girl. Not as pretty as Hensley, but attractive .

“Sorry to dash away. I’m on a mission to find a book.” She smiled at him and then crossed through the double doors into the spacious room to his left, peeking in various corners as she went.

He moved closer to the room where she stepped into hoping to find her book. A comfortable parlor back in the day, he guessed, judging by its décor. Pinstripe sofas and chairs, all framed in walnut. It appeared nearly the same as what he imagined he’d have found back then.

A grandmotherly lady with excellent posture and silvery white hair piled into a knot on the top of her head came bustling through the double doors from the room where Kit had entered.

“Good heavens, child! Who knows where you’ve left it.

Your nose is always in a book. It could be anywhere.

” She crossed directly in front of Blake toward a set of double doors on the opposite side of the foyer leading to his right.

A large drawing room, perhaps. She gave him an efficient nod hello as she passed before him, along with a peculiar and mischievous grin.

He returned an amused smile and nodded. She didn’t pause to greet him beyond the odd smile she’d given. She must be the grandmother Sam had mentioned. And she moved briskly, like a spry young chicken, wasting no time at all, carrying a basket with some skeins of colorful yarn.

His brow arched as she sped away, disappearing from his view.

She wore a navy-blue straight skirt to above her ankles with three large white buttons on the sides of each hip, old-fashioned cream shoes with chunky low heels, and a white blouse with a big bow that draped in front.

She could have stepped out of a magazine from the turn-of-the-century in the early 1900s.

Now he could see why Hensley dressed the way she did. She had inherited her fashion choices from this clearly competent woman. He could tell that she was in command by her posture and manner.

A blond young lady entered the foyer from the opposite direction of the front door, blowing on her bright pink nails, presumably to make them dry faster. She stopped a few feet in front of Blake and gave him a flirtatious but charming smile.

“Well, aren’t you handsome?” Then she turned around and hollered up the staircase. “Hensley, your Wyoming cowboy is here! Hurry it up! You’re making him wait.” She whirled back around to face him. “I’m Lula. But I’ve got a date and can’t linger. I’m sure she’ll be down soon.”

“He’s not my Wyoming cowboy!” A voice hollered from somewhere above.

He couldn’t help but chuckle. Hensley’s voice.

Cheerful, vibrant, and sweet. But at that moment, she sounded rather annoyed.

Hopefully not too annoyed with him. She’d answered his call at noon about joining him at the diner that evening and hadn’t hesitated too long or fussed when he offered to pick her up.

To Lula, he attempted to maintain his dignified manner, holding his cowboy hat in his hands. “Not a problem. Carry on.” He grinned, further amused.

“Lula,” the blond, dashed up the stairs, disappearing as quickly as the others.

A quieter version of Hensley, another brunette, reading a book, wafted through the foyer from the same door where Lula had entered.

She never glanced up as she proceeded toward the room with the turret where Hensley’s grandmother had gone.

She read aloud, murmuring to herself. “Drain and serve at once. Serves fifteen.” Once inside the room where her grandmother was, her voice drifted into the foyer.

“Grandmother, what do you think of this recipe for the Women’s Missionary Auxiliary luncheon next week? ”

An exchange of lowered voices between them, and then the girl emerged again into the foyer, still reading the recipe.

This time, she stopped to take in the fact someone was standing there.

“Oh, goodness, hello. You must be Blake. I’m Jenny, Hensley’s older sister. I didn’t see you there before ...”

Before he could reply, a vigorous rendition of “Stand by Me” sounded on a piano. The melody was soon accompanied by offkey vocals streaming from the room on their right where their grandmother had disappeared.

Jenny sighed and rolled her eyes. “Sorry. That dreadful pitch would be our MaryAnne. She’s practicing for a wedding. I’m afraid her singing skills do not match her beautiful playing.”

He shouldn’t comment one way or the other about that, so he cleared his throat. “Well, it’s very nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Jenny turned her head away to glance up with him when heels clicked on the staircase.

It was Hensley, wearing taupe heels beneath her shapely legs.

And above those pretty legs swirled another of those fifties-style dresses, similar to the one she’d worn the day they’d chased after Boscoe.

Cinnamon brown fabric dotted with white polka dots.

His eyes traveled to the cinnamon brown sash wrapped around her slim waist, and her brunette waves framing each side of her heart-shaped face.

She certainly had her own style. Different from other girls, and very attractive.

They were only headed to the diner for burgers, to discuss ideas for the fundraiser. He'd dressed down, opting for jeans and a plaid shirt. He'd brought a navy blazer along, but it was inside the limo. Should he offer to take her to The Creek Grill instead?

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I've had all sorts of interruptions and last-minute phone calls." Hensley breezed up to them, tucking a taupe clutch and a notebook under her arm. "Didn't mean to keep you waiting, but I'm starved. Let's go before another delay happens."

"Sure. It's all right." He stood up taller and slid his hat on. Should he mention how pretty she looked? Nah. This wasn't a date. Just a meeting. She might take it wrong.

"Have fun!" Jen smiled and closed her book as Hensley opened the front door and stepped outside.

"Thanks. See you later." Hensley waved to her sister .

He followed. Interesting family. Would he remember all of their names?

Had he misjudged this old-fashioned girl? She seemed, somehow, perfectly ... family oriented. Completely unlike his family, spread out all over the country at present. He had yet to meet her parents, but oh, to have a family like this!

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HENSLEY GULPED WHEN Blake introduced his driver as Wickham.

He opened a rear limo door for them and stood aside, waiting as they approached.

She nodded and smiled in the driver's direction, her brow arching.

She slid into the seat and scooted over to make room for Blake.

Hmm. A friend named Bing, and a driver named Wickham!

This was all so odd, considering her favorite author was Jane Austen.

Glancing around at the luxurious interior of the limo, she nearly had to pinch herself as Blake slid onto the seat. Why did it seem as if she'd fallen into one of Jane's books?

And how had any of this even happened? Oh yes, because she'd opened her mouth and stuck her foot into it, agreeing to confine herself to working with him on the fundraiser. It was good work, after all. It was the Lord's work.

And something about this man's aloofness brought out the competitive spirit and drive that compelled her to keep serving, to keep doing.

To not be left behind while others did everything for Jesus and she sat on the sidelines.

To not come before the King of Kings one day, empty-handed.

No, she should be using her gifts and talents to serve in as many ways as she could.

And so here she was, with a man who thought of her as somehow lacking.

She'd been rushing around to get ready since arriving home after work.

She'd even left a bit early to avoid the rush hour.

Not that Dogwood Creek had much traffic, but they did have some.

She'd left the boutique at four o'clock, leaving June Milton in charge.

But since then, she'd had three calls from June about this, that, and the other.

With her tummy grumbling and it being the end of a long week, she was glad to be heading for dinner, except her nerves were on edge about it being dinner with Blake Sterling, Mr. Grumpy Unfriendly Judgmental Cowboy.

Sure, he'd opened up a little at Sam's dinner the night before, but she still didn't know why he had deemed her as not his type.

Now that June's questions had been handled, she could finally relax. June worked most Friday and Saturday evenings to cover the shop. Maybe she could get through the evening without having to take calls or texts. She would turn off her cell and direct June to contact Jen if she had any questions.

June had been a Godsend to her boutique.

With all of her sisters between the ages of eighteen and twenty-eight, she'd found they required most weekends off—unless they took on a contract to help with a wedding.

They all had busy social calendars, after all.

Hensley's Wedding Creations offered a variety of wedding planning and coordinating services to their brides who purchased gowns from the boutique.

Maybe Blake would ask her about it at dinner and she could tell him more about their family business.

She and Blake didn't speak much on the awkward limo ride other than to mention the nice weather.

It was just as well, giving her time to unwind.

She'd had a frantic bride call that afternoon, desperate for a last-minute alteration for an out-of-town bridesmaid.

She had calmed the bride and set an appointment for first thing Saturday at nine.

This had made the bride thankful and happy.

Then a mother of the bride visited the shop, panicked after shopping at three other wedding boutiques in Nashville, unable to find the right dress to match her daughter's robin's egg blue color scheme.

Not an easy color to coordinate. They'd settled on something in pale pink with silver accent threads.

She'd led the mother to her best option first. The mother had left the shop extremely satisfied, but not until they'd tried five other options, taking up much of Hensley's remaining time.

Of course, the bride's mother had eventually agreed the first option was best.

After resolving those two dilemmas, a bride came inside the boutique carrying an heirloom veil that had been damaged.

It wasn't one of Hensley's creations, but apparently, one of her bridesmaids had attempted to iron the fragile antique piece.

In the process, she'd ruined it. Hensley showed the bride how she could repair it if desired but also spent much of her last hour on duty helping the bride try on suitable replacement options.

The bride opted for both the repair and a new veil.

She would wear one to the ceremony and the other to the reception. Problem solved.

The day's work had been cut out for her.

She'd completed an alteration, a veil repair, and her other work.

Nonetheless, she enjoyed her career. Designing creations that made brides happy for their special wedding day gave her great joy.

She also thrived on the joy of making their wedding days run smoothly and seeing their smiles on those occasions.

What could be better than that? Nothing else gave her such satisfaction.

But why did Blake tap his fingers softly on the door handle and why did he keep glancing in her direction? Finally, he asked, "Would you rather dine at The Creek Grill?"

She tilted her head to one side, considering their choices.

“After the week I’ve had, I admit to being indecisive.

I’m fine with either one. My favorite meal at the grill is the seared scallops dish with baby spinach and pomegranate sauce.

It comes with roasted honey-glazed carrots and the best baked macaroni and four-cheese side you’ve ever tasted.

If we go to the diner, I’ll order one of their incredible burgers with the works.

And I’ll devour the entire thing. So, it’s up to you. ”

“It sounds like you need to dine properly then.” He lowered the window between them and Wickham, instructing him to head for The Creek Grill instead of the diner .

Hensley turned toward the passenger window and smiled weakly.

It was a good choice, and she didn’t disagree.

A few minutes later, they were settled at a table away from everyone else.

She ordered a peach-flavored sweet tea, and their waiter brought them an appetizer of stuffed mushroom caps that Blake ordered at her suggestion.

After tasting two of those, the tension began to drain from her while they waited for the main course.

Blake sat back in his seat, remaining quiet as he studied her with curiosity behind his intelligent brown eyes. She was thankful for the soft music playing in the background

though. It was the perfect distraction from having to make small talk.

When the waiter brought their meal out, she thoroughly enjoyed every bite, doing her best not to care why Blake had said she wasn't his type.

If she contemplated it too much, she figured they wouldn't be able to work together to complete the task of helping the youth raise the funds for their mission trip.

When their meals arrived, she appreciated the fact that he offered the blessing without having to be reminded.

Arranging the linen napkin on her lap, she guessed she ought to ask him something to get to know him a little better and begin some sort of amiable conversation. "Tell me about your family, Blake."

"Well, I have an older brother, Brandon. He lives in the small but pleasant town of Rockport, Ohio. It's north of Cincinnati. He's now at the helm of Sterling Enterprises since our father's stroke. He's been recovering, but progress has been slow."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear about that. Is he going to be all right?" Hensley glanced at him.

"I personally don't think my father will ever be the same again, but he did recently come to the Lord through all of this.

He's now confined to a wheelchair and requires nearly round-the-clock medical care.

He's out of the nursing home, but he has several nurses, and there's a cook and a cleaning lady who attend to his needs. "

She tasted another bite of the delicious scallops, nodding. "I'm glad he's getting the

care he needs.”

“Yes, I am glad for that too.” He sipped his tea. “Consequently, we had to move the headquarters to Rockport when the stroke first happened. Dad was well enough to attend my brother’s wedding last year to a lovely woman named Stephanie with some help from a nurse.”

“I see. And tell me about your sister-in-law.” Her brow arched as she tilted her head to one side. Maybe some of Blake’s serious nature had to do with his concerns for his father’s health.

He sliced into one of his scallops. “Stephanie owns a bookstore in Rockport that has been in her family for generations. I think she and Brandon had a lot in common since he was the Vice President of our bookstore division. He used to oversee our Books & Burgers locations, but now he has stepped into my father’s former role, overseeing all three of our divisions. ”

She didn’t know much about Sterling Enterprises, prompting her next question. “What are the other two divisions?”

“Weymouth Furnishings is the division I’ve been assigned, though I’ve stepped into more of a consulting role.

We’ve promoted someone from within to handle most of my workload, but I conduct a monthly review and an online meeting with the managerial staff.

That has freed me up to handle my own interests with Deerpark Cabins,” he explained.

“As I mentioned before, I wanted out of the corporate world as much as possible. This was a way to compromise so I could still be part of the family business but with

less hands-on responsibilities. It's also how I was able to spend time in Wyoming. ”

“And your brother is happy with this arrangement?”

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He nodded, tasting a large bite of the baked macaroni and cheese dish. “Yes, he understands my ambitions are different. And there’s Shelly, our younger sister. She oversees our pizzeria division from Florida. We own and operate a number of these pizzerias, primarily located inside hotels. ”

At least he seemed to be enjoying the meal she’d recommended. “Is Shelly married?”

“No, but she has a boyfriend who’s been in the picture for a few years. I suppose they’ll marry one day soon. As for my parents, they’ve been divorced since I was in my teens. Our mom lives in California on beachfront property near L.A., but she never remarried either.”

Her lips parted and seemed stuck open for a few seconds before she recovered with a response.

“So, your family is really spread out ...” How terribly unfortunate!

She could hardly imagine being separated from her family.

No wonder he possessed such a serious nature.

It must be a lot to contend with. It probably weighed on him more than he let on or perhaps even knew.

He lowered his gaze toward his plate. “We are. We find ways to keep in touch and visit each other, but yes, we’re all in different states.”

As Hensley neared the last few bites of the meal, she found herself appreciating the treasured silence that now fell over them.

Was it because of the week she'd had, or his distaste for her?

She couldn't be sure. She only knew it was for the best, but she had a slightly different view of him now.

And since they'd eaten, they'd be in a better frame of mind to discuss the fundraising event.

"Would you care to try the lemon cheesecake or maybe the chocolate truffle mousse with raspberry garnish?" Blake held up the dessert menu toward her as he pushed his plate aside.

"The mousse sounds nice." She couldn't let cheesecake stick to her hips.

When the waiter returned, Blake ordered two dishes of the mousse for them.

She could get used to dining out with him and riding in his limo.

But all of this was only temporary. As soon as they finished planning and executing the fundraiser, things would go back to how they were before, only they'd be acquaintances by then. Maybe even friends.

A short while later, they had their dessert before them. Blake tasted some of his and then leaned back, appearing satisfied. "So, tell me, Miss Fitzwilliam, what are your thoughts about the fundraiser? We're in the south. Will guests be expecting fried chicken and some sort of donation box?"

She shook her head, chuckling. "It's still chilly outside. They like fried chicken year-

round, but there will be plenty of opportunities to attend fried chicken and potluck church dinners this summer. I'm thinking a chili cook-off and an auction."

His brow arched. "Will the ladies from the church donate chili? And what kind of an auction?"

"Trust me." Hensley smiled as she lifted a small spoonful of the dessert toward her lips.

"The ladies will donate more crockpots full of chili than we can serve, and church folks will donate all sorts of items for the auction. Books, pictures, household items, you name it. Our youth group can also display some of their artwork to auction off. And they can auction offers of service to do spring cleaning, yardwork, and other odd jobs that require manual labor."

He leaned forward. "I like these ideas. I think they can work."

She arched her brows in surprise. "You're not going to argue with me about my ideas? I fully expected you to disagree."

He chuckled and shook his head. "No, really, I like your ideas. Let's go with it. All we need now is a date, time, place, and a checklist."

She eyed him in disbelief and then snapped her mouth shut. "I'm shocked, Mr. Sterling. You're not going to make it that easy on me, are you? Surely you have some sort of reason to claim my plan isn't suitable."

"No arguments here. Chili cook-off and auction it is. But how do you envision this cook-off taking place?"

She relaxed and folded her hands, placing them on the table.

Then she leaned forward. “Well, since you asked, instead of charging tickets or a fee for the meal, we’ll ask folks to vote for the best chili by donating money for their favorites.

Whoever has the most donations wins the cook-off,” Hensley explained before tasting one of the raspberries on her mousse.

“I see. And the auction? How do you envision those logistics?” Blake leaned his head to one side.

“We can place the items being auctioned on long tables with clipboards beside each item. Let folks add their name and the amount they wish to bid. The highest bidders will be announced before you auction off each youth member for their offer of labor services. They’ll have to stand up front beside the auctioneer, of course.

But that’s what we want, so that folks can see the youth they’ll be supporting for the mission trip. ”

Blake grinned, revealing those adorable dimples. “Ah, so the youth members stand for that part as the main feature. It will be some fun at the end and get the youth more involved, am I right?”

She nodded. “That’s right. The youth will have fun, and the church folk will enjoy their help, and everyone will be thoroughly entertained. You’ll get a lot of bidders having a blast and upping their bid for the fun of it.”

He slapped the table good-naturedly. “How does May fifteenth at seven o’clock in the evening sound for the event? I’m guessing six p.m. will be too early for some.”

“Sounds good to me.” She opened her notebook and jotted down their two ideas and the date and time. “It gives us about five and a half weeks to prepare. We’ll need to

finalize our checklist at our next meeting. I'll try and start on it in my spare time before then. When do you want to meet next?"

"Let's say Tuesday night. The Gathering Place for burgers. I'll pick you up at six, if that's all right with you?"

She hesitated. "Better make it six-thirty. Because by the time I'm home and get turned around, thirty minutes will have passed. Hopefully I won't keep you waiting too long that way. "

"Yeah, you have a lot going on. Busy household." He was smiling again. Did he know how endearing his smile was when it appeared?

His remark made her chuckle. "You can say that again. Four sisters can be a lot of fun, and other times, a lot of headaches. The boutique doesn't close until six, but I think that's Kit's night to close, so I may even be able to get away a bit early."

"I was wondering if your sisters help at the shop." He finished eating the last of his dessert and pushed it aside.

"Yes. We all help a few days each week in the boutique, but I'm there four or five days a week.

Usually five days, but I take a day off here and there.

"Then she dove into a little more about their wedding boutique since he'd mentioned it.

"We also take on some wedding coordinating and planning contracts when the brides request it. Jen heads up our catering services. Lula does our photography. MaryAnne plays the piano for some of our wedding ceremonies and offers DJ services for

receptions too. Kit, well she does our accounting. She loves mathematics, unlike the rest of us.” She paused and sipped her tea.

“I end up doing the bulk of decorating when I’m not designing or sewing wedding dresses.

But we all help and work together as needed.

We’ve even got linens, bunting, real China dishes and silver, stemmed glassware, and silk floral arrangements.

What we don’t have, we know where to get it. ”

“Nice! I’m sure your shop must be very successful.

Many folks come to this area for weddings.

In fact, we’ve already been asked if our lodge has space can be rented for weddings, though we haven’t felt ready to book for that yet.

Maybe if we had someone like you to recommend . . .” He cocked his head to one side.

Hensley nodded, but she shouldn’t appear too eager.

“Possibly.” Besides, she was entirely too uncomfortable with exploring the idea of doing any wedding business with him.

After all, it was the brides and their families who customarily paid for her services, though some venues did require their clients to use certain vendors.

She supposed it would be all right to discuss that with him down the road, but only if she enjoyed working with him.

And that remained to be seen. “I’d say we have a good start here.

If you don’t mind taking me home, I have an early day tomorrow.

I’ll head to the ladies’ room before we go, but what’s my share of the bill? ”

“Of course. I’ll handle the bill. This is my treat.

” He raised a hand when she started to protest. “No, I let them talk us into volunteering without taking much time to even pray about it, which is unlike me. So, it’s really my responsibility the way I see it, but I’ll meet you at the front door, and we’ll be on our way. ”

“Thank you. I don’t know what else to say ...” It was generous of him and an unexpected gesture.

She truly didn’t know what else to say. He’d surprised her, surpassing her expectations. He’d been a perfect gentleman throughout their dinner, remaining pleasant and lowkey, a blessing after her challenging day.

Maybe his natural bent of being aloof had contributed to it, but nonetheless, serenity was a blessing.

He hadn’t argued about her ideas, and now he offered to pay for their meals.

He’d even taken her to a more expensive restaurant than originally planned.

Plus, he had picked her up and was taking her home.

But now, Hensley didn't know what to think regarding Blake Sterling. Had she misjudged him? Except, what exactly did he find lacking that she wasn't "his type?" Was he one of those wealthy Manhattan elite snobs, like the ones she'd read about in the tabloids?

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We all know him to be a proud, unpleasant sort of man;

but this would be nothing if you really liked him.

—Jane Austen

CHARLES “BING” EATON returned from the kitchen and handed Blake a bottle of grape soda.

He slid a box of gourmet pizza onto the rustic coffee table and sank into a leather chair beside the matching sofa where Blake sat.

A fire crackled in the stone fireplace of Bing’s newly completed A-frame cabin and the pizza had just been delivered.

Blake held out his glass soda bottle to toast it against Bing’s. “Cheers on the completion of your cabin.”

“Cheers!” Bing smiled and their bottles clanked.

“You must be relieved to have everything finished except for the grounds.” Blake gazed out of the floor to ceiling windows at the trees in the distance, their view diminished only by the presence of a backhoe, an excavator, and other equipment scattered about the lawn.

His friend nodded, scooping up two slices of pizza onto a plate. “Yes, but the landscape supervisor assured me today that they’ll be finished in less than two weeks

with the exterior.”

“That’s great news. We’ll need the crew back at Deerpark Cabins soon since construction has begun on the remaining three cabins.

” Blake scooped up two slices onto a contemporary styled square plate.

His own cabin was complete too, but he didn’t have fancy pizza dishes like these.

“Who picked out your dishes? These are nicer than the paper plates I thought you were still using.”

Bing rolled his eyes and chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve grown tired of paper plates.

Might hire a cook too, one of these days.

My sister, Caroline, sent these as a housewarming gift.

I’m happy to say my days of roughing it in Tennessee are finally over.

I didn’t want to bring much from my condo in Manhattan, so I guess I have some shopping to do. ”

“A cook is a great idea if you don’t plan on getting married anytime soon.

Is your sister still planning to visit now that winter is over?

Maybe she can help you with some of the finishing touches on the place.

” Blake arched his brow, recalling that Bing’s sister had recently texted about attending a society event in Manhattan with Bing in tow as well.

He hadn't replied yet because he'd likely have to tell her he wasn't planning on being in New York anytime soon.

Not when they were so close to finishing all of the construction at Deerpark.

Bing shook his head at the suggestion of marriage. "No, no wedding plans here yet, but Caroline did say she's hoping to get away before summer to decorate the new place a bit for me. Knowing my sister, I'll receive a text with an itinerary planned down to the last minute for her entire visit."

Bing, who'd earned his nickname back in their middle school years due to his extraordinary arcade gaming abilities, released another chuckle along with Blake's.

They both knew how organized and detailed Caroline could be.

It gave Blake a headache to imagine it. Caroline Eaton was a force to be reckoned with at times.

"She'll like the pictures of the geese, and your stuffed deer hanging over the mantle, and the mallard ducks.

Those are all great choices for a log cabin.

Wildlife décor is working well at the lodge and at my cabin.

"His log cabin was much larger. Not an A-frame, but a sprawling two-story with a long front porch.

It was nestled between two mountains flanking the rear of his Deerpark property.

It featured dormer windows, ponderosa green shutters, and a three-tiered deck

overlooking stunning views, including a view of part of the creek that wound through the small town.

Blake's gaze now settled on the ugliest item in the spacious room.

"Not too sure about that stuffed porcupine though."

Bing laughed. "I've only put it there to see how long it takes my sister to get rid of it. Chuck, from the crew, gave it to me as a joke."

Blake grinned. "I'll say she'll have it gone within the first twenty-four hours of her arrival. It will vanish, and then she'll feign complete innocence as if she's never seen it before in her life."

"My guess is it'll take her five minutes from entering this room to spot it.

Another ten minutes will pass before she remarks about it.

Twelve hours to dispose of it entirely. And then we'll never see my old friend Porky Pine again.

" They laughed and Bing took another huge bite of the bacon, spinach, and artichoke pizza.

When they stopped laughing, his friend's voice took on a curious tone.

"Wickham tells me you've been on some outings with a certain Miss Hensley Fitzwilliam. "

"That rascal!" Blake shook his head, but he knew it was of no use to keep Wickham and Bing from commiserating upon his dating life—or rather, the lack thereof.

They were forever up to no good, but they'd known each other too long to suppose he could have any success at stopping them.

They'd even set him up on a blind date once with a girl named Lola.

He would never live down Lola since she'd disappeared after an hour of the date, never to be seen again.

He had no idea what he'd said to scare her away.

Nothing had come of it, but he wouldn't put it past them to try something again if he didn't find a girlfriend soon.

As for his remark about Miss Fitzwilliam, he waved a hand.

"She's only a friend I'm working with on a fundraiser for a mission trip the youth group is planning.

Speaking of cooks, don't you think now that you have a furnished condo in Manhattan, a log cabin in the countryside where skiing opportunities abound, and a promising career as a Vice President at Deerpark Cabins that you're ready to settle down and find a good wife who can do all of the cooking for you?"

Bing rolled his eyes before taking another bite of his pizza. "Ha! Why? Because you still have these old-fashioned notions in your head that a good wife will stay home and do all of the cooking and cleaning as opposed to having a career, or at least a career in spending my trust fund ..."

"Of course. A diminishing trust fund is a sign of a healthy relationship. Better to lay out a little cash than expose your wife to the world and its temptations." Blake finished his first slice of pizza and reached for the second slice on his plate.

Bing sighed and shook his head. “You really need to get over Elise, my friend. Just because she ran off with some no-good school board superintendent after she became an elementary school teacher doesn’t mean that all women who have a career are off limits.”

“Maybe, but I prefer to take my chances with a woman who prefers to put God, husband, family, and home first.” Blake tasted another bite of his pizza, ignoring Bing’s concerned glance.

He didn’t want anyone’s concern or sympathy.

He loathed sympathy, in fact. No, he was doing just fine.

He’d been broken up with Elise now for two years and had moved on, hadn’t he?

He just hadn’t met anyone worthy of dating.

Finding single women who didn’t have a career planned out for the rest of their life was like finding a needle in a haystack in this day and age. And besides, he was in no hurry.

“I don’t disagree with you on that, in theory.

All I’m saying is that Hensley of Hensley’s Wedding Creations, and her family, have an excellent reputation in Dogwood Creek.

I don’t think she’s anything like Elise.

And I also don’t think Elise intended for things to happen the way they ultimately turned out.

” Bing drank some of his grape soda. “It’s just one of those unfortunate things, but you’ll eventually find the right one.

I think you should give Hensley Fitzwilliam a chance if the opportunity presents itself. ”

“Perhaps, but for some reason, I’m not sure if the type of woman I’m seeking can be found in Dogwood Creek, or anywhere, really.

” Had he begun to give up on finding someone he could fall in love with?

Maybe, but it sure wasn’t Hensley. She was wrapped up in her wedding boutique business, even if she did come from a reputable and rather old-fashioned and charming kind of family.

“I’d venture to say you’re all wrong on that account, old friend. In fact, I’d say you’re more likely to meet someone here than anywhere else on the planet. And the women around Dogwood Creek seem to have more family values than all of the women in Manhattan combined.”

Blake shrugged, but did Bing have a point?

Had he put up walls and defenses for self-preservation against career women because of what had happened when he’d discovered his ex-fiancée’s cheating?

Maybe because he’d caught Elise engaged in a passionate kiss with that unscrupulous fellow, it had cut him too deeply.

If she was going to kiss someone else, she should have at least broken up with him first. That would have been the sensible thing to do, but some women didn’t seem to have a shred of decency these days.

The only good thing that had come out of it was finding out before their wedding rather than after.

But he tilted his head to one side as he took another bite of the pizza. Had he put up obstacles because of his ex that were too high for most women to jump?

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HENSLEY PERUSED HER wardrobe for something to wear on Tuesday's outing to The Gathering Place until she found the nautical-themed dress patterned after one she'd seen featuring ladies' fashions from the 1920s.

All of the bedrooms in the drafty old Victorian had tiny closets, so her parents had eventually equipped each daughter with antique armoire wardrobes.

And Hensley's was chock full of old-fashioned fifties style dresses and such.

Yes, this particular dress would be perfect with the cute navy-blue sailor hat trimmed in white to match.

She'd wear navy-blue pumps with a white bow clipped to them .

She swirled around the room while holding the sailor dress against her frame until she fell into another wedding daydream.

She could imagine herself riding in that limo again.

Perhaps not with Blake, but rather her imaginary future Mr. Darcy.

Although, she had to admit Blake had grown on her a little since their dinner at The Creek Grill.

But only a very little. She plopped onto her canopy bed and sank back into the pillows, imagining a more agreeable and less judgmental man at her side.

“Knock, knock. May I come in?” Some taps sounded at the door.

Hensley gave no answer as she imagined herself walking the grand halls of Pemberley, and with a Mr. Darcy of her own at her side.

He would keep his arms clasped behind him as they strolled those magnificent halls, but ready at any moment to offer his arm and steady her when they descended the staircase.

She would be wearing a silk ballgown, ready to dance among all of their fine guests who waited below for a chance to mingle with them and be properly introduced.

“Earth to Hensley ...” Her sister’s voice disrupted the glorious moment as she peeked around the door, and sadly, just as they were about to greet their guests, all dressed in their finery, anxious to meet Mr. and Mrs. Darcy.

Hensley sat up, blinking her daydream away. “Oh, hello, Jen.”

“You were a million miles away ... a daydream perhaps of you riding in a certain man’s limousine?” Jen grinned, crossing her arms over her chest.

Hensley flung a pillow at her sister and Jen jumped onto the bed, giggling after catching the pillow.

“Most definitely not!” She rolled her eyes, and with an indignant deep voice in her best rendition of a manly tone, she mimicked Blake’s earlier remark after meeting him when they’d chased after Boscoe.

“Hensley Fitzwilliam is ‘not exactly my type.’”

They burst into giggles. Then her sister grew serious and rested her elbows on the

pillow she'd caught a moment ago, propping her chin in her hands. "I can't imagine dating someone with that much money."

Hensley's brow arched. "It is hard to imagine being so rich that one can afford a full-time armed driver and a limo, plus a shiny red truck."

"And you meet with him tomorrow evening to finish the initial planning for the fundraiser. Is this the dress you plan to wear?" Jen glanced at the sailor-style dress on the bed.

"Yes, and the hat. Can I borrow your navy hard-case clutch?" Hensley's lips curved into a smile.

"Of course." Jen nodded. "I do sometimes wonder if we'll ever meet our Mr. Right. I'm twenty-eight and starting to give up."

"And I'm twenty-five and can't help but ask myself the same question.

If we keep praying, it will happen when we least expect it.

Our Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley shall appear.

The Lord will not forsake us." Hensley swung her feet over the side of the bed, but deep down, she had plenty of doubts.

"But do not think for one moment that I have met my Mr. Darcy yet. I still consider Blake to be at best, downright grumpy and unfriendly most of the time—especially considering how long it has taken for him to even introduce himself when he has been attending our church since moving here a year ago—and judgmental. Very judgmental."

Jen tucked some loose hair behind an ear.

“I know you are an excellent judge of character, but I do hope for your sake that everything you think about him turns out to be wrong. It would be encouraging if at least one of us found a husband.” She tilted her chin and then sat up.

“We shall not give up or sink into despair about finding one. I am always encouraged by your faith, Hensley. On that note, Mother sent me up here to ask if you were coming down for dinner. It’s spaghetti night.

There’s salad, garlic toast, and pineapple upside-down cake. I helped make the cake.
”

“Then I know the cake will be perfection. It all sounds great. I’m starving. Let’s eat ...”

Hensley jumped up from the edge of the bed and her sister followed as they headed outside into the hallway.

It was hard to fathom that the Lord could find five husbands for five sisters when they all seemed to be running out of time.

Women had biological clocks, after all. If she’d managed to give Jenny any faith, it was by accident.

She barely had enough for herself. Iron sharpened iron and Jen had encouraged her without knowing it.

If He would just send three husbands for the eldest three daughters .

.. Jen, herself, and Lula. MaryAnne and Kit were younger and had more time.

But she and Jen were especially running out of time.

Five was an awfully large request. Maybe she should pray for only three husbands and stop praying for five.

Not that the Lord could not handle a large request, but sometimes she had the idea that He was much too busy answering everyone else's prayers to remember her requests.

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Our scars make us know that our past was for real.

—Jane Austen

“PAPER PLATES AND SOME of those disposable paper tablecloths would be my vote. No washing dishes and easy clean-up.” Blake squeezed mustard onto his burger after they’d bowed their heads in prayer to bless the meal.

The Gathering Place sure was full for a Tuesday, but when had he ever seen it not full?

At least he and Hensley managed to secure one of the last available tables without a wait.

But what came to mind was when he and another wrangler, Jed, had overseen a similar fundraising event for some of the youth at the church in Wyoming on the Sweetwater River Ranch.

They’d used paper plates and disposable paper tablecloths. “My motto is to keep it simple.”

“My motto is to do everything with excellence,” Hensley insisted, ignoring the meal before her.

“Cleaning up after the event is no trouble since I don’t mind washing the dishes.

My boutique already has dishes and linen tablecloths available.

I don't mind bringing them over. All I need to know is how many round tables and how many square or rectangular tables are at your main lodge dining or banquet room. ”

“All right, if you don't mind washing dishes and all of those linens ...” His voice faded. “What's the next question on our checklist? ”

“So, we are in agreement. We'll have real dishes, real silverware, and linens on the tables.” Hensley crossed her arms over her chest, tapping a pen on the checklist.

Her tone didn't sound happy. Blake was about to take his first bite of the delicious burger, but now he held it in mid-air. He couldn't leave her with the wrong idea. “Well, not exactly. I'm not in agreement. I'm going along with your preferences.”

“Fine. Noted.” Hensley checked off those items. “But we'll be going with the real dishes and nice linens. As I said, I don't mind washing dishes. You have a kitchen at your lodge, right?”

He took a bite of his burger. Mmm. It was good. Would Hensley ever taste hers? Before taking another bite, he answered as she leveled a steady gaze at him. “Yes, there's a kitchen.”

“Great. That brings us to centerpieces. I'm afraid to ask your opinion, but it's on the checklist and we must arrive at a decision, one way or the other. Yay or nay?” Her lips twisted to one side and she crossed her arms over her chest again.

She appeared as if she braced herself for the worst, the way she leaned back and tilted her head to one side. Warning bells were ringing in his ears. This certainly wasn't going the way he'd imagined.

“I take it you're in favor of centerpieces?”

“We’ve not had any fundraisers or dinners at the church without them.

They make a nice touch and show that those hosting the event have put some time and thought into planning the event.

I think folks will take us more seriously and will open their wallets wider to give.

They will see how much it matters, right down to the centerpieces you probably think are a waste of our time. ”

“I see.” He took another bite of his burger while she uncrossed her arms and picked up a knife to slice her burger in half.

Then she took a ladylike bite of one corner of her burger while he chose his words carefully.

“If you think it’s best. I wouldn’t go to all that trouble or waste any time on that sort of thing if it were just me doing the planning . . . ”

She placed her burger on the plate and picked up a fry, dipping it in the appetizer cup containing a small side of ranch salad dressing. “I didn’t think so.”

She’d been very specific about ordering her side of dressing, asking for some in a little cup to accompany her fries.

Before he could reply, she shifted in her seat and sat up taller. “But, it’s not just you. It’s both of us. We have to make the decision together.”

He blinked. That point seemed obvious, but he wouldn’t mention it lest he stir up a blazing fire in her eyes.

For some reason unbeknownst to him, her pretty blue eyes already had spark in them.

Though she looked nice in that navy sailor dress trimmed in white with that cute hat perched on her head, it was a tailored piece that sent an “I’m all business” message.

She continued when he appeared speechless.

“I do think it’s best. It will show excellence in our commitment to the Lord.

Plus, everything will look nicer all the way around.

Hensley’s Wedding Creations has dozens of options to choose from for centerpieces, but I personally think it would be a nice touch to make something with a mission or chili theme to go along with whatever I can donate to the main base for them, whether it’s spring silk flowers in a vase or something else.

Maybe we could make some cute cardboard chili bowls with some sort of Bible verse on them. ”

He picked up his burger, about to take another bite. “Okay. Whatever you think.”

“Okay, you’ll help make the themed item to go with each centerpiece, or you’ll just dump it on me to come up with something myself?” Her brow arched as she leaned toward him for clarification.

Maybe he’d wait on taking that bite. Was she glaring at him?

He cleared his throat and set his burger down.

“I’ll be happy to help. Tell me what to do and where to be when you’re ready to make them.

” Her brow was still arching for some reason, so he added, “If it means going to the craft store or something, I’m happy to accompany.

I’ll do my best to be helpful, though it’s not really my thing. I’ll even pay for anything we need.”

This earned him somewhat of a satisfactory smile and she checked the item off their list of discussion questions. “Thank you, Blake. That’s very generous and kind of you to offer. I’ll try to keep any expenses low cost.”

She certainly was organized. He’d give her that much. She took another of those ladylike bites from her burger. He’d better take a bite too before the next question. No telling how much debating it might require.

Hensley finished chewing and set her burger aside.

“Those jars for donations which we’ll place beside each crock pot of chili for voting purposes .

.. let’s talk about that for a minute. Shall we use ugly undecorated large jars for donations, decorated large jars, or decorated boxes?

” She paused before diving into more detail.

“I mean, if we use jars, folks can see the money piling up in them. It may encourage more donations, especially if the jars appear low in donations. Some husbands will want to ensure their wives win the vote for the best chili to stay on their good sides. They’ll be attempting to calculate how much money to donate to win.

In other words, we only require minimal decorating to the jars, such as some twine and a bit of burlap and lace.

A name card on each jar featuring the names of the cook, or in some cases, several cooks, would be the bare minimum of what we should do. ”

Blake held off on his next bite to reply, seeing she’d put quite a bit of thought into this jar business. “Ah, I see what you mean, now that you’ve explained it all. No ugly jars allowed.” He smirked. Would the light bit of teasing loosen things up between them?

She chuckled, but her chuckle faded fast, replaced by a contemplative silence. She breathed in deeply and released a sigh. “I hope you aren’t making fun of me. I’m only trying to make sure we measure up to past events and put our best foot forward for the sake of the gospel going forth. ”

He shook his head, his brows furrowing. “No, I’m not making fun of you.

I mean it. We shouldn’t have ugly jars if we’re going with linen tablecloths and centerpieces.

They’d stand out like a sore thumb, right?

We should only have the decorated ones, just as you said.

If we have to put a name on each one, what’s an extra step to make them attractive?

We’ll want them to draw attention. Now that I think about it, I don’t think boxes will serve our purpose if we want to pull in more donation funds, unless we can’t find enough empty jars.

I guess we need some of those large pickle jars. ”

She eyed him with some degree of reservation in her eyes, as if she didn’t trust him.

But she finally nodded. “Good. I think we’re on the same page.

” She scribbled down some notes. She set her pen down with a sigh and closed the notebook before picking up her burger to take another bite.

“I think that’s it for tonight. When can you arrange for a tour of your lodge?

We could make the banner I have in mind and do the photo wall featuring each of the youth group members and a group photo in the center. ”

A banner and a photo wall too? Was she going a bit overboard?

He shrugged. If he told her that, she might breathe fire out of her nostrils.

Instead, he repeated, “A tour?” Considering how much more they had to do to prepare than he’d expected, he shouldn’t suggest a meeting too far out on the calendar.

Judging by the thin firm line her lips pressed into at the moment, he must have aggravated her enough for one evening.

Probably a good idea to allow a few days to pass before their next meeting.

“How about Friday night? I’ll have some Chinese food delivered, that is, if you like Chinese? ”

“Chinese is fine.” She dipped a fry in the dressing. Returning to her notebook, she thumbed through it until she found a large white envelope. “Samantha gave me these photos we can use to highlight our youth.”

Oh. He nodded. “Nice. ”

If Samantha had given her photos, then these women sure did like to go all out for their fundraising events. He couldn't argue with that. Best to find out what kind of Chinese food she preferred.

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“What kind of Chinese food do you like? Anything in particular?” He began to relax, some tension draining from his shoulders. At least she didn’t seem to have any arguments about Chinese food.

“The sweet and sour chicken is my favorite. Fried or white rice is fine. And a vegetable egg roll or spring roll would be nice, but I’ll take a chicken egg roll if they don’t have a veggie egg roll. I’m not big on pork.”

He could remember that much. “Got it. Is seven good?” He’d learned that a little later in the evening was best for her. “I can pick you up in the limo, like usual. We’ll eat at the lodge, so we’ll have more time to tour the facility, eat our dinner, then make the banner and do the photo wall.”

She nodded. “Seven on Friday evening is great. I don’t have any upcoming weddings on Saturday, so if you have no events at the lodge between now and May fifteenth, we can accomplish a lot in advance. Maybe I’ll bring the dishes and tablecloths.”

“Fine with me. We don’t have any events booked between now and then.” He took another bite of his burger, noting she’d begun to relax.

“There’s just one more important detail.”

Maybe they weren’t done after all. He angled toward her, leaning forward as he held his burger in mid-air again.

“We need to explain our plan to the youth group next Wednesday evening at seven. It’s when they usually meet. Without them on board, we don’t have a chance of

success.” She picked up another fry from her plate.

“Will that be difficult to get them to agree? Won’t they have ten different opinions?”

“Not if they want our help.” She bit off half of her fry.

“It’s also why we have ironed out most of the details ahead of meeting with them.

It cuts down on a lot of the flack and debating about this, that, and the other.

The important thing is that we present the idea, offer to tend to these things they don’t have the time or resources to handle, and get them involved with the idea of being willing to auction off their labor to folks in the community.

In other words, we need them to attend the event and come with willing hearts and hands. ”

He nodded and bit into his burger. When he finished chewing, he added, “Sounds easier said than done.”

“No worries. I’ll explain everything. You can stand beside me for reinforcement. I’ll mention it to Sam so she can introduce us,” she offered.

Sounded easy enough. “Good plan. The youth group doesn’t know me that well yet. They’ll respect what you have to say, and I’ll support you.”

Phew! Had he survived their second meeting? She likely had decided he was argumentative, but in the end, he had agreed to everything she suggested once he understood her reasoning.

What could they talk about now? She didn’t appear too pleased with him.

Maybe they should finish their burgers in peace.

By then, he'd think of something to chat about with Miss Hensley Fitzwilliam.

She took another bite of her burger. He was glad to see her eating.

The door jingled, and more folks entered the diner.

Hensley turned white as a ghost when she glanced up at the door and the burger in her hands dropped to her plate. The remaining lettuce leaf and tomato slice slid out, but she didn't seem to care.

"What's wrong?" He kept his voice low. Then he glanced over his shoulder, spotting a group of three men near the door.

"Unfortunately, it's my ex-boyfriend, Jake," she whispered before breathing in deeply and staring down at her plate.

"The last man on earth I'd prefer to see.

We dated three years. Everyone thought we'd marry, but we broke up when he took a fancy job at a big law firm in Louisville, Kentucky.

He's on staff as one of their real estate attorneys. Haven't seen him in ages."

But "Jake" soon observed her and sauntered over to say hello. "Hey, Hensley! How's it going?" Jake adjusted his tie, giving her a wide smile.

"Jake, how nice to see you again." Hensley forced a smile, but she stiffened even though he leaned down to hug her.

She patted him on the back once or twice as he hugged her, but Blake could tell she was uncomfortable.

As the fellow rose from the hug, she added, “Goodness, I haven’t seen you around in forever. Maybe the Christmas before last?”

The tall man wearing a long double-breasted coat nodded, tucking a pair of leather gloves in his coat pocket. It was chilly and rainy outside. Glancing at Blake, he extended his hand. “Sorry, I don’t think we’ve met. Jake Parker.”

“Jake, this is Blake Sterling.” Hensley gestured toward Blake, seated directly across from her.

“New boyfriend?” Jake’s brows arched toward Hensley for confirmation as Blake shook his hand.

“Yep, new boyfriend. That’s me,” Blake heard himself choke out as he tightened his grip on the handshake. Couldn’t have the fellow thinking Hensley was still single. But why had he stepped up like that? It was unlike him to fib about anything. “Nice to meet you.”

Jake, still arching his brow, glanced at Hensley and then back at Blake when she didn’t nod or flinch. Blake reached across the table to cover Hensley’s hand with his. They had to play the part now that he’d gotten himself into this mess. He glanced at Hensley to see if she’d protest.

Hensley nodded ever so slightly, a nervous laugh escaping her throat. She didn’t pull her hand away when his hand covered hers.

She recovered, glancing up at Jake while Blake kept his hand over hers. “Are you in town for long?”

“I’ve moved back to the area since I’ll be heading up a branch here.

Well, not exactly here. Closer to Gatlinburg, but it’s only a short drive away.

My law firm is expanding into Tennessee.

” Jake glanced over at his friends who’d settled into a different table as a waitress approached them.

“Looks like it’s time for me to order, but take care. I’m sure I’ll see you both around.”

Hensley nodded, but Blake turned to stare after Jake Parker as he left to join his friends.

She released a long sigh as if she’d been holding her breath and gazed at him with a mix of gratitude and relief in her eyes. “Thank you, but you didn’t have to do that.”

“No, I wanted to. Not sure why. I guess something about him irked me.” He stole another glance over his shoulder at her former boyfriend and then turned back to Hensley.

“When you finish eating, how about a ride in the limo to the craft store? We can shop for whatever you think is needed to complement those centerpieces. Maybe we’ll find those jars and the twine, burlap, and lace you mentioned. ”

She nodded. “That would be nice.”

Somewhat content with his actions and also befuddled by them, Blake hardly understood what he’d just done.

Was it Jake's impeccable dress and demeanor?

Maybe the fact he'd dated Hensley for three years of her life and yet hadn't married her?

Why did her ex-boyfriend seem to bring out an urge to protect her?

Was it jealousy pangs that twinged? He should have worn a suit like Jake instead of the red and black plaid lumberjack shirt and jeans he sported.

Sure, Hensley was overdressed, but he'd begun to grow accustomed to her doing that no matter where they went.

Instead, he'd dressed down in flannel to ward off the chilly spring weather.

It seemed more appropriate since he spent most of his time communicating with his construction crew.

Whenever he glanced over his shoulder, he caught Jake staring at Hensley.

Why did it leave him with the impression the fella would make a move to reunite with her soon? Maybe he should consider stepping up his game, that is, if he was going to listen to Bing's advice, and maybe what his heart might be telling him.

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How did it happen that their lips came together? How does it happen that birds sing, that snow melts, that the rose unfolds, that the dawn whitens behind the stark shapes of trees on the quivering summit of the hill?

A kiss and all was said.

— Victor Hugo

A peek through the partially closed blinds on the window between her desk and the boutique's sales floor revealed her sister Lula ringing up another elated bridesmaid's purchase.

To her chagrin and dismay, Jake had called that morning, asking if she'd dine with him at The Creek Grill.

"For old times' sake," he'd said, his voice containing a wistful tone.

Ack! She should have changed her cell phone number .

Hensley turned him down flat, knowing the end of that road where he was concerned. "Sorry, Jake, I have other plans. Besides, I make it a personal rule not to get involved with any of my ex-boyfriends."

In other words, he'd had his chance. She'd disconnected the call before he could respond. It was an audacious and bold move on Jake's part. Didn't he respect the fact Blake had made it clear to him they were dating? Sure, fake dating, at this point. But Jake didn't know that.

As far as she was concerned, Jake had turned out to be just like Michael Stanton, her previous boyfriend before him.

She'd dated Michael after turning eighteen until she'd turned twenty-one, long before she'd met Jake.

But then one day, Michael had joined the Marines without discussing it with her beforehand.

A few months after his first deployment, his letters began coming less frequently.

She knew it was over, though he hadn't been injured or killed. His mom had still been receiving letters from him too. He eventually wrote her a letter to say that he'd met a nurse stationed in the area. They planned to marry as soon as possible. Hensley had been heartbroken.

Three or four months later, Jake asked her out when he was home from college one weekend.

They'd grown up attending the same church, but he was away much of the time, attending Vanderbilt University Law School in Nashville.

They had dated for three years while he drove home most weekends from Nashville to Dogwood Creek.

It had taken her months to recover from her breakup with Jake when he'd moved to Kentucky after his graduation.

She'd been expecting an engagement ring, but in the excitement of graduation and finding a new job at a fancy law firm, she was lost in the shuffle.

More than once since meeting Blake Sterling, she had become lost in her head, as she had after each of her break-ups.

What was so wrong with her that both Michael and Jake had broken up with her instead of pursuing marriage?

She would have given up everything she'd worked so hard for in order to follow either one to the ends of the earth.

She could create her wedding designs from anywhere, after all.

One of her sisters could have taken over managing the boutique.

Since those relationships had ended, her love for operating Hensley's Wedding Creations had grown.

Now, she didn't ever plan to give it up.

It had become part of her dream, and she enjoyed her work immensely.

With Jake's return and Blake's words ringing in her mind, it all led her to ask the same questions.

What was wrong with her? Wasn't she pretty enough?

Did she lack something in her personality?

Was she too successful or intimidating on some level?

Was it because she couldn't cook? Did they dislike the way she dressed in old-fashioned dresses all of the time?

Was she too prim and proper? Was it her faith in Jesus?

What was it that drove her boyfriends away?

Was it because she didn't offer to sleep with them, preferring to honor the Lord by saving herself for marriage?

And why was Blake so infuriatingly argumentative, reserved, and now, confusing?

The way he had stepped up to pretend to be her boyfriend left her puzzled.

Why had he said she wasn't his type, but now announced she was his girlfriend?

Why did he care about protecting her pride when Jake had returned?

He hadn't seemed to consider her feelings when they'd first met. Why did he care now?

What was so wrong with her that she wasn't his type at first glance?

The question had plagued her for the past few weeks since meeting him, but she couldn't bring herself to ask what he'd meant.

What was his type anyhow? And why did she care what he thought?

If he had been friendlier when they'd first met and hadn't made that statement, perhaps she would have considered him.

He was attractive, eligible, a fellow believer in words and deeds, but he'd made a fatal mistake with her.

Relegating her to someone beneath him for some reason.

Blake's arguing with her about the fundraiser hadn't made things any easier. He had responded like a typical male to everything she'd brought up at The Gathering Place, as if none of her concerns mattered except maybe decorating the jars. And that had only mattered after she'd explained it .

In the end, he had come around to each of her viewpoints. But she'd had to explain everything, which had completely exasperated and exhausted her. It had been both infuriating and annoying, to say the least.

Had she been too pushy about what type of event she wished to present to the community?

Had she been fair, considerate, and willing to consider his opinions?

Did she have a valid point about doing everything with excellence?

Her grandmother and mother would certainly approve if they were in the same boat. That much she knew.

She had listened to him and given him every opportunity to protest. She hadn't shut him down.

She'd merely stated her reasoning and he'd given in, or so he said.

Perhaps he had agreed with her on some things, but she wasn't sure at this point.

Which was yet another reason why she looked forward to their meeting tonight.

She'd finally have a tour of his cabin property, and more importantly, she could

assess whether he was okay with the plans they'd settled on.

In her defense, she'd pressed on, knowing what her church family was accustomed to and what had worked well in the past. It was a shame that she'd had to lay everything out, but wasn't it better than letting them present a substandard event?

When she made a commitment, she preferred to throw her whole heart and soul into it.

That was how she'd been raised, to always do her best and go the extra mile.

If Blake couldn't see that, it wasn't her fault. The Lord knew her heart.

The upcoming meeting with him for that tour of his new lodge and some preliminary work on the tables and the banner was preferable to sitting at home on a Friday night alone.

Especially with Jake in town again. For that, she was thankful.

It would be a pleasant distraction. Maybe she could figure out the mystery behind Blake's confusing words and actions.

She bent her head over the design, glad for the creative outlet, using a pencil to shade part of the train on the gown in the sketchbook containing many of her latest wedding fashions.

Tonight, they would finally have a chance to set their plans in motion for the youth group's fundraiser.

She'd already packed some table linens, craft supplies, and the banner, setting the boxes near the rear entrance.

When Blake arrived in his limo, she'd be ready.

Spreading the gospel would be a pleasant distraction from her problems, because no matter how many times she turned it over in her mind, she could not find any answers to her dilemma about what was wrong with her.

Something had to be wrong since each of her boyfriends had given up on her, and since the one who wasn't an actual boyfriend but pretended to be, had pronounced her all wrong for him.

A tapping sounded on her office door. Lula seldom knocked, and if she did, she generally burst into her office shortly after. Since the door didn't swing open, she called out while putting some finishing touches on her design. "Come in."

It was Samantha Braeburn who stepped inside. She smiled to see her neighbor. "Hi, Sam. How's Boscoe? Any new escapes lately?"

"Hey there, Hensley." She chuckled and rolled her eyes. "No, my furry boy has been behaving well lately. How's it going with you? Thought I'd pop on over and see how you and Blake are doing with the fundraiser planning."

Sam gave her a curious grin with her big brown eyes sparkling and wide.

"I was planning to speak to you on Sunday at church, but I'm glad you're here now." Hensley gestured toward one of the two seats on the other side of her desk.

Sam sat in one of the chairs and began rummaging through both front pockets on her dress. Finding a small gift box, she held it up and slid it across the desk toward Hensley. "I brought you one of my quarter necklaces to thank you for helping me with the dinner for you and Blake. "

“You didn’t have to do that.” Hensley returned a sheepish smile as she opened the box. “Aw, this is beautiful. Thank you so much. You’re very talented.”

“You’re welcome. A beautiful necklace for a beautiful friend.” Sam smiled with satisfaction and sat back in her seat. “I painted it blue to highlight the blue in your eyes.”

Tears pooled in Hensley’s eyes. “You have no idea how much I needed to hear that.” She swiped a tear away and continued to admire the lovely gift.

Sam’s brows furrowed. “In truth, I was hoping Blake might have told you how beautiful you are, but if he hasn’t, never mind that for now. He’ll see it soon enough.”

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“Oh, Blake and I, we’re just friends, really.” Hensley waved a hand, dismissing that subject. “He can be a little ... how shall I put it? Infuriating.”

Ack! She probably shouldn’t have shared that much. She shouldn’t open the floodgates to how much his words had hurt her and the swirl of confusion in her head and heart.

“Men sometimes have a gift for that. I could tell you stories about Tiff.” She shifted in her seat. “Have the two of you been able to make any progress with the fundraising efforts?” Sam rested her small hands in her lap and clasped them together, making her seem even more petite than she was.

“As a matter of fact, we’re meeting this evening to begin prepping his main lodge for the event.” She brought Sam up to speed on what they’d planned so far.

“Wow, it sounds like the two of you have made great progress. And it’s very kind of you to donate linens and real dishes.

” Sam seemed pleased, judging by the glint in her eyes.

“And yes, Tiff and I would be happy to introduce you to the youth group this coming Wednesday evening so the two of you can tell them what you’ve come up with so far and get them on board. ”

“Great. I guess Blake and I will see you at seven o’clock sharp in the youth room then.” Hensley jotted the date and time into her planner.

Sam leaned forward. "I'll drop off those clipboards at the lodge soon so you can attach the bidding sign-up sheets to them.

We have a bunch of extra clipboards in storage.

Sounds like they'll come in handy. I'll ask pastor to put a note about the event in the bulletin asking folks to make chili and donate items for the auction.

And yes, I'm sure Tiff will be happy to be the auctioneer at the event.

" Then she winked and gave Hensley another peculiar grin before rising from her seat.

Pausing at the door with her hand on the knob, she added, "Have fun tonight."

Before Hensley could do more than nod and return a wave, Sam slipped out of the office. Why did it seem as if Samantha was up to something regarding her and Blake?

It wouldn't work. Blake had seemed adamant that she wasn't his type, even if he was pretending to be her boyfriend. She wasn't so sure she could get past his objection to her, regardless of whatever he'd meant by it.

"YOU'RE SURE YOU DON'T want to try and find some friends to join us for the show? Four free tickets to a dinner and show are expensive these days." Tiff held up the four tickets to a dinner theater in nearby Gatlinburg.

Sam parted the front curtains and gazed across the street.

"I'm sure. As I said, I have a better idea.

And besides, I've already seen Pride two riding trails; an undeveloped plot for

archery; a boating dock with canoes for the creek; and Deerpark Lake with another boating dock and a pavilion nearby for picnics, cookouts, and campfires.

She took note of the barn and fenced corral he showed her, explaining where horses would soon fill the empty stalls.

He'd mentioned something about going to see some horses with Bing that they'd likely purchase.

Since they were limited on time, Blake showed her around the main lodge and its spacious dining room after the tour. There, they enjoyed the Chinese food when it was delivered. Floor-to-ceiling windows gave them a spectacular view of the wooded areas and mountains in the distance.

He'd built a fire in the stone fireplace while they waited on the food to arrive. When it came, he suggested they eat at the table closest to the fireplace. Oddly enough, the evening was turning out to be kind of romantic, but did he have the same perspective?

They talked about his ambitions for the landscaping and marketing of his property. There would be a grand opening when everything was complete. He said they were on target for a July grand opening.

She commented that she would pray everything went well.

Sitting up straighter, recalling something important, she leaned forward.

“Before I forget to mention it, Jake grew up in our church. His family still attends there. He'll likely be at every Sunday service now that he's returned to Dogwood Creek. ”

He stabbed a slice of the beef on his plate and managed to spear a piece of broccoli

onto his fork also. “Looks like I’ll be sitting with you on Sunday since I’m your new boyfriend.” Stealing a glance at her, he smiled.

“Probably for the best.” What else could she say to that, but his adorable dimples were showing again.

They’d have to arrange a phony break-up at some point, but she wouldn’t mention that now.

She was enjoying their dinner meeting too much.

With the crackling fire and the lodge dining room to themselves, it had been a relaxing meal.

She’d enjoyed the tour too. What a house he had built for himself!

The log cabin probably had as many bedrooms as the old grand Victorian she lived in.

Was he planning on having a large family someday?

“He hasn’t bothered you since Tuesday, has he?” Blake shifted in his seat, pausing before tasting more of his beef and broccoli dish.

She toyed with the sweet and sour chicken on her paper plate, stirring it around with her fried rice.

Would Jake’s call to ask her out aggravate him?

But what if Jake called again? She might as well tell him the truth, especially since she didn’t relish any interactions with her ex.

“Yes, as a matter of fact, he called this morning and asked if I’d consider dining with him at The Creek Grill. ”

“That takes some audacity after I told him I was your boyfriend.” His brows furrowed.

She nodded.

“And since you’re here with me, I assume you told him no.” He wore a smirk.

“Yes, I told him I had other plans and that I made it a rule not to date any of my ex-boyfriends. He had his chance.”

Blake sliced into more of his broccoli. “I would understand if you wanted to go out with him, but I gather that you don’t. I was trying to be helpful. While I’m being honest, maybe I was being a little protective. I guess I’ve grown fond of you since we’ve been working together on this project.”

He’d grown fond of her? He was being protective of her? She could take care of herself, but she didn’t know how to respond. It was rather sweet of him, so she simply smiled and stared at the food on her plate, her cheeks growing warm.

After the meal, Blake pointed out the wall he thought would work best for hanging photos of the youth group. Then he pointed out where they could hang the long banner. The wall for photos was one he’d had built-in with a corkboard for event organizers to use for displays like what they had in mind.

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Before arranging the photos on the corkboard wall, they decided to work on the banner since it required painting and drying time.

They spent half an hour stenciling the words onto the banner and then an hour painting each letter.

He had been better with a paintbrush and her crafting paints than she'd expected, so the time seemed to fly by while he told her about his life growing up in a penthouse in Manhattan.

They left the banner spread out on a couple of long tables to dry while they put white tablecloth linens and colorful blue and green table topper linens on all of the tables after hauling them inside from the limo.

"Why blue and green?" he'd asked.

He was right to ask. They hadn't talked about colors.

"I thought we'd go with the colors of the earth that we see on globes since it's a mission trip.

Sam added some photos of the Dominican Republic to the envelope with the photos.

"We could hang those too." She bit her lower lip.

"Why? Is it a problem? I didn't think you would mind about the colors since you didn't seem enthusiastic about using real linens. "

“No, your choice in colors is good.” He shrugged and raked a hand through his dark hair. “I’m fine with whatever you want. I was just curious. ”

Had his hair grown kind of cute and messy as they’d worked?

For a moment, she imagined herself running her fingers through his wavy brown hair.

And as they’d worked together to spread each cloth over the tables, their hands must have bumped into each other gobs of times, creating a magnetic pull between them that she couldn’t deny.

Somewhere along the way, she kicked off her shoes to provide relief to her throbbing feet. And was she a mess too, her hair all askew from the ride in his golf cart and all of their work?

After they had the tables arranged and covered with the cloths, including the long rectangular ones that would hold food and auction items, they hung the photographs using some thumb tacks from his office on the second floor.

She’d followed him upstairs to see the floors above since they hadn’t gone that far on the tour.

There were guest rooms on both the second and third floors, he had explained along the way.

Those rooms in the main lodge quadrupled his capacity for guests.

“Some are more like apartment suites, and others are more like hotel rooms.”

He showed her a few of the rooms. They were professionally decorated and filled with top-of-the-line furnishings. Impressive, to say the least.

Downstairs again, when they finished the photo wall, it was time to hang the banner that had dried.

He'd offered to drill some holes and use screws, but she suggested they tie string to the built-in banner ringholes.

Then they could loop the string around the base of two wall sconces on either side of the windows.

He nodded, hands on hips. "Works for me, 'Blue Eyes.'"

Smiling at her, those gorgeous dimples appeared in his cheeks again. 'Blue Eyes?' She was melting at the endearment. Her cheeks warmed and she glanced away so he wouldn't see her shy smile.

"That way we won't damage these nice log walls," she'd managed to point out .

And that's how she ended up on the ladder, since she had a specific method in mind. But then she lost her balance, teetered, then screamed, and then fell—directly into his muscular arms.

"Are you okay?" His voice sounded husky as he held her close against his chest.

She'd blinked, one arm flailing and the other clinging to his neck. "I am n-now." Her voice came out in a whisper as she managed to wrap her other arm around his neck too.

He'd held her against his chest for a few seconds. Both of them seemed stunned. Their lips were only inches apart and her gaze locked onto his. The man must work out every day to have muscles like those that held her so easily!

And that's when he bent his head ever so slightly and kissed her. The kiss continued as he gently lowered her to stand on tiptoe, her arms still wrapped around his neck.

Goodness, what a kiss! Gentle, hungry, and sweet.

He finally pulled himself away, raking a hand through his hair again, both of them breathing heavily. What had just happened between them?

They stood still, inches apart, staring at each other, letting their heartbeats settle.

"I thought I wasn't your type?" she finally blurted out in a soft voice, taking a step back. But she wore a coy smile. Maybe he wouldn't take her question the wrong way if she smiled and kept her voice low. But she had to know. She had to ask him, now .

"M-maybe I was wrong," he managed after a few seconds.

But the question begged to be asked, and her hands flew to her hips. "Why did you think I wasn't your type?"

"Well, you seem like, um, I don't know ... a business woman." His hand waved to one side. "You know, wrapped up in your career as the owner of Hensley's Wedding Creations. "

She nodded slowly and then tilted her chin. "That's true. I am wrapped up in my career. It probably saved me from total despair after Jake moved away, though I would have given it all up for him back then."

He didn't respond, but his eyes were locked on hers still, so she continued. "I think it's the one thing that saved me, in retrospect. I healed as I threw my all into the business I'd inherited from my grandmother. It really began to flourish. And now, I love what I do."

She paused, tilting her head to one side, waiting for him to speak. When he didn't, she pushed on, probing him for an answer. "Why does that bother you? Can't a woman have a career and a family?"

His feet apart, Blake rested his fists on each side of his belt. "I don't know. I'm not sure. It's not what I imagined, I guess."

"It's something each couple has to work through and talk out together, don't you think?"

I am the owner, after all. I can hire more people if I want to take on less responsibility.

Or if I decide I want to work on a part-time basis instead of full-time.

If I want to take a year off, I'm the boss.

I can make appropriate arrangements. If those are done right, I can take the time off.

You know this better than anyone, being a business owner yourself. "

Some bit of light or a ray of understanding seemed to flicker through his brown eyes as he gradually nodded. "Yes, you may be right."

His tone was gentle, contemplative. No apology though. Not an admission that he was wrong. But he was saying that maybe she was right.

At least that was something. A starting point.

She lifted her chin again, hands still on her hips.

“I know I’m right. Lots of women have successful careers and manage to juggle a family and household too.

It can be done. Many families wouldn’t even make it without two incomes.

My parents are one example of an exception to the rule.

My mother has never worked outside of the home, but when my father was between churches as a pastor, they decided to move back to Tennessee and live with my grandmother.

The land and the house are paid for. It’s all to go to my mother when my grandmother passes anyhow.

It’s how my Dad is able to work as a freelance columnist for The Gazette and how my mother is able to remain at home and run the household.

That’s what works for them. So, I’ve seen it work both ways. ”

He offered her a weak smile. “It’s something we could try to work through, I mean, if we were together. I’m not sure where I stand on it all anymore, to tell you the truth.”

Why did it seem as if he was holding something back when he stared at his shoes? Did this have something to do with a former girlfriend or something? The way he’d used the word anymore, as though referring to something from his past ...

She crossed her arms over her chest. “So, tell me, Blake Sterling, do all of your girlfriends have no job or career? Are they all completely dependent upon you? Oh, I forgot. You’re from Manhattan.

” She waved a hand. “Maybe they were all Manhattan socialites, dependent on their

families and trust funds?”

He winced. “No, but ... I mean, the sort of girls I was introduced to usually didn’t work for a living. One did. Our relationship didn’t last.”

“I see. Well, I’m not like other girls.” She leveled her gaze at him, keeping her voice firm but soft.

He chuckled, sounding relieved. “I’m glad to hear that. I think I’m beginning to understand this about you. I’m willing to talk through those decisions when and if the time comes, uh, I mean, if we were together.”

This seemed to be going a whole lot better. He must’ve been hurt in the past by the relationship he’d mentioned that hadn’t worked out, maybe like Jake had hurt her. She wouldn’t delve into it all now. It was growing late.

They’d done a lot for one evening. The banner was up.

The tables were nearly done and arranged.

They could put dishes on them closer to the event.

The photo wall looked great. But her back ached.

Her feet hurt. For the first time in weeks, she had some answers about Blake’s judgmental words and what he’d meant.

She was drained physically, except for the magnetic attraction that hung in the air between them, which had energized her emotionally.

He stepped closer again, closing the distance she’d put between them.

“Want to go on a real date?” He cleared his throat.

“I mean, would you consider allowing me to take you to a dinner theater to see *Pride & Prejudice* in Gatlinburg next Friday? I have four tickets. You could bring one of your sisters and I could invite my friend, Bing.”

Her lips curved as a smile spread across her face. “You mean, like a double date? To see a play based on my favorite book?”

He nodded as he fished around in his shirt pocket and produced the tickets, holding them up. “Yep. Tiff gave me the tickets. They include dinner and dessert, plus the show. Oh, and he said to dress up for the photo opportunity.”

That sounded nice. A first date and a couple photo.

That’d be something memorable for couple goals.

Plus, a play based on her favorite novel from the literary world.

Next to the Bible, it was her go-to book of choice and the source of all the silly daydreams her mother said took up too much space in her head.

Her smile widened. “I’d like that very much, especially if it includes another ride in your limo. I’ll ask Jen if she’d like to accompany us as Bing’s date.”

“It’s a date then.” He glanced at his watch. “Let’s get you home before your parents start to panic. I’ll drive you in my pickup since I sent Wickham home a while ago. It’s almost eleven-thirty and I should have you home before midnight.”

She found her purse and shoes, slipping into them. “Thank you. That’s wise. Grandmother will be counting the minutes between snores, and she can be quite the

informant. ”

He chuckled and began flipping lights off as he took her by the hand and led her outside of the dining room and down the wide front hall toward the main entrance. “I guess we don’t have to pretend to be dating anymore.”

She couldn’t help but smile at his remark. Evidently, they were sort of officially dating. She could hardly wait to tell Jen. How nice it was to have a gentleman holding her hand again. He held the door open.

As they stepped out onto the deck that led to a wooden walkway and the parking lot, she stole a glance up at him. “So, there isn’t anything wrong with me? You were just concerned about my dedication to my career. I assure you, my career would never take first place over someone I cared about.”

He stopped walking and turned to face her. “No, there’s nothing wrong with you, Hensley. I just have a bad habit of occasionally sticking my foot in my mouth and having everything come out all wrong. I hope you can forgive me.”

Weeks of tension drained from her shoulders.

Speechless and stunned by his profession, she could only nod, a mixture of relief and other questions floating around somewhere deep in the back of her mind.

It was great that nothing was wrong with her.

Nothing was wrong with her! She had an urge to hold her arms out and spin around in a dance under the starry sky, but that would divulge how much it had bothered her.

Her heart was soaring. He didn’t find her unattractive, too petite, too short, too curvy, too fat, or too skinny ... or a myriad of other things that had crossed her mind.

But would he accept her career as a wedding fashion designer and shop owner? Would he curtail her dreams or clip her wings? Would he support her dreams and ambitions as she intended to support his? Only time would tell.

Maybe it's why Jake had broken up with her.

Maybe he hadn't intended to impose his career ambitions while making her sacrifice hers.

Jake hadn't asked her about how they could make it work.

He'd simply broken things off with little explanation other than he didn't want a long-distance relationship and wasn't ready to settle down into a marriage.

Maybe it had been his problem and not her all along.

Whatever the case, maybe she and Blake had found solid footing by agreeing to talk about this if their relationship grew into something more serious.

They'd cross that bridge when and if they came to it.

It was a start.

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There are shortcuts to happiness, and dancing is one of them.

–Vicki Baum

PALM SUNDAY ROLLED around and Hensley's ears perked up when Reverend Jameson landed squarely on the subject of the importance of forgiveness.

She was expecting him to continue talking about how Jesus had entered Jerusalem on a donkey to the praise of a people who would then crucify Him the next week.

Somewhere along the way, he'd wandered onto the topic that weighed most on her heart.

Forgiving folks when they trespassed against us.

Which reminded her she should forgive Blake for all the weeks of despair he'd caused her.

Hadn't Blake settled the matter on Friday night?

Maybe it ran deeper than that. Maybe she'd been struggling with abandonment issues because of Jake and Michael as well.

Could it be that God was gently putting His finger on her heart, making sure she didn't carry the weight of unforgiveness any longer?

After all, a soldier did not entangle himself with the affairs of this life.

Getting tangled up over things in the past would distract her from serving the Lord and bring conflict into future relationships.

It was time to release everything once and for all.

With Blake seated beside her, his hand covering hers, Hensley did her best not to squirm or shift in her seat.

The pastor was saying we could not expect to receive forgiveness from the Lord if we didn't forgive those who trespassed against us.

She'd heard it many times before, but okay.

Lord, I forgive Blake for his words, and I also forgive Jake and Michael for abandoning me.

Phew, that was better. Her heart did seem a whole lot lighter.

She stole a glance at Blake. Was he also impacted by the topic? Maybe he could release whatever hurt his past held for him as well. In time, he would tell her more. For now, she was content to sit beside him on a Sunday morning surrounded by friends and family who gave them curious looks.

Not so long ago, impatience might have taken hold of her.

At her age of twenty-five, she cherished the excitement of their new romance unfold naturally, without forcing uncomfortable discussions about painful memories.

Not that her interest in his past wasn't piqued, but something about his aloof manner and quiet ways were at work, setting an unrushed pace between them.

Since Bing sat in the same row, Hensley had motioned for Jen to sit beside Bing in anticipation of next Friday's double date.

She didn't have much time to explain everything to Jen that morning, but when the rest of the household was running around getting ready for church, Hensley waved Jen inside her room when her sister knocked, fully dressed—minus a belt.

Closing the door, she'd had about five minutes to bring her sister up to speed and loan her the perfect leather belt.

Jen's eyes had widened as she took in the latest news about the progression in Hensley's relationship with Blake and their plans for a double date.

Saturday had been busier than usual and she hadn't been able to mention it to Jen prior to then.

Her sister finished putting the belt on and turned toward her with a smile.

“Yes, I'll go along as Bing's date on Friday.

I'm glad you and Blake are going out on a real date.

I was beginning to think you two wouldn't get around to it, but I'm thrilled! ”

Hensley opened the door for them to head downstairs into the chaos below while they were still talking, but Lula's voice echoed from below, somewhere on the second floor.

Something about her insisting that MaryAnne lend her a pair of slingback heels.

They both knew MaryAnne had no intention of parting with those shoes.

Kit was calling Ruffles, attempting to get him inside the house.

Moments later, Father's voice had bellowed up the staircase from the foyer that it was time to go.

The household seemed to burst apart at the seams as one by one, the Fitzwilliam daughters, parents, and their grandmother filed out of the front door.

They had piled into various vehicles and made the short drive to Dogwood Creek's Community Church.

Sipping hot coffee and keeping her eyes on the wet spring roads drenched by an early morning rain on the way to church prevented Hensley from much of any further discussion with Jen.

But after the service, Hensley introduced Blake and Bing to her parents and Grandmother while her family congregated in the aisle near their pew. "Mom, Dad, Grandmother, I'd like you to meet Blake Sterling and his friend, Charles Eaton. Everyone calls him Bing."

Jen stood beside Bing, a sheepish grin on her face.

Hensley glanced at Blake and his friend.

Had she introduced them properly? Their smiles and handshakes told her she had.

She gestured toward her parents and Grandmother one at a time.

"This is my mother, Emma Fitzwilliam; my father, Reverend Aaron Fitzwilliam; and my grandmother, Virginia Lonsdale. Everyone calls her Ginny."

With that out of the way, she prayed they didn't invite him to lunch.

They shouldn't rush things. An Easter dinner invite would be okay though.

Would they be satisfied with an introduction for now?

They'd seen him coming and going from the house, but they'd always been in other parts of the house.

It was time, especially since he was no longer just someone she was working with on a project for the church.

Nor was he pretending to date her to protect her from Jake, whom she'd caught staring at her during the service several times. No, they had a real date lined up now.

Her mother's brows arched and Grandmother's eyes widened. Her father turned his head, leaning an ear toward the young men, particularly Blake .

"Nice to meet you, Reverend and Mrs. Fitzwilliam, Mrs. Lonsdale ..." Blake stepped aside when he finished shaking their hands so Bing could do the same. He echoed Blake's sentiments.

"My father still holds his license to preach, but he's technically retired from preaching since we moved here from Kentucky.

Now he does freelance writing for The Gazette .

" Hensley tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as the handshaking wrapped up.

She'd been tempted not to introduce her father as a reverend, but it was probably best that she did since he conducted weddings once a month in Gatlinburg.

“I believe I’ve already met this nice young man a few times.” Grandmother winked at him, and he smiled in return. “It’s delightful to meet you too, Bing .”

“Yes, I believe we have met before.” Blake gave her a nod. “Wonderful to see you again, Mrs. Lonsdale.”

Phew! It seemed as if he’d hit a homerun with Grandmother, judging by the way she sparkled as she spoke to Blake.

Despite her formal and old-fashioned ways, she had a way of breaking the ice.

She’d always favored Hensley, lavishing her with special attention, and even leaving her boutique as an inheritance to her.

She’d known her eldest granddaughter, Jen, didn’t seek that kind of responsibility.

And Hensley was the second eldest, after all.

Their other sisters hovered nearby, but Hensley didn’t introduce all of them since they’d met Blake before and currently seemed distracted by something else. Plus, they’d seen Bing around at church. Instead, she nodded toward them. “I’m sure you’ve seen my sisters around.”

Blake nodded, loosening his tie. “Yes, we’ve met.”

Bing added, “You have a beautiful family, Mr. and Mrs. Fitzwilliam.”

Her mom and Grandmother smiled, and Father said, “Thank you.”

Emma Fitzwilliam, Hensley’s mom, formerly a Lonsdale, now offered them a welcoming smile. “Do you boys have anywhere to go for Easter dinner? If not, I hope

you'll consider joining us after church. ”

That was nice of her mother to do instead of asking them twenty questions like she sometimes did when meeting one of her new boyfriends.

Blake turned toward Bing, who nodded and then turned a pleasant smile in Jen's direction. Blake put his arm around Hensley's shoulders and turned back to her mom. “We'd be delighted to join you. Bing's sister may be with us though.”

“Bring her along too,” Grandmother said as Mother nodded.

“Plenty of food for one more. You're in for a treat.” Hensley's father grinned, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned toward the men. “There will be a big spread. Save room for lots of ham, dressed eggs, and pie. Lots of pie.”

“Looking forward to it, sir.” Blake nodded to her father who then said something polite about getting Grandmother to the car.

Blake took the opportunity to pull Hensley aside as her parents began herding her sisters and Grandmother toward the main doors.

Jen and Bing chatted quietly. Ahead of her parents, what were Lula and Kit giggling and carrying on about?

Blake glanced at them when their laughter echoed off the ceiling.

Hensley's brows furrowed and her cheeks warmed with embarrassment at their unladylike manners, but thankfully, he was searching for someone else.

Hensley followed his gaze, discovering it was Jake on whom his gaze rested, likely to ensure her ex was leaving. She couldn't help but smile shyly at the way Blake

safeguarded her. Jake tossed Blake a glare from near the main entrance before following his parents outside.

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Was Wickham—standing to one side of the church entrance—also staring at Jake?

Wickham allowed his hand to rest on his holster, his firearm showing from under his suit jacket.

He'd always kept his suit jacket buttoned, never allowing his firearm to show at church before, not that she could recall.

That might cause a stir among folks. Had Blake asked Wickham to keep an eye on her ex?

It wouldn't surprise her any, though she didn't think Jake would be aggressive.

Especially since he was an attorney, and especially not at church.

But all the same, it was sweet to be looked after by Blake.

Lula and Kit reached Wickham's side and said something that made him chuckle, so Blake's driver didn't see Jake leaving.

They were doing too good of a job of distracting him.

Lula couldn't resist a man in uniform, but she and Kit were behaving like silly schoolgirls, the way they were carrying on.

If only Mother would nudge them along instead of pausing behind to indulge them.

She turned back to Blake when he released a sigh, likely because the now nearly empty congregation room had finally cleared of the tension Jake's presence had brought.

Once Jake had a new love interest, tensions would improve.

Blake turned toward her and lifted her hand to his lips, brushing the back of it with a light kiss.

Woah! Why did her knees seem weak? This man—who had infuriated her for two weeks—now made her swoon.

She'd be in a daydream for the rest of the afternoon.

Maybe the entire week ahead. And she was sure her cheeks were blushing deep red.

Keeping his voice low, he smiled at her with tenderness in his eyes.

“So, Blue Eyes, I'll plan on meeting you here on Wednesday at seven, but Bing and I will pick you up on Friday in the limo.

We should probably leave at six if we want to be on time for the play.

I'd take you to lunch this afternoon, but Bing and I were just going to grab some sandwiches from a drive-thru along the way.

We're heading out to purchase those horses I mentioned.

It's a long drive, over an hour away. It will likely take most of the day there and back.
”

Hensley nodded. “That’s fine. I’m planning to take it easy, but Jen and I will be ready on Friday at six.

I’ll see you on Wednesday at seven when we talk to the youth group about the fundraiser.

Maybe I can find somewhere we can go after the play for a little dancing on Friday night. Do you like to dance? ”

Blake cocked his head to one side. “I do. That sounds nice. I don’t know many country line dances though. They tried to teach me in Wyoming, but I was hopeless.”

She laughed.

“For you, I’ll try, if it’s country dancing you have in mind,” he reassured, fidgeting with his cufflinks.

Goodness, he sure dressed nicely for Sunday services! How handsome he appeared in a suit and tie. “I’m not sure where yet ... but I’ll let you know.” She had some ideas, but at present, it was his musky cologne scent thrilling her senses.

He squeezed her hand gently. “Bing and I will walk you and Jen to your car.”

She’d follow him anywhere if he kept wearing that cologne, but the four of them gradually moved toward the main doors.

Was it a signature scent? She managed to find her tongue as they made it to the entrance.

“Sure. Uh, Jen’s riding with me. I’m parked beside Lula’s car,” she explained.

“There are so many of us and we’re ready at different times.

We take three or four cars to get everyone here close to on time.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, my sister, Shelly ... she hogged the bathroom. Brandon and I had to wait our turn. He was older, so I was usually last unless I managed to sneak in first.” He held one of the church doors open. “I can’t imagine having four sisters. We wouldn’t have made it anywhere on time.”

She smiled at this glimpse of his childhood.

They saw Lula, Kit, and MaryAnne piling into Lula’s sporty blue car in the parking lot.

Her parents and Grandmother were already in her dad’s car and pulling out of the lot.

When they reached her vehicle, Blake held her door open while Bing opened Jen’s passenger door.

After settling in behind the steering wheel and turning the engine on, Blake leaned in and kissed her when she lowered the window. Bing closed Jen’s door too. Hensley waited while Bing and Jen finished chatting .

“See you Wednesday, Blue Eyes.” Blake stepped away and Bing joined him, the two heading to Blake’s limo where Wickham waited.

Hensley released a long sigh. Was she in a daydream? Such a gentleman! Not at all as he had behaved when she’d first met him.

Bing seemed equally enthralled with Jen. She leaned back against the seat’s headrest, giving her sister a sideways glance. Jen was speechless.

“Well, what do you think of Bing?” She pulled herself from her daydream, shifting out of park into drive.

Jen smiled, biting her lower lip. “He’s a dream! Lula would say I’m in love.” Jen laughed softly.

Hensley smiled. “So is Blake. I keep pinching myself to have met him, though I admit I wasn’t too keen on him at first.”

“What brought you around?” Jen arched her brows.

“I don’t know exactly.” She waved a hand.

“He can still infuriate me sometimes. I think he has some expectations about not getting seriously involved with someone married to a career. But something tells me that his old-fashioned ideas stem from a past relationship. Anyhow, we talked and decided that’s a bridge we’ll cross if we come to it. ”

“I see.” Jen released another dreamy sigh. “Bing sure does seem like a sweet guy.”

“He does. You two seem to be hitting it off.” Hensley stole a glance at her sister who now clamped her mouth shut, which meant she didn’t plan to discuss it any further for now.

Jen would be perfect for Bing. Ha, or maybe for Blake!

Jen’s heart’s desire was to become a stay-at-home wife and mother.

She was an excellent cook and didn’t mind keeping house.

Sure, she could switch easily to don a business hat when necessary, like when she

helped at the boutique or did catering.

Jen was going to make her Mr. Right extremely happy with her homemaking skills.

She was softspoken, sweet, full of genuine kindness and everything good, and the gentlest of creatures .

Hensley, lost in how far she and Blake had journeyed in their relationship, drove them the rest of the way home in comfortable silence and reflection. Sure, it would be nice to see Blake again on Wednesday, but it was their date on Friday that held most of her excitement.

Was her heart beating faster in anticipation? What on earth would she wear? Something extra nice for their first real date.

FRIDAY FINALLY ARRIVED , but all week it had seemed as if it never would.

Wednesday evening had gone well enough. Blake had stood at her side, nodding at all of the right times when she addressed the youth.

By a show of hands, were all on board—maybe because they were curious about Blake’s limo and that log cabin resort.

June Milton was scheduled for the closing shift, giving Hensley and Jen extra time to get ready.

Hensley chose a cream dress with a pink floral print design and cream heels.

Jen selected a mint green dress with a white peplum jacket and gray heels.

They would wear dress coats since the weather would be nippy by the time it grew

dark.

When the limousine pulled into the gravel lane leading to the house, Lula squealed from her front-facing room on the second floor, alerting the household. Jen and Hensley were putting the finishing touches on their makeup in Hensley's room on the third floor.

Lula's footsteps clicked as she ran downstairs to answer the door. About two minutes later, she climbed the staircase to reiterate the news of their arrival. Her new spring sandals already irritated Hensley with the way they reverberated through the halls.

Their middle sister flew into Hensley's room without knocking. "They're here, they're here!" Breathless, she paused, glancing from one to the other. "Jenny, your new admirer, Bing, is here, and he arrived in Hensley's darling Blake's limo, driven by the handsome Lewis Wickham. "

She fell back onto Hensley's bed and let out a long sigh followed by, "Oh, Wickham! When will you notice me?" She rolled over onto her stomach. "Hensley, you must put a good word in for me with Wickham."

Hensley gasped. "I will do nothing of the sort. I barely know him."

Lula protested. "But he's been driving you and Blake around for weeks. And he's so very handsome! Have you seen that uniform he wears and the gun he carries? You know I can't resist a man in uniform. I am sure that I am in love."

"Yet another reason why I won't be mentioning my little sister to him.

" Hensley smiled at the reflection of her sister in her vanity mirror.

Lula obviously had a crush on Wickham. She shook her head before widening her

eyes as she applied a final layer of mascara.

When she finished and twisted the cap shut, she spun around on her vanity seat.

“What about that boy you mentioned a few weeks ago ... Mark?”

Lula sat up on the edge of the bed and waved her hand. “That was before I met Lewis Wickham.”

“You’re a wonderful photographer, but you’re a terrible and fickle flirt!” Hensley sighed and rose to slip into her cream heels. They weren’t too high, and they had chunky heels and sturdy straps around the ankles. Great for keeping one’s balance when dancing.

“I hate to break it to you, Lula, but Hensley is right. You are flirtatious and boy crazy.” Jen, standing at Hensley’s dresser, sprayed perfume on her wrists and neck.

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“You’re no fun!” Lula rolled her eyes and released an exasperated sound. “It’s been ages since any of us had nice dates. And these put all the others to shame. It’s awfully selfish of you not to think of your middle sister. Try not to keep them waiting forever.”

Jen, her voice calm, gave their younger sister one of her older-sister looks. “Lula, be a dear. Try and curb your enthusiasm about Wickham. You can put your energy to good use by going downstairs and telling our dates we’ll be right down. ”

“I will, because I am nice, unlike some people around here.” Lula gave a harrumph and then jumped up from the bed, leaving them in peace. Her footsteps echoed down the hall as she stomped toward the staircase.

Hensley ignored Lula’s pouting and reached for her pink clutch. Their middle sister was being spoiled, petulant, boy crazy Lula, as usual. They assessed their final looks at Hensley’s oval mirror. Satisfied, they descended the staircase to greet their dates.

Meanwhile, their three younger sisters gathered around the foyer. They’d apparently kept Bing and Blake laughing in their absence. Lula kept peeking out of the windows on each side of the door to wave at Wickham. She brazenly opened the front door and hollered his name, waving. “Lewis! Lewis!”

Then she grinned. Lewis Wickham must’ve waved in return.

Lula stepped back inside, smiling as if she’d been crowned by the Queen of England.

Hensley was thankful when Grandmother called out, asking Lula to fetch her basket

of yarn.

Their parents had gone on a date of their own, but nothing slipped past Grandmother.

She knew Lula was the ringleader of all the silliness in the household.

Before any more silliness could occur, Blake held his arm toward Hensley.

Leaning close when she reached his side, he smiled approvingly. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Her cheeks warmed. “You’re looking handsome yourself in your blazer, tie, and the blue Oxford.”

“Thank you. Ready?” Blake glanced at Jen and Bing, who nodded, and then Hensley again.

Hensley smiled. “We are.”

“Don’t be out too late,” Grandmother called after them.

Bing and Jen followed her and Blake outside to the limo where Wickham held the rear passenger door open.

Soon, they were situated inside the limo.

The ride turned joyous when Blake surprised everyone by opening a mini-fridge and drawing out a bottle of chilled sparkling pear juice.

He served it in real glass champagne flutes stowed in one of several private compartments.

Soon they were laughing and toasting each other, setting a celebratory tone for the milestone evening of their first dates.

Bing held up his glass with a grin. “To first dates.”

Blake didn’t hesitate when he turned to gaze into Hensley’s eyes. “To first dates and meeting the most beautiful ladies in Dogwood Creek. The finest Tennessee beauties.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Jen smiled. Seconds later, she tapped her glass against Bing’s.

Hensley found herself lost in Blake’s chocolate eyes, those dimples appearing as she tipped her glass toward his.

Did he truly consider her a Tennessee beauty?

Perhaps she benefited the most from his healing words after doubting herself for so many weeks.

Tonight, she could put those fears and insecurities to rest. With a handsome, successful man of faith such as Blake at her side, why should she continue to harbor doubts about herself?

God had made her beautiful, but perhaps He was navigating her toward Blake instead of Jake or Michael for a reason.

Was Blake the man the Lord had set aside for her? Jake and Michael hadn’t cared much about missions or evangelism the way Blake did. That fact alone began to sink into her spirit.

The four of them clanked their glasses together and sipped some of the sweet refreshing liquid.

She was glad Blake hadn't brought alcohol along.

It was something she and Jen had given up for the Lord during their teen years when they were both baptized.

She counted it as a testament to Blake's faith, appreciating the fact that none of them had to ask why he had selected a sparkling pear cider instead of an alcoholic beverage.

"Did you find a place for dancing after the play?" Blake balanced his glass on his knee .

Hensley glanced at her sister, and they exchanged a smile about the surprise they had planned. "Yes and no. We improvised, but I hope you'll like our idea."

Blake's brow arched. "Ah, well, I love surprises."

"I'm sure it will be fun, whatever it is," Bing agreed.

"I'll have a word with Wickham about where to drive us when it's time to leave the theater," Hensley said, "if it's all right."

"Of course." Blake tapped his chin. "Now you've got my curiosity up."

Hensley laughed. "You'll just have to wait, but I think it will be worth it."

"Will you give us any hints, Jen?" Bing leaned toward her sister.

Jen pressed her lips together and pretended to twist a lock over them. Shaking her head, she grinned, pretending to throw the imaginary key away. "No hints from me."

“No hints!” Blake playfully protested. “That’s not fair. We’d like at least one clue if we must wait until after the play.”

Hensley eyed Blake, tilting her head to one side. “I suppose we could give you one hint.” She turned toward Jen. “What do you say, Jen? Shall we give them one tiny hint?”

“I suppose one won’t hurt,” Jen relented. “Go ahead, Hensley. Give them a clue.”

“All right, boys. Let me think for a moment.” Hensley dipped her chin and her brows furrowed as she silently debated on what would be an ideal hint. Then she pursed her lips and smiled. “Track twenty-nine. But that’s the only hint we’ll give you until the surprise is revealed.”

Jen chuckled. “That’s a great clue!”

Bing leaned his head to one side. “Hmm. Track twenty-nine? I’m completely baffled.”

“No idea ...” Blake shrugged.

“Looks like we’re here,” Jen informed them a few minutes later as the limo turned into the theater’s parking lot .

Soon, they piled outside of the limo and their dates ushered them inside the dinner theater via a special line.

Hundreds of people lined up to enter the building in various other lines, but since they had V.I.P.

tickets, their line didn’t last long before they were led to a photographer and his crew.

An assistant stepped forward to help position them and asked which background and what kind of photos they wanted.

Blake turned to Hensley. “Whatever you’d like, ladies.”

Hensley smiled. “Thank you, Blake. How about one with all four of us with that English country house background, and another of Bing and Jen, and one of just us two?”

“Sounds good to me,” Jen agreed.

“We can do that,” the assistant said, motioning them forward, positioning them efficiently.

The photographer snapped their photos, rearranging them for each one.

Hensley could hardly wait to see how they would turn out, especially since Kit had curled and styled their hair, pulling some hair back and pinning flowers in place over their brunette locks.

It wasn’t easy pulling Kit away from her book reading time to style their hair early enough for the date, but she’d done a nice job.

Next, they were led to the V.I.P. section near the front and center of the stage. Someone would bring their photos out to them later, the hostess explained as she seated them at a table for four. They had a spectacular view of the stage.

Their hostess introduced their waitress who poured them glasses of southern sweet tea and water.

She gave them a basket wrapped with linen and filled with warm flaky biscuits and

cornbread squares.

She slid a crock of whipped butter and a dish of strawberry preserves and another of grape jam onto the table.

“I’ll be back with your dinners soon,” she said before moving on to the next table of patrons.

The place was filling up as they each buttered their bread choices.

“So, have you and Blake been friends for a long time?” Jen posed the question with an arched brow as she leaned toward Bing.

Bing nodded as he slathered butter on some cornbread. “We go way back. We both attended the same private grammar school together through high school along with our siblings, and ultimately Othello Business College, a fairly prestigious business college in Manhattan.”

“And what brought you to Dogwood Creek?” Hensley had been curious about their friendship too.

“When Blake attended a wedding that took place here in Gatlinburg last year for some friends from the area, he spotted the property for sale. Then he called and asked if I’d accept the role of Vice President for his property venture in building Deerpark Cabins.

Maybe we’ll expand into other areas later.

I saw it as a chance to get out of the city and live in the beauty of the mountains covered with pines, rivers, creeks, lakes, plenty of fresh air .

.. God's glory revealed in every direction we look.

” He waved a hand to one side. “I jumped at the opportunity. It was my chance to get out of my father's hotel empire and into something more my own. ”

“My sentiments exactly.” Blake buttered one of the golden brown, flaky biscuits.

“I'd been looking for a way out of my father's business too.

While I haven't completely escaped, this has been a way for Bing and me to strike out on our own.

It wasn't easy working for my father. He had some atheistic and worldly views that didn't sit well with me. ”

“When did you come to know the Lord?” Hensley tilted her head toward Blake as she clasped her glass of sweet tea.

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Blake smiled, a faraway look evident in his brown eyes.

“I was saved when I was nine years old at a Vacation Bible School event one summer. It was right here in Tennessee while I was visiting my grandparents on their twelve-acre property in Ashford.” He paused and tasted some of his biscuit.

“My siblings and I would visit for a few weeks every summer when we were kids. They had some horses we loved to ride. And a creek for fishing and swimming. We always loved coming here. Naturally, I was drawn to the state when I saw the property for Deerpark Cabins.”

“For me, it was at the Methodist church our folks took us to in Manhattan. The same one Blake’s family attended,” Bing explained. “I was a little older than Blake when I gave my heart to the Lord at age twelve. Just in time to save myself from making a lot of mistakes during my teen years.”

Blake grinned. “That’s the truth. Bing’s dedication kept us out of many troubles over the years. Neither of us drank. We didn’t do drugs or any of those things. It was like the Lord protected us.”

Hensley nodded and exchanged glances with her sister.

It seemed as if their dates were honorable men.

Maybe Blake was someone she could fall in love with after all.

But before she could continue pondering the matter, the waitress returned with their

plates of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, gravy, green beans with ham, corn on the cob, slaw, and three-bean salad.

Bing offered to bless the meal and at the same time, he prayed over their time together while all four of them held hands.

A little while later, their dates purchased a single rose for each of them when someone selling long-stemmed red roses passed by their table. Hensley drank in the fragrance of the rose Blake gave her. Jen smiled too and then gazed in appreciation at Bing.

“Thank you, Blake. You didn’t have to do that ...”

“I wanted to,” he replied, covering her hand with his.

Before she could respond, the lights in the theater dimmed, the velvet curtains parted, and the play began while they ate the feast spread out before them.

They laughed a lot during the performance, especially at the antics of the Bennett sisters, their mother, and the vicar.

The acting was excellent. Hensley was impressed at how easy it was to hear the actors, their line adaptations from the book, and the quality of the sound system .

The waitress refilled their tea and checked on them a few times.

Later, she brought them cups of coffee and plates of warm apple pie or strawberry shortcake for dessert.

During the romantic scenes, Hensley enjoyed that Blake made eye contact with her several times and sometimes put his arm around her.

He and Bing were both attentive, making sure she and Jen had everything they desired.

When the waitress cleared away their plates, Blake held her hand.

When their shoulders or knees brushed, a tingling sensation reminded her of the magnetic pull between them.

During a brief intermission, someone brought them copies of the photos they'd taken earlier.

Blake purchased copies for her and some for himself.

Bing paid for copies for Jen and some for himself too.

They would each leave with a group photo and their respective couple photos.

When the play concluded, they joined the audience in giving a standing ovation for the superb performances. They had been thoroughly absorbed and entertained throughout the evening.

It was dark outside when they emerged from the theater at about ten o'clock.

The fresh evening breeze felt good on their faces, but they were eager to climb back inside the limo so they could head to the surprise that kept Blake and Bing baffled.

They didn't have far to walk since Blake's driver had pulled up close to the exit doors.

"Hensley has some instructions for you about our next part of the evening, Wickham," Blake explained as he removed his tie, giving Hensley a nod of

encouragement.

Hensley smiled and stepped up to Wickham, beckoning him aside. She whispered the directions, asking him to drive them to her shop on the corner of Gooseberry Lane and Dogwood Drive in Dogwood Creek.

“Got it. Yes, ma’am.” Wickham saluted her with a smile, tipping his hat .

Sliding into the seat beside Blake, she joined the others in the back of the limo and the driver closed the door. She texted MaryAnne to ensure the surprise was ready since she’d played a role in their plan.

Hensley smiled when her cell lit up with her sister’s reply. “MaryAnne said everything is a go and waiting for us.”

Blake covered Hensley’s hand with his. “I hope you ladies didn’t go to too much trouble.”

“Not at all,” she reassured him. “Any guesses yet as to the surprise?”

He glanced at Bing, who shook his head. Then he turned back to her. “No clue.”

Jen and Hensley smiled at each other, both resisting the urge to laugh.

Jen turned toward Bing. “You’ll see. We think you’ll both enjoy it.”

THIRTY MINUTES LATER , they arrived at Hensley’s Wedding Creations.

Wickham parked and then opened a door for them.

They spilled out onto the sidewalk, and Hensley, with keys in hand, hurried to unlock

the boutique.

When they were all inside, she locked the doors again while Jen turned on a few lights inside.

Hensley kept all the blinds closed. It would be more private that way even though they wouldn't be in the front room.

She led them through the door that led into the stockroom and her sewing area where she took her designs from mere sketches on paper to real life gowns.

She and Jen hung their dress coats on some hooks near the door.

The stockroom was organized with shelving for rolls and bolts of silk, satin, lace, and other fabrics.

A large, square, fabric-cutting island took up much of the space in the center of the room across from her long sewing desk.

Along an empty wall with gold and white wallpaper to their far right and some shelving containing extra items for weddings such as candles and vases, there was plenty of space for dancing.

MaryAnne had brought her record player over and placed it on a stand.

Only it wasn't a typical record player. Following her, their dates spotted it right away. That couldn't be helped since it was large and noticeable.

Blake stepped forward, nearing the old-fashioned record player, his brow rising as he took in the shiny copper horn with its raised rose design embellishments. "An old-time Victrola?"

“Is it a phonograph or one of those things they called gramophones?” Bing grinned, following for a closer look.

“Does it use electricity, or do we have to wind a handle?” Blake searched to see if it was plugged in.

Hensley and Jen laughed at the way their dates fired questions in rapid succession, but it was Hensley who spoke up.

“Yes, it’s like a retro-gramophone, except it’s modern.

It’s wired for electricity and it’s even Bluetooth ready.

But see this pile of records?” Hensley patted the pile of records MaryAnne had also brought, and the men nodded.

“This is my grandmother’s private collection.

Many of these songs are from the 1940s.”

Hensley turned the machine on and sorted through the record jackets until she found the one with the “Chattanooga Choo-Choo” by Glenn Miller.

Setting the record on the player, she lifted the needle to the right place.

While she operated the record player, Jen lit two candles and dimmed the lighting.

The music began streaming. When the men heard the words “track twenty-nine” in the first few lines of the song, they grinned and laughed.

Now they understood the hint she’d given them earlier.

“I love big band music,” Blake announced as she stepped up to his side. He wore a wide smile, and his eyes were already dancing. “Would you care to dance, Miss Fitzwilliam?”

Hensley reached for Blake’s hand, pulling him into their first dance.

She used all the moves she’d learned over the years from her mother and grandmother.

Jen did the same, pulling Bing into a dance too.

The boys spun them around, dipped them, and turned them this way and that at all of the best times, or so it seemed.

Hensley enjoyed the fact that they’d either had a few lessons or had seen enough old-time dancing on television to muddle through without much trouble.

When the song ended, Hensley put another record on. “This one is from 1943 and it’s Harry James. I love it because it’s romantic and slow, perfect for dancing. It’s called, ‘I Had the Craziest Dream.’”

She returned to Blake’s side. He pulled her close as they swayed to the music a few feet away from Jen and Bing. Blake clasped her hand, and she leaned her cheek against his strong chest.

How sweet the night was as they danced to Perry Como’s “Prisoner of Love,” Frank Sinatra’s “Five Minutes More,” and “A Little Bird” by Evelyn Knight. “I’ve Got a Gal in Kalamazoo” was another Glenn Miller favorite they played.

They ended the evening with “Time on My Hands” by Peter Knight and His Orchestra, or so the record jacket said, and “I’ll Be Seeing You” by Bing Crosby.

Another Bing ! Hensley bit her lower lip, recalling many past daydreams of her Mr. Darcy.

It seemed as if she was dancing in her Mr. Darcy's arms.

Would she wake from this daydream? Was Blake for real? Was he her Mr. Darcy?

And judging by the gazes Bing gave her sister, she guessed those two could easily fall in love at any minute.

Would she too fall in love with Blake? Or would they only end up breaking apart after quarreling about her wedding design career and the boutique she managed?

Suspecting she had already begun to fall for him, Hensley bit her lower lip.

Could she risk breaking her heart a third time because this otherwise wonderful man resented the time she spent on her career?

As they continued to dance, she dismissed her concerns for another day. The evening had been too special, and she knew all too well that tomorrow would come soon enough.

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I was one way ... and now I am different. And the thing
that happened in between ... was Him.

—Mary Magdalene, “The Chosen”

“PLEASE, SAY THAT WE may invite Wickham inside to enjoy our Easter dinner too. It doesn’t seem right to make him sit outside while we enjoy this feast.” Lula waved a hand around the kitchen, gesturing toward the island where a number of casserole dishes and platters waited to be served.

There was a corn casserole, a homemade macaroni and cheese, a sweet potato casserole, green beans, sweet corn, and a dish of almondine asparagus.

The smell of cloves and brown sugar wafted from the juicy ham roasting in the oven.

Brown gravy simmered next to boiling potatoes on the stovetop.

Soon, Jen would mash the potatoes into a cloud of fluffy buttered deliciousness.

Pies Grandmother had baked took up most of the kitchen table in the breakfast nook.

“I don’t see why not, as long as Blake doesn’t object.

” Mother wiped her hands on her apron after spooning whipped cream onto a dozen dessert dishes filled with cherry gelatin.

“But please finish helping Kit and MaryAnne with setting the dining room table first while I top these with a cherry. We’re almost ready to eat. ”

Hensley glanced at Blake. He stood near the dessert table surveying the pies while she balanced a pecan pie in one hand and an apple pie in her other, about to carry them out to the buffet sideboard in the dining room.

She’d return for the cherry and apple pies next.

He seemed to be gazing at the lemon meringue and the New York style cheesecake Caroline Eaton had brought along with some fancy brioche rolls.

Would he mind having an employed member of his staff join them?

She had already told him he could invite Wickham, but his driver had been on a phone call, so he’d followed her and the rest of the family when they’d hurried inside after the church service.

Blake shrugged. “Fine with me. I was going to ask him earlier, but he was on his cell.”

Lula released a squeal. “Thank you, Mother.” She threw her arms around Emma Fitzwilliam and gave her a peck on the cheek.

“And thank you too, Blake.” Smiling and humming a little tune as she opened the silverware drawer and grabbed a handful of forks, she swirled around to face Jen and Hensley and stuck her tongue out at them.

Then she skedaddled away to help their younger sisters.

Hensley rolled her eyes and Jen sighed, looking around for a towel. For the time

being, they would ignore Lula's antics. But they all knew the world would be a boring place without her around to pester everyone.

"I don't know how you do it with five daughters over the age of eighteen still living at home, Mrs. Fitzwilliam." Blake crossed his arms over his chest. "I assume they've all graduated. Isn't that right, Hensley?"

"Yep. I think I mentioned that we were all homeschooled. Kit, the youngest, is nineteen. And Lula is twenty-three going on fifteen," Hensley replied.

Her mom chuckled. "I don't know how we do it either. I guess we enjoy it as long as our Heavenly Father allows. We are blessed with a full quiver, and mighty is the man who can shoot many arrows into the world for the Kingdom of God. "

Hensley glanced at Blake before dashing through from the kitchen to the dining room. He was smiling and nodding, his whole face lighting up at her mother's reply. Did he intend on having a big family with lots of children?

Bing popped an olive in his mouth from the relish tray and appeared amused, based on how his eyes seemed to dance and the grin on his face. "I'll go check on Caroline. I left her in the living room with your grandmother."

"I just came from there," Jen said. "They were discussing where to purchase the best embroidery threads. Grandmother promised to give her a tour of Mother's sewing room on the second floor after we eat."

"Does Caroline sew?" Hensley arched her brows as she passed him with her pies, pausing to angle toward Bing, who leaned over the counter with the appetizers, surveying the relish tray and dressed eggs.

He shook his head. "Not a chance of that as far as I know, but she does enjoy

embroidery and knitting. Our mom forced her to learn, but now she really seems to enjoy it.”

“She’ll be able to talk about embroidery threads and yarn with Grandmother for hours then.

” Jen found a clean towel and wrapped it around the warm casserole dish of macaroni and cheese topped with a cracker crumb topping.

She followed Hensley to place the dish anywhere she could fit it on the table.

A short while later, with everyone seated around the Easter dinner table after church, including Wickham and their other guests, Father gave the blessing as everyone bowed their heads.

“Thank you for this day to celebrate our risen Savior who made a way for us when we were yet lost sinners. Thank you, Lord, for the many blessings you have bestowed upon us. May we keep our eyes on you and not our circumstances. Help us to be good servants and soldiers. May we always count our blessings, even in the hard times. We bless our time together and this bountiful feast. Amen. ”

Everyone said amen in unison and began passing various dishes and platters around the table while plenty of chatting ensued.

Soon their plates were heaped with all of the good things laid out on the table.

But why did Hensley have the impression that Caroline’s presence would change the way things had been going for her and Jen with regard to Blake and her brother?

She’d been on two dates with Blake since their first, one evening date on Tuesday to paint canvas portraits at an art supply shop at her suggestion, and a short hike and

picnic on Saturday at his suggestion, the day before.

The painting class had been low cost and fun, not that cost seemed like a great concern for her Manhattan cowboy.

They'd left with paintings of Easter crosses in the foreground of a sunrise, their crosses cresting over a meadow of flowers.

Their picnic had included fried chicken, potato salad, and green beans from The Gathering Place.

They'd taken nature photos on the hike. Reaching a pleasant spot along the creek, she'd spent an hour sketching the scene spread out around them in her sketchbook.

Blake had admired her sketch and peeked at some of the other sketches in her book.

Jen had enjoyed three dates with Bing in the past week.

Hensley was especially happy for them. Jen was the oldest after all, and she deserved to find happiness more than anyone else she knew.

Though joy stirred in Hensley's soul from the morning's worship service and a whisper told her to be gracious, tension nagged at her.

For one thing, Caroline refused to call her brother Bing.

She called him Charles. Not even Charlie.

So formal. For another, she stuck close to Charles, and Blake too, mainly only speaking to them unless someone addressed her directly.

Being a guest, and not knowing anyone else, Hensley supposed that could not be a fault.

But she seemed to laude her longtime friendship with Blake, cracking whispered private jokes in his ear and exchanging glances with him as she passed dishes around that she mainly declined .

Miss Eaton also slid into the seat between Blake and Charles before anyone could bat an eyelash.

Grandmother remedied that by giving up her seat and silently motioning Hensley over to sit on Blake's other side.

Grandmother moved to sit on the other side of the table, squeezing in with her three younger sisters and Lewis Wickham.

Of course, Lula made sure to sit beside him.

Jen sat on Bing's other side. Her parents took the seats at opposite ends of the table, as they usually did.

For another matter, Caroline dressed to the nines.

Tall and slender with a pretty face and blond hair like Bing, she had the proportions and appearance of a supermodel.

Hensley guessed her silk pantsuit with its belted long jacket and sleek pants, designer shoes, and leather purse cost as much as some of the custom wedding gowns she sold in her shop.

Maybe even as much as some seriously expensive ones she ordered from popular

designers to supplement their boutique's selection.

Lastly, Miss Eaton's tone came across as fake polite instead of genuine.

The rest of the time, she seemed aloof, as aloof as Blake had seemed at first. Her facial expressions revealed much whenever she wrinkled her nose or let a smirk appear.

And she did those things frequently while listening to the conversation around the table.

Yep, Caroline Eaton, was a Manhattan socialite after all, and behaving a bit like a snob.

She might even become a force to reckon with if given too much attention, or rather, not enough .

Time would tell. And when Mother asked how long she would be visiting her brother, Caroline had said, "Until Charles is weary of me."

Charles let the remark go over his head without any reaction, but both of Grandmother's brows rose.

Poor Jen! But so far, Jen didn't seem concerned.

Perhaps she wasn't picking up on any of it yet.

And if Jen did, she was generally too polite, sweet, and easygoing to create a fuss.

But even Jen had limits to what she would tolerate.

Would Caroline become a third wheel and disrupt her newfound dating relationship with Bing ?

Would Blake's sister prove to be similar when Hensley finally had a chance to meet some of his family? Her brows furrowed.

“And how do you like Dogwood Creek so far?” Grandmother arched her brows as she addressed Caroline.

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“I must admit, Dogwood Creek is full of charm and appeal. I look forward to visiting the candle shop, the gift stores, and the boutiques. The mountains and wooded areas are a breath of fresh air ... a lovely change of pace from the city,” Caroline gushed.

Then she leaned toward Blake, pouring on a sugary sweet tone.

“Your idea to build a log cabin resort here with my brother as your vice president is brilliant. People from the city will flock here. But then, everything you do succeeds, Blake.”

He shrugged as he sliced into his ham. “I’ve always felt more at home in Tennessee than in the big city. The pace is more relaxed and it’s less crowded. A man can breathe here.”

“My thoughts too,” Father agreed with a nod.

But alarm bells were ringing in Hensley’s head.

Did Caroline have designs on Blake? If so, would he succumb to the charms of a familiar and pretty face?

Did they have a dating history? Maybe it was finally time to ask more about his past girlfriends.

He did not seem as if he had an attraction to Caroline, but she couldn’t be sure without asking him outright.

After the meal, Hensley was glad when Grandmother invited Caroline upstairs for that tour.

Grandmother Lonsdale knew exactly what to do to salvage time for Hensley to be alone with Blake and spare Jen for time with Bing.

With that handled, Father invited Wickham to join him in the family room to watch television, probably because he'd observed Lula's attraction to the young man and had concerns about her judgment.

Bing and Jen excused themselves so Jen could take him on a stroll through the brick garden paths behind the house.

While her younger sisters helped Mother with washing dishes, Hensley led Blake to the front porch.

It seemed like the safest place to escape household commotion.

On the porch swing, they could take in the mountain views in the distance and the signs of spring in the shrub and flower beds.

The mountains seemed to stand proud and tall over Dogwood Creek that Easter afternoon, reminding her of the Lord's strong arm of protection, despite those who might invade.

Arms that she planned to lean on in the days to come.

Would Blake also become a tower of strength and a place of refuge, or would they be easily torn apart?

And just when they'd begun to get to know each other.

BLAKE PUT HIS ARM AROUND Hensley's shoulders when they settled into the porch swing. He could get used to lazy Sundays and homecooked meals. If Hensley could cook like her mom, it meant hours of enjoyment ahead of them. And if not, she had plenty of family to call for recipe advice.

Hensley turned toward him. "I know you went along with the painting canvas portrait idea just for me, but I've been meaning to ask, what do you like doing in your spare time besides hiking, Blake Sterling?"

Was she teasing him a little, using his surname? Her tone was playful too. It sure seemed that way, but he didn't mind. "Oh, I like to do many things. Fishing, horseback riding, canoeing, watching old westerns or football. I also like archery, reading books, and swimming. And you?"

"Like you, I enjoy many things. Reading is high on my list, sketching, taking walks, horseback riding, touring historical homes, dancing, canoeing, hiking, and bicycling. But we have something else in common." She glanced at him.

"We are both second-born children who lived in the shadows of our older siblings. And we both overcame that, forging new paths."

Blake tilted his head to one side. "You're right. I guess we have both forged new paths. Does your family have horses here?"

She nodded. "We have two. Want to go riding sometime?"

"I'd like that. Our horses arrive on Monday. And I'm enjoying this peaceful view from your front porch. I sure don't mind porch sitting. We didn't have that in Manhattan."

Did she have any idea how much he valued easy moments like this?

It seemed they could only be found on Sundays or some evenings after a long day.

It's why one of his first purchases in Dogwood Creek had been a couple of rocking chairs for the front porch at his cabin.

And for a second, he could see himself growing old with Hensley, rocking in those chairs, holding each other's hands.

He'd ordered more for the balconies and decking around the main lodge too.

"Have you called your father and siblings today to wish them Happy Easter?" Hensley asked as the swing creaked.

"Not yet, but I will later tonight when I'm home.

"Those calls might take him some time. "It's probably going to be hard for us to go out on any dates this week.

With Caroline in town and more construction and landscaping going on, I will be wiped out at the end of each day.

But I do have some good news. Folks are already dropping off items for the auction and signing up to bring chili. "

"That is great news. I knew they would." Hensley smiled, but she shifted in the swing and her smile faded. "I love to sit out here and read sometimes. It's so peaceful."

"It is." He could not disagree with that, and when found, peace was to be cherished.

It was a gift from the Lord. And few found it, but today, they seemed to have found some measure of it.

Except Hensley seemed tense now, stiffening despite his arm around her.

Only he wasn't sure why. Women were hard to understand. Should he ask what was on her mind ?

"I'm curious. Caroline seems close to you. Did the two of you used to date?"

Ah! He chuckled, shaking his head. He wouldn't have to ask what was on her mind. So, the tension was about Caroline. Why did that not surprise him any? Caroline was ... Caroline. She could be kind of a pain. A little on the snobbish side.

But he couldn't say that exactly, could he?

He could assure Hensley that he had never dated her before.

And it was time to tell her about Elise.

He'd been engaged to her for a couple of years, after all.

She'd broken his heart, and it had taken him some time to recover.

Wyoming had done most of that for him. It was time to at least mention that he'd once been engaged.

He glanced at his watch. "Well, I make it a rule not to talk about the past too much. I tend to get bogged down by it. But I'll give you the five-minute rendition.

I've never dated Caroline and don't plan to.

She's my friend's bossy kid sister. I was once engaged to marry a girl named Elise, about two years ago.

That is, until she graduated from college, took a job as an elementary teacher, and promptly cheated on me with some head honcho on the board of education.

Before Elise, there were a couple of girls I dated over the years, but the only one that stood out was Sarah, back in high school.

Except she moved away when her father was transferred.

People's careers seem to find a way of interfering in my love life.

And that's it. My whole love life history in a nutshell. Has it been five minutes?"

"I'm sorry about what happened to you with Elise and Sarah, but I'm glad to hear you didn't date Caroline.

" Hensley leaned to one side, resting an elbow on the arm of the swing.

She released a sigh. "I guess now is a good time to give you my history in five minutes. It'll probably take less than that.

You met Jake. And before him, there was a Marine named Michael who ended up deployed.

He married a nurse, also deployed. And there was a boy in my teens from our homeschool co-op, Nathan.

He moved away to go to college, and I never heard from him again.

I've had a few other dates over the years.

Nothing else. And I'm saving myself for marriage. "

Blake regretted that he'd made some mistakes on that count, but he was saving himself for marriage now.

He'd repented and turned himself around to be pleasing to the Lord.

He nodded and reaching over, squeezed her hand gently.

Then he pulled her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it, gently.

Hensley was someone special. He shouldn't rush things with her.

He had to be sure. His heart couldn't take another loss.

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Our world has created a false unrealistic image of what women are supposed to look like and act like.

But the truth is that every woman was not created by God to be skinny, with a flawless complexion and long flowing hair.

Not every woman was intended to juggle a career as well as all of the other duties of being a wife, mother, citizen, and daughter.

Single women should not be made to feel they are missing something because they are not married.

Married women should not be made to feel they must have a career to be complete.

We must have the freedom to be our individual selves.

—Joyce Meyer, *The Confident Woman Devotional*

BY THURSDAY, HENSLEY was beginning to wilt. Things had begun to stall where Blake was concerned. Samantha had stopped by on Wednesday afternoon to let her know the clipboards were at the lodge. Hensley thanked her for the tickets Tiff had given Blake.

Sam smiled, waving a hand to one side. “Aw, it was nothing. I’m glad you were able to go with Blake and see the show. You seem kind of glum. Why the long face? Is everything all right?”

Hensley had shrugged. “I think so. I haven’t seen Blake in a few days. I guess I’m just missing him.”

Samantha leaned her head to one side. “I’m sure you’ll see him soon. You can work with him on the sign-up sheets for the clipboards now that they’ve been found and delivered.”

Hensley had nodded and that had been the end of it. But it was concerning. Blake hadn’t called or even texted. Not even to simply say hello or ask how she was doing. Would they end up not seeing each other until Sunday?

He’d warned her that he had a busy week ahead, but had something changed since the dinner on Easter? Had Caroline been dropping little bugs into Blake’s ear and Bing’s too, supplanting them? It wouldn’t surprise her any. Jen hadn’t seen Bing since Easter Sunday either.

And if Caroline was doing her best to undermine them, how were the men holding up? Were they having second thoughts? Her gut told her that whatever was happening, it couldn’t be good. Maybe she was jumping to silly conclusions. Surely, he was busy with work.

But on Thursday, late afternoon, Blake finally texted:

Something has happened in the lodge’s main dining room. The tablecloths have all been messed up. And the banner has fallen. I haven’t seen it yet. Security just informed me. We don’t know how it happened since so many folks have been dropping off items for the auction. Anybody could have done it.

She replied:

How strange. I’ll stop by as soon as I’m off work in about thirty minutes and start

fixing things. I'll probably bring Jen to help me.

He responded:

I'm horseback riding with Bing to test out one of the trails, but we'll try and meet you there as soon as possible.

He hadn't said he missed her. No mention of asking her out on a date for Friday or Saturday night either. By security, did he mean Wickham? The whole thing was very odd. Who would have messed up everything they'd worked so hard to do?

Would Jen go along and help her straighten out the mess? If it meant a chance of seeing Bing, she probably would jump at the opportunity.

What if they ran into Caroline? It might be good to have her sister there for moral support.

They could leave Kit in charge at the boutique.

It was Kit's turn to close anyhow. Lula had a photo-shoot to do for one of the shop's brides.

It was MaryAnne's day off, but Jen was already working at the boutique, so Jen was a logical answer to finding help.

Within the hour, she and Jen drove to Blake's property in Hensley's red jeep and were on it. It had started raining before they left, drenching her on the way to and from the jeep. At least she'd been able to salvage her hair.

Then the sun came out again. But walking into the lodge was odd, seeing the banner dangling from one side and dragging on the floor .

.. and all of the tablecloth linens laying around in messy piles.

Some linens were half on the chairs and half on the floor.

Who would have done all of this to their hard work?

Upon closer inspection, it appeared as if someone had cut the string holding the banner around the base of one of the wall sconces.

It was a clean break. Whoever had done all of this had done it on purpose.

Had they been acting alone or with help?

Had it been a disgruntled member of the youth group?

That didn't seem to make any sense. The youth had all seemed excited about the upcoming mission trip and a chance to travel outside their country.

With all of the folks dropping off donations for the auctions, Blake was right.

Anyone could have done this. But who and why?

NO SOONER HAD JEN AND Hensley begun setting things to right when Bing and Blake arrived.

She saw them through the windows as they tied their horses to a hitching post installed in one of the shrub and garden beds along the perimeter of the lodge.

Hensley hadn't noticed it before, but she did now as she saw them dismount and head inside through a side door.

“Hey, girls.” Bing greeted them with a sweet smile as he raked a hand through his hair, but his eyes went straight to Jen .

Jen smiled back at him with complete adoration as she finished straightening one of the tablecloths.

“How’s it going?” Blake removed his cowboy hat and crossed to Hensley’s side, glancing around at everything with wide eyes.

“I don’t understand how this could have happened.

We’ve left the doors unlocked for brief periods during the day so folks could drop off their donations for the auction, but .

..” He gestured toward the long row of tables where items had piled up.

Hensley glanced at the donations. There were stacks of books, dishes, some framed pictures and artwork, vases, Christmas decorations, a vacuum cleaner that appeared to be brand new, a bread maker, pie plates, leather purses, and many other useful items.

Thunder boomed in the distance and a downpour of rain began pelting everything outside as a sleek black BMW pulled into the property and parked near the lodge, its engine drawing their attention along with the thunder.

Caroline stepped out of it and whipped open a large clear umbrella with big white polka dots on it.

Maybe a rental car? She opened a rear passenger door and produced a picnic basket.

She was dressed in cute jeans and an oversized, untucked white shirt, gobs of white and gold bangle bracelets on her arms, and big dark sunglasses she would no longer

need in a thunderstorm.

She headed for the lodge's side door to dodge the rain.

Too bad it wasn't locked. Hensley sighed and turned back to fixing the next tablecloth. Why did a sense of foreboding overwhelm her? At least her peach dress with its elegant bandeau collar had dried out from being drenched earlier.

Caroline breezed through the door, shaking water off of herself and her umbrella. "I think I made it here just in time. That storm crept up out of nowhere ..."

"Looks like you just missed it." Bing held one end of a tablecloth while Jen held the other as they spread it onto a table together .

Caroline glanced around, her brows arching. "What's happened here?"

Bing brought her up to speed while Blake joined Hensley, following Bing's lead in helping. Between the four of them, they'd have things returned to normal in no time, even if Caroline didn't bother to help.

"Oh, well, I'm sorry to hear about this, but I've brought that dinner I promised.

Pasta prima vera and a big salad. It was a special from The Creek Grill.

There are breadsticks too." She set all of her items down on one of the tables.

Then she bit her lower lip and placed her hands on her hips, surveying them and the scene of messed up tablecloths as they continued working.

Caroline had been planning dinners for Bing and Blake?

Hensley's brow shot up. She'd give Blake the benefit of the doubt.

Maybe the three of them were simply catching up and reminiscing about old times.

Still, it would have been nice to have been included or invited along during one of their get-togethers.

Blake's phone beeped with some sort of alert. One of those sharp beeping weather alerts. Then Hensley's cell beeped in a similar manner too. And Jen's. Then Bing's. Caroline wasn't local, but even her cell was ringing with an incoming alert.

Hensley checked her messages and sighed. "Possible tornado warning for the whole county." She slipped her phone in the pocket hidden in the voluminous skirt of her fifties style dress. "They don't expect the storm to let up until after two in the morning. Fifty mile an hour winds expected."

"They are advising everyone to stay off the roads." More thunder clapped outside, causing Blake to step closer to the windows. "I don't think any of us should drive in this. Bing, let's get the horses to the barn."

Blake headed for the side door.

"Good idea. We'll be right back, ladies." Bing wasted no time in following Blake outside .

"Be careful, guys." Jen's brows furrowed.

And for good reason. Hensley could see all of the tree branches waving their limbs and various twigs and leaves blowing across the parking lot. The horses were getting frisky too, bending their heads down in the wind, and shifting on their hooves.

Great. They were stuck with Caroline for at least a few minutes, alone.

But Hensley paused from working to stare after Blake and Bing.

The wind was really picking up and the sky had turned from partly sunny when she'd arrived, to cloudy and gray, and now dark and threatening in a short time.

Would the men be all right? The rain was coming down hard.

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“There’s nothing we can do. We’re going to be stuck here for a while. Let’s just finish putting these tablecloths back on the tables, Hensley. It will take our minds off all of this,” Jen said, her calm and sensible voice taking charge.

Hensley nodded and returned to helping her sister.

“I’ll help too,” Caroline finally said.

CAROLINE DIDN’T HAVE much to say in the men’s absence. Caroline, Hensley, and Jen continued receiving weather alerts on their phones. Putting everything to rights in the lodge’s dining room took most of their focus when they weren’t checking the alerts about the rapid changes in the severe weather.

About twenty minutes later, the guys returned from the barn where their eight new horses were housed. Hensley had begun to worry that something had happened, but each time she glanced out of the windows toward the big barn, she could see it was still standing.

Blake had mentioned their horses would arrive the Monday after Easter.

By that time, he had said he would have plenty of oats, hay, and everything else they needed to care for the quarter horses properly.

She could hardly wait to meet them all. That would have to wait for some other day.

Now, the men strode into the dining room from the side entrance, drenched from the rain, but safe.

“How’d it go?” Hensley asked as she and Caroline spread another linen on the tables. “You did say you have eight horses now, right?”

“Four mares and four stallions,” Blake affirmed. “All doing well in their stalls despite the crazy weather. They’re a little on edge. They know something isn’t right.”

“But they are fed and watered for the night and have fresh bedding,” Bing added as he gave Jen a kiss on her cheek. “You know you are staying here, right? It’s not safe out there.”

Jen was nodding. “There’s been a lot of thunder, tons more rain, and it’s so windy. I can’t imagine trying to drive home in this even though we are only a few miles down the road, especially with the clouds making it so dark.”

Caroline’s brows arched at seeing her brother kiss Jen.

Blake slipped his arms around Hensley’s waist, surprising her from behind. He whispered in her ear. “I’m glad you’re stuck with us here. I’ve missed you. Text your parents and let them know you’re both safe for the night but that we won’t let you out on the roads in this weather.”

Hensley reached for her phone. “Good idea. They’ll be worried.” She couldn’t help but smile as Blake continued to hold her while she typed. So, he had missed her! His shirt was wet, but now was not the time to push him away ... not when he was making his feelings so clear.

Blake glanced around while she finished sending her parents the message and then released her. “Looks like you’re almost done here. I see you’ve managed to put the banner up too. Nice work, ladies.”

“Thank you.” Hensley and Caroline finished replacing the last linen. “Phew. Thank

you for helping, Caroline. ”

“Of course.” Caroline smirked. Then she headed for the picnic basket. “I assume you would like to eat in here? There’s plenty for all of us. We only need a few more plates.”

Blake glanced at his watch. “There are some plates, silverware, and cups in the kitchen through that door right there. It’s not fully stocked yet, but I brought a few items over.

If we stay here at the lodge, we have a better view through all of these windows at what the weather is doing.

The construction company assured us that the windows and this structure are allegedly tornado proof.

We can build a fire in the fireplace. There are toothbrushes, toothpaste, shampoo, and snacks available in the gift shop down the hall.

Even pajamas for the ladies. Everyone can have a bedroom of their own on one of the floors above.

There are several sofas and chairs in the lounge which has board games, books, and a piano. ”

“That all sounds comforting under these circumstances,” Hensley replied. It was obviously too dangerous to make the short trek toward home. Her mom texted back that they should stay put and be safe.

“Very nice,” Jen agreed. “Thank you, Blake.”

More thunder sounded. The security lights outside lit the exterior up enough that Hensley could see the tree branches were still whipping around wildly.

Lightning lit up the sky and the rain came down sideways.

She was glad they were indoors, and that they weren't alone.

The presence of two men gave her a sense of safety.

Still, she whispered up a prayer for God's protection.

"I'll get us some plates." Caroline disappeared into the kitchen.

"I'll build us a fire." Blake bent to stock the fireplace with more logs.

"We should see about drinks." Jen glanced at Hensley.

Blake spoke up. "There's tea, juice, soda, and water in the fridge inside the kitchen. We use it as a break room for employees and staff too, so I keep it stocked. There's coffee and hot tea in the cupboards."

Hensley smiled. "Thank you. What would you and Bing prefer?" Was it possible that one of the construction workers Blake employed were disgruntled enough to sabotage their hard work?

Blake nodded as he arranged logs. "I'll have one of the mango orange juice drinks."

"That's what I'll have," Bing said when Jen glanced in his direction.

A little while later, they gathered around a table near the windows and the fireplace where they could keep an eye on the storm.

Blake offered the blessing and prayed for their safety.

He turned on a flat screen television so they could watch the news with the latest weather updates, but after about ten minutes, Bing asked if they could listen to a Christian lady speaker they all knew on a different channel.

“Sure. She’s funny. I don’t mind.” Blake glanced around the table toward the others.

Jen and Hensley nodded enthusiastically. Anything to take their minds off the weather for a few minutes.

“As long as we switch back to the weather in a bit. I think we should listen to the news updates.” Caroline stabbed some pasta with her fork.

“Okay.” Blake used a remote and switched to the channel Bing mentioned.

The speaker was talking about various roles women had filled during Bible times.

She stressed that Christian women could serve not only as wives and mothers, but in leadership, teaching, other ministry roles, and in businesses within their communities.

“Wherever women go, and whatever the Lord leads you to put your hands to, do it with excellence and show the love of Christ to others while you’re doing it,” the lady evangelist said.

Blake tilted his head as he listened, and Hensley perked up. This might be the kind of teaching to open his heart to favor and even champion her career.

“Esther saved a nation by marrying a political figure. Ruth worked with her hands in the fields, gleaning whatever she could, saving her and Naomi from starving, and eventually marrying a handsome and successful landowner. Bathsheba raised a king.

Deborah led an army to victory and served as a judge.” The speaker paused.

“Are you beginning to get the picture? Whether you work at home or do something outside of the home, whatever God calls you to do, do it with a heart of obedience and do it well. If you have a talent, don’t hide it.

Use it for the expansion of the Kingdom and to serve your family, community, and the Lord. ”

The woman continued after another brief pause.

“The Bible says that Mary Magdalene and other women in the New Testament, such as Salome, ‘gave of their substance’ to carry on the spreading of the gospel through the ministry of the disciples and Jesus. Giving of their substance implies that these women had some sort of existing wealth, or perhaps earnings from a business or other means to acquire wealth. Miriam was a worship leader for the children of Israel after their victory at the Red Sea. Many women took care of the prophets in the Old Testament. Lydia sold purple linen in the New Testament. Her husband was a tanner, and they helped Paul’s ministry. ”

“So, you see, dear friends, anything you put your hands to, if you do it to serve Christ and do it with excellence to give of your time, money, and talents from an obedient and willing heart, then the Lord is pleased.” The evangelist’s voice began to fade.

Some music came on when the speaker finished her teaching.

Blake clicked back to the news channel, but he seemed to be contemplating all they’d heard, judging by the way his brows furrowed.

Did he understand how much it meant to her to help women find their dream wedding gowns and create a meaningful wedding celebration?

It was a type of ministry in and of itself.

Marriages were important and they should be celebrated.

Or, because of his past with Elise, would he forever hold to a different kind of expectation concerning her career choices if their romance grew into something more ?

After the meal, Jen and Hensley offered to wash the dishes while Caroline cleared the table, bringing plates and other items to them in the kitchen.

Then Blake led them to the gift shop to purchase anything they could use for their stay, and then upstairs to suites he selected for them.

He gave Jen and Hensley their own keys to an apartment suite with two bedrooms and a soaking garden tub.

Further down along the same hall, he led Bing and his sister to another suite and gave them another set of keys.

“I’ll take the room beside my office. It’s on this same hall.” He gestured toward his office a few doors down. “Now we can all relax and hang out in the lounge until bedtime.”

Hensley sneezed, but she was nodding. Then she suffered through a coughing fit. Was she coming down with something? “We’ll meet you there shortly. I’m going to put this robe and nightgown from the gift shop inside our suite and have a look around.”

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“Me too.” Jen nodded, holding up the bag with her items from the gift shop.

“All right. See you downstairs. It’s the big room between the gift shop and the dining room if you get lost,” Blake explained, but concern lurked in his eyes.

Was he worried about her coughing and sneezing?

Blake and Bing had offered to pay for their selections, but they’d insisted on paying for their own purchases. Again, it had been gentlemanlike of them to offer. At least they had everything they would need for a sleepover.

A little while later, they all gathered around in the lounge, relaxing on leather sofas and chairs.

Blake had built another fire in that room’s stone fireplace.

Jen and Bing settled into a game of chess at a table for two while the winds howled and the rain continued to pour outside.

Blake had rummaged around in his office for a notebook and pencils, and now he handed them to Hensley. “So, you can sketch. ”

“Thank you.” She sneezed again, but that was sweet of him to think of her.

He crossed the room and returned with tissues for Hensley while Caroline perused the bookshelves.

“You are a lifesaver.” She smiled, accepting the box. She chose the corner of a sofa and sat with her sketch book, pencils, and tissues while Blake slipped out of the room and disappeared around the corner. He returned with a gift bag a few minutes later and handed it to her.

“What’s this?” Hensley peeked inside the cute paper bag but had to set it aside for a coughing fit.

“Open it,” he instructed, sitting in the chair beside her end of the sofa.

“Have you settled on names for all of those quarter horses?” Hensley asked as she pulled out a soft and fluffy blanket featuring a gallant horse with beautiful markings.

“Aw, thank you! You went to the gift shop. I saw this very blanket in your gift shop earlier. And cough drops, vaporub, a box of orange tea, and cough syrup. You’re the best. But you shouldn’t have. I would have muddled through.”

“You need all the help you can get. I can’t have you coming down sick on my watch while I stand by doing nothing.” Blake rested his hands on his knees. “And no, I haven’t settled on names yet for the horses.”

His face told her nothing about his feelings for her, but the gifts told her everything.

She spread the blanket over herself and popped a cough drop in her mouth to soothe her sore throat.

That was better. She began to relax, but Blake was quiet and aloof again.

His brows furrowed. Was he stewing about something?

Perhaps trying to figure out who would have broken into the dining room to mess up

all of their hard work?

Worried about the thunderstorm and possible tornadic action?

Maybe concerned about his business? Concerned about her being sick?

Or aggravated about having guests in his care during the bad weather?

He could even be worried about the barn blowing down and the safety of his new horses, or a tornado picking up one of several pieces of construction equipment on the property and sending it crashing into something else.

She opened the spiral notebook as more thunder sounded.

Time to focus on something else to take her mind off the storm and her sore throat.

Bing had turned the big flat screen television on in the lounge too, so they could listen to the weather updates.

He kept the volume low but turned it up with a remote control when the weather host said a tornado had touched down on the other side of the county ten minutes ago.

The forecaster said they should be mindful that another tornado could hit before the night was out since another strong wall of stormy weather was headed their way.

Bing turned the volume low again when the update ended.

“All right. Suggest a name for Blake’s horses, everyone. I’ll write down the ones he likes.” Hensley tapped a pencil on the page of the open notebook, her brows furrowing. “You said four mares and four stallions, right? How about Rhett and Scarlett for two of them?”

Blake's face lit up with a grin. "Perfect. Write those down."

Jen twisted around in her seat. "Ahab and Jezebel?"

Blake chuckled, nodding. "Write those down too, please."

Hensley wrote down the first four names.

Caroline settled on a book from the library collection and sat in the leather chair directly across from Blake.

She opened the book and leafed through it until she found a page of interest, running a finger along the lines as she scanned it.

"How about Poppy and Parsnip? These are flowers that are common in Wyoming according to this, and I know you loved your time there, even though we all missed you terribly."

Was she flirting with Blake again? Lord, have mercy. Hensley tapped her pencil more firmly. Was it loud enough to convey her annoyance with Caroline ?

"Poppy and Parsnip. Write those down." Blake nodded. "Two more ..."

At least he didn't sound as enthusiastic about Caroline's suggestions.

"How about Fred and Ethel?" Bing leaned forward while swiping Jen's bishop with his rook.

Blake smiled. "Excellent. That takes care of our first eight. But we have four more mares and four more stallions arriving next week too."

“Eight more?” Hensley’s mouth dropped open. “How about Fannie and Frank?”

“Nice.” Blake nodded and Hensley scribbled those names down.

“Huckleberry and Kaleidoscope,” Caroline said as she snapped her book shut and rose to find something else from the shelves.

“Good. I like those names as well.” Blake nodded and Hensley added them to the list.

“Pooh Bear was Bing’s favorite cartoon and book character when he was a child,” Jen put in, keeping her eyes locked on Bing.

“And petunias are some of Jen’s favorite flowers,” Bing mentioned, gazing at Jen.

“Pooh Bear and Petunia it is.” Blake waved a hand and Hensley scribbled those down too, a smile on her face.

Bing and Jen were adorable together and completely in love. Anyone could see it. But Caroline was rolling her eyes and wrinkling her nose. Ugh!

“We need two more. How about Sparky for a stallion and Midnight for a mare? Do you have any black mares coming?” Hensley leaned forward, her brow arching as she gazed at Blake.

“As a matter of fact, we do have one black mare coming. Sparky and Midnight. That’s perfect. Is that all sixteen names?”

Hensley counted. “It is.”

“Done. Thank you, everyone.” Blake released a sigh.

She imagined he had his hands full with everything else going on around the resort.

Not to mention, he'd told her of his dream to allow troubled teens to spend time on the property in the bunkhouse once it was finished being built.

Was that weighing on his mind too? It seemed to her that it was one of his main goals in building the property.

He'd mentioned it to her several times, worried about which group to invite.

She'd suggested that he contact a Teen Challenge group in the area.

They were nationwide, but logistically speaking, it was a good place to start.

He had perked up at her suggestion. But until the construction finished, and all of the landscaping was complete, it did not make sense to get ahead of the timeline.

He had much to do with acquiring everything the property required to run properly.

There would be an intense hiring and training phase too, plus marketing concerns.

And the grand opening to plan. He had a lot on his plate. No wonder his brows furrowed so much.

Finding names for sixteen quarter horses would be one less thing on his mind. She tore the page out of her notebook and handed it to him. He folded it and tucked it inside his shirt pocket. "Thank you, Blue Eyes."

Hensley gave him a weak smile. If only she hadn't come down with such a bad cold. She blew her nose into a tissue. Did it appear red and swollen? Not a very romantic look, but sometimes life just got in the way of romance.

“Well, that kept us entertained for about ten minutes.” Caroline had another book in her hands as she returned to her seat.

Hensley peeked at the cover. Gulliver’s Travels? At least she had good taste in books, but she turned her attention toward sketching another wedding dress design.

Caroline leaned toward her. “What are you doodling there?”

Doodling? If her nose wasn’t running, she might’ve stood up with her hands on her hips and given Caroline an attitude adjustment .

“She’s not doodling. Hensley is a fashion designer. She creates stunning wedding gowns. I saw some in her boutique’s windows.” Blake smiled at Hensley. “I’m only sorry I don’t have a proper sketchbook around here, but a spiral notebook will have to do for now until I remedy that.”

Was he really praising her work? And standing up for her to Caroline? He even seemed ... proud of her profession. That was a glimmer of hope.

“Oh, I had no idea. Hmm.” Caroline sank into her seat and opened the book she held.

Hensley bent her head over her sketch, concentrating on the pencil lines to make the skirt fuller. But her eyes were growing heavy. She might even fall asleep right there on the sofa while daydreaming about Blake carrying her off to her room in those strong arms of his.

Why did it seem as if she had a slight temperature?

If they’d truly fallen into some time warp of Pride & Prejudice , this was not the way it was supposed to happen.

Jen should be the one who was sick, and she should be well enough to stroll about the room and play a melody on Blake's piano .

.. but no, she was the one who'd come down with a bad cold.

At least Caroline had been somewhat nice that evening.

Even helpful at times. Another surprise.

She was still snobbish, but a little bit nice was better than not nice at all.

It had been an interesting turn of events and eye-opening.

Her suspicions had been confirmed about Caroline hiding Bing and Blake away from her and Jen, bringing them dinners and planning their social calendars.

Would their boyfriends begin to include them again when the storm came to an end?
Or would trouble in paradise resume at Caroline's behest?

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When you cease to dream, you cease to live.

—Malcolm Forbes

WITH MAY'S ARRIVAL , they were on the brink of the fundraiser. Hensley recovered from her head cold a few days after the storm. No other strange incidents at the lodge had occurred, and the season of thunderstorms and rain seemed to have come to an end. For that, Hensley was thankful.

Blake had added to Wickham's security duties by posting him as a guard over the lodge and hiring an additional security guard to step in when Wickham functioned as his driver, or whenever he had an evening off to take Lula on a date.

Meanwhile, Hensley and Blake spent several evenings decorating the glass jars and creating centerpieces during the following days.

The next week, they arranged the items that had been donated for the auction.

This meant setting starting bids for each item they intended to auction and adding the starting bids to each of the sign-up sheets on the clipboards.

In the final days leading up to the event, Hensley checked with Blake to ensure that the doors would be locked if she brought her dishes and silverware over.

Things like that were costly. He assured her that his security guard would keep a close eye on every delivery and any person coming or going while also keeping the place locked.

She and Blake also teamed up to shop for sour cream, hot sauce, crackers, shredded cheese, white onions, and green onions for toppings.

They would chop and prepare the onions and other toppings on the day of the event.

She might not be a skilled cook like Jen or her mother, but she could chop and dice onions.

And at some point, she really should step up and spend some time in the kitchen with her mother and sister to improve her cooking skills.

For now, she did her best to hide the fact from Blake, especially when he invited her to dinner and a movie at his place to relax after all the hard work they'd done.

He made them chicken parmigiana on a bed of fettucine and it was divine!

She'd been enthralled with the tour of his home.

Mainly empty rooms, but he did have a nice sectional and recliner in his living room.

Yes, he could certainly use decorating help at some point.

But she wouldn't dream of lifting a finger to do so unless he popped the question.

And then she'd have to grapple with what her answer would be, first and foremost. As for his home, there were certain things she loved about it.

The front porch, the deck, the views from the windows, the dormer windows, the island in the huge kitchen, the stone fireplaces, the flat logs inside on some walls and drywall on others .

.. the oval modern soaking tub in the master bath, the his and her sinks, and the walk-in closets.

Not to mention the amazing oven and farmhouse style sink in the kitchen, which increased her desire to learn how to cook.

Then Tiff came down with a head cold, leaving them without an MC at the fundraiser. Samantha came by the boutique to tell Hensley about the problem the day before the event.

“We really thought he would have improved by now,” Samantha explained.

“I’ll talk to Blake. One of us will do the speaking, or maybe we’ll take turns,” Hensley assured.

She and Blake agreed to take turns. As long as the church ladies showed up with plenty of chili, everything seemed ready. Even Caroline was making a crockpot of chili to bring to the event. Jen was too. And many ladies had signed up to bring chili, giving Hensley peace of mind.

Jen took Bing aside as the event was about to begin as she dropped off her crockpot of chili to the buffet tables where Hensley hovered, greeting various ladies from the church as they brought their items to her.

Jen bit her lower lip and turned to her handsome boyfriend. “Bing, I’m so sorry, but ...”

“You’re not going to break up with me, are you?” Bing’s eyes widened.

“No, nothing like that. But my mom is bringing chili too. You’ll need to remember to vote for her chili with some of your hard-earned dollars too. I don’t mind if I don’t

win, but your sister and my mother count the most.”

Bing let out a, “Phew!” Relaxing, he held up a wad of dollar bills. “Don’t worry, I can handle that.”

Hensley chuckled and elbowed him, having heard the whole conversation. “Bing, my advice, if it matters any, is make sure you vote for your girlfriend’s chili above all others.”

Bing turned to her with surprise in his expression. “Oh. Okay. Got it. Good to know. Vote for my girlfriend.” He turned red and glanced at Jen with a shy smile before dashing away to find Blake. Probably to ask him to vote for Jen’s chili too.

The event itself went off without a hitch.

The youth loved being auctioned off to mow people’s lawns, mulch flower beds, and do spring cleaning tasks for various folks.

Everyone laughed when Nancy Lundgren, known as the bookmobile lady, widowed and in her sixties, won a bidding war for the high school’s handsome quarterback, and one of the most popular youth group members.

It was either her or Maggie Cornford, and Nancy wasn’t about to back down.

Blake did a great job of wearing his cowboy hat when he introduced the youth and accepted bids.

Hensley did her part by welcoming everyone and directing them to the auction tables for the other items. Blake said the blessing.

They’d tag teamed everything and people seemed to enjoy it.

Folks also gave bids on the donated items and many left with their like new items and happy smiles on their faces.

Robbie Watson won the most “votes” for her fabulous chili.

That made sense, since she loved to cook and owned The Gathering Place diner.

Jen came in second, and Hensley had no doubt that Bing had something to do with that.

Even Caroline seemed to have a great time at the event.

Best of all, the youth had earned more than enough to go on their mission trip to the Dominican Republic.

The event was a huge success. They’d had a full house.

Then the cleaning up began. Hensley had so much volunteer cleaning help that all she had to do was recruit Blake to assist her with carrying boxes of dishes, linens, and centerpieces to her jeep.

When they were finished, he pulled her into a long kiss.

When the kiss ended, she gazed up at him while he held her in his arms. “Are you glad you listened to some of my suggestions for the event?”

Blake nodded, holding her in his arms. “I am. It was really nice because of your organizational skills. Most importantly, we achieved the objective. And wow, did we ever have a great turnout! The place was packed. Folks had a lot of fun too.”

A smile played on her lips. “Does this mean I deserve an extra kiss?”

“Most definitely.”

She didn't have to ask twice. His mouth locked with hers in a passionate kiss that left her knees knocking again.

WITH THE FUNDRAISER behind them, Hensley could breathe easier and take time to notice the flowers blooming for summer.

Or so she thought. Jen came home from a date with Bing two days later, upset.

Hensley had worked late sewing one of her creations.

But now that she was home, she only wanted to crawl in bed with a cup of hot tea and a good book to read.

Except Jen knocked on her door.

“Come in ...” she called out.

Jen slipped inside and closed the door. Hands on her hips, she began pacing. Rarely did Jen get upset about anything.

“What is it?”

“I'm not sure where to begin.” She waved a hand into the air.

“Do I tell you how Caroline has redecorated Bing's house and taken over his life, or do I start with the part where she was sitting on the edge of Blake's desk, waiting to catch him so she could lure him away for dinner while we went on a date?

Because Bing has to find stuff for her to do or she follows us around everywhere.

Which is fine some of the time ... but I'm telling you, Hensley, I don't trust her. Not one little bit."

"Wait. Slow down." Hensley closed her book and set it aside. "She was sitting on the edge of Blake's desk?"

Jen nodded. "Wearing a provocative short skirt that showed off very long legs. Need I say more?"

"No, I get the picture. It doesn't sound good." Hensley swallowed a lump in her throat. "Did they go out to dinner?"

"I don't know. I think so. Bing pulled me away so we could get to our dinner reservation at The Creek Grill on time. We were trying to catch a movie after. He didn't want his sister tagging along. Nor did I. But I didn't want her to steal Blake's time away from you."

"I see." Hensley rearranged her pillows and sat up straighter.

She bit her lower lip. Did she trust Blake?

After all of his sweet kisses and their wonderful talks, she did.

But Caroline, she was another matter altogether.

"The truth is, I had to work late tonight to finish a dress for a bride. I wouldn't have been able to go out with Blake tonight anyhow.

And they are only friends. I don't think Blake would succumb to her charms. But I know she is trying everything she can think of to win him over. "

Jen sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Do we know when she returns to Manhattan?” Hensley sank into her pillows.

“Not soon enough. I’ve had it up to here with her.” Jen covered her face with her hands.

For Jen to be this upset, it had to be bad.

“Doesn’t she have a boyfriend? I thought Blake mentioned something about her dating someone in the hotel industry like her father.”

Jen nodded. “Yes, but they’re on the outs.”

“Well, then we need to pray that they get on the ins.”

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That made her and Jen laugh, because they both knew her verbiage didn't make sense.

And yet, to them, it made perfect sense.

They served a big God who could answer anything.

It was time to believe that He would do something about all of it and that He cared about them.

She didn't think her heart could take losing Blake too, not after losing Jake and Michael.

"HOW LONG WILL YOU BE gone?" Hensley's brow arched as Blake explained that he had been invited to Rockport and couldn't get out of it.

Family business matters. Not for Deerpark Cabins, but for Sterling Enterprises, Inc.

, his father's company that his older brother, Brandon, managed from Rockport, Ohio.

"A week or two at most. Then we'll do some special things together when I return. I promise." Blake's voice sounded preoccupied. "I want you to meet all the new horses. We'll take a picnic and go horseback riding. Just the two of us."

"Okay. You'll text me and call sometimes?" She could at least look forward to riding the trails with him. But why did he have to leave for two whole weeks? What kind of

business took that long? Or was this God's way of protecting him ?

Maybe he could use the time to figure things out for their future.

Like about her, and their relationship. Where they were headed.

And in truth, he might be safer in Rockport than around Caroline in Dogwood Creek.

Especially after what Jen had told her last night.

Yes, maybe God was protecting him and their relationship.

"Of course," he assured.

"All right. I'll see you when you get back." But her brows furrowed.

Two weeks without Blake? It would be hard to stay positive or even find delight in the little things, like taking in views of the late spring and early summer blooms in the garden, or enjoying the colors of a sunset on an evening stroll, for another thing.

The way folks and couples were doing more things outside in the warmer weather, for another.

It would make her miss him even more. But she'd have to press on, even though life wouldn't seem nearly as vibrant without him around.

When had she begun to fall so hard for her Manhattan cowboy?

Maybe Caroline would grow weary of waiting around for him and return to New York.

It hadn't been the answer to prayer that she'd expected, but she had to trust that God knew what was best. Except she had to admit, some part of her was irritated with Blake for abandoning her just when things seemed to be opening up for them.

“THINGS HAVE STALLED between Blake and Hensley. Something's not right.

” Samantha Braeburn glanced around at Nancy Lundgren, Lauren Juniper, Robbie Watson, Alicia Caruso, and Maggie Cornford.

“I checked in with Hensley yesterday and Blake has flown off to visit his brother in some little town in Ohio. She seems kind of down. I'm not sure what to do for them now. He'll be gone for two weeks. ”

“Did the sabotage work? I mean, taking my suggestion of removing all of the tablecloths and cutting down the banner so they'd have to get together to fix it?” Nancy leaned forward in her rocking chair.

They were all seated across the front porch of Alicia Caruso's century-old farmhouse, enjoying the weather.

Robbie had brought strawberry swirl cheesecake bites for their meeting, but seated at a bistro table, she presently bent her head over a wreath she was creating with some craft supplies she'd also brought along.

Maggie, also seated in a rocking chair, was crocheting an afghan.

Nancy crocheted a baby blanket for a local mission.

Lauren sat on the front steps in one of her boho-style skirts where she could admire Alicia's flowerbeds.

And Alicia sat on a bench, patting one of her two Labrador Retrievers, Biscotti, while Coco lounged at her feet.

“Yes. The sabotage was perfect timing. Hensley and Jen went to fix everything just before those storms came through. Blake, Bing, and Bing’s sister, Caroline, hosted them overnight in the main lodge.

They were effectively stuck there since it was too dangerous to drive home.

As I understand it, from what Lula told me when she came to get her hair cut and styled, Jenny and Hensley ended up in their own luxurious suite.

” Sam leaned forward. “But we need to think of a way to get Hensley and Blake together again now that the fundraiser is over. And Jenny and Bing as well. Oh, and it seems there is a romance blossoming between Lula and Blake’s driver, that Wickham fellow. ”

“We need a way to bring Blake home sooner.” Alicia patted Coco since the dog nudged her for equal affection.

“Two weeks is an awfully long time to be away. Take it from someone married to a trucker. Every single time Clint goes away, I miss him, even though I’m busy with the diner and potluck dinners.

” Robbie pressed her lips together into a firm thin line.

“Plus my ‘Marching Into Glory’ Dinners whenever someone goes home to meet Jesus. It’s still hard to be apart from my Clint. ”

“Just when we are so close to helping three of the Fitzwilliam sisters find their happily ever after ...” Samantha released a sigh. “According to Lula, Bing and Jen are

madly in love. And Lula has had several dates with Lewis Wickham.”

“I think I have an idea.” Nancy kept crocheting as she spoke, but her eyes were sparkling.

“We’ll host a dance at the community center next weekend.

Not just any dance. A big one, open to all of Dogwood Creek inhabitants.

We’ll ask everyone who attends to wear 1920s garb.

Hensley loves to wear vintage clothing. She won’t want to miss such a huge event.

I’m guessing she’ll ask Blake to come home a week early in time to escort her to the dance. ”

“That’s a great idea, but can we organize such a large event in one week’s time?” Sam’s mouth twisted and her brows furrowed.

Nancy nodded. “All we need to do is telephone someone at The Gazette to put it in this weekend’s edition so folks have a week to get their clothing ready. We can serve cookies and punch to keep the refreshments simple. Folks will want to go out to dinner in advance or after the dance.”

“What about decorations and the music for dancing?” Maggie leaned toward Nancy.

Alicia perked up, her eyes brightening. “We can ask MaryAnne to be the DJ. Maybe she’ll meet someone at the dance.”

“I can bring some fresh flowers for the cookie and punch table,” Lauren offered.

Sam smiled. This might actually work. Lauren owned the Life Is a Garden floral shop in Dogwood Creek.

“If the dance is for next Saturday night, I’ll bake a hundred cookies on Thursday evening and a hundred more on Friday evening if you can help me, Sam. Can Tiff watch Noah while we’re baking?” Robbie glanced at Sam.

“Sure. I can do that. I’m sure Tiff won’t mind.” Sam smiled. Things were looking up

“We’ll need more decorations. I’ll make a balloon arch for a photo booth,” Alicia offered. “Maybe Lula can take some professional photos for couples when she’s not dancing with Wickham, at least during the first hour.”

“I like it. Let’s not overcomplicate it.” Nancy sat back in her rocking chair. “Our plans are just right. I’ll call my editorial friend at the newspaper tonight, and then I’ll get MaryAnne on the phone so we have a DJ ... and oh, dear me, I almost forgot. I’ll reserve the community center first.”

Nancy laughed at herself.

“By all means, don’t put the cart before the horse.” Maggie clucked her tongue. “I suppose there is always the school gymnasium or we could set up a tent in the church parking lot if all else fails.”

Sam released a contented sigh, pleased with their plans.

She’d have to sacrifice two nights of baking, but when all was said and done, Hensley, Jen, and Lula would be the prettiest girls there.

Blake, Bing, and Wickham would have no choice but to pop the question to their

lovely dates.

And when it came to bringing couples together, what was the sacrifice of a little baking?

CAROLINE TAPPED AN impatient foot, her arms crossed over her chest as she gazed over the crowd gathered at the Dogwood Creek Community Center. “And you’re sure that Blake said he would meet us here? Because I don’t see him anywhere, and yet, here stands our Hensley without an escort.”

Hensley tried to disregard the condescending tone in Bing’s sister’s voice. She glanced away, turning her attention toward the dance floor where couples danced to ragtime tunes from the 1920s. MaryAnne was doing a splendid job of playing all of the right kinds of music .

“He’ll be here,” Bing assured as he glanced at Hensley with apprehension in his eyes and then at his watch. “His flight must’ve been delayed. He takes pride in being punctual.”

Hensley bit her lower lip, blinking back tears that threatened to spill over her eyelashes. She simply must not cry, and especially not in front of Caroline.

He’d promised he’d be there, but they were well into the final hour of the dance, and he had yet to appear.

She’d grown weary of waiting on his limo and had made the decision to drive herself to the dance without him.

Her silver dress, with its five tiers of sparkling fringe was too pretty to hide away.

It matched her jeweled headband and silver dancing shoes too.

Bing had danced with Jen numerous times. Then he'd danced twice with Caroline and twice with Hensley to ensure they each had a good time. But Jen now seemed put out with him for some reason and tapped a foot.

Caroline leaned toward them. "Wait until Blake gets here, only to realize he has cut his entire trip short to return for a shindig with a balloon arch, cookies served on paper plates, and punch served in paper cups instead of a proper venue with chandeliers and canapes."

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Bing rolled his eyes and turned to his sister. “I’ll have you know that Blake was proud of the fact that he ate on paper plates several times a week while he was in Wyoming.”

Hensley exchanged a glance with Jen and then angled toward Caroline. It was time someone stood up to her. “It might surprise you to know that Blake was all for serving our fundraiser guests on disposable tablecloths with paper plates and plastic utensils until I talked him out of it.”

Caroline only shrugged in response, still wearing a smirk.

It occurred to Hensley that the woman was desperately miserable and needed Jesus.

Why hadn’t she figured this out sooner? She’d have to pray for her and wait for another opportunity to share the love of Christ. Maybe Jen could do the same.

She’d probably already done so in a hundred little ways, knowing her sister as she did.

The main doors opened, and Blake finally strode into the large hall wearing a black tuxedo, just as he’d said he would. Hensley released a quick breath, her heart beating rapidly. He’d finally arrived!

He spotted her right away. Reaching her side, he handed her a huge bouquet of roses and kissed her cheek. Whispering in her ear, he added, “You look stunning! I’m so sorry I’m late. My flight was delayed. I came as soon as I could. Drove like a madman.”

Hensley nodded, accepting the roses he thrust into her hands. Part of her wanted to shuck them over her shoulder. Couldn't he have taken an earlier flight or returned yesterday to prevent all of this from happening the way it had? But he did look terribly handsome in his tux.

"I'll make it up to you," Blake whispered as he raked a hand through his hair. "I promise."

The man who worried about her career interfering with their lives had let his interfere.

Did he see the predicament he'd put her in?

It had been embarrassing, to say the least. She had made it clear to him how important this dance was to her when they'd talked about it several days ago on the phone.

Kit sauntered over to them. "Oh, hello, Blake. Glad you could make it. Have any of you seen Lula? Or Wickham? Mother's looking for them."

Blake's brow shot up. "I was looking for Wickham too."

"Lula snapped some photos of couples for a while, and then they danced to a few songs, but I think she and Wickham left about oh, twenty minutes ago," Jen replied. "They were probably going out to eat."

"Okay, I'll let Mother know. Thanks." Kit hurried away to where their parents and Grandmother were seated with some of their friends.

Blake turned toward Hensley. "Would you like to dance? "

She bit her lower lip again. Reluctantly, she nodded, setting the bouquet of red roses on a nearby chair.

He reached for her hand, and she allowed him to lead her toward the other couples dancing in the center of the large room.

She was happy to see him, after all. Was it safe to swipe a tear away now that Caroline couldn't see her face as they made their way past dozens of other couples?

What a difficult evening! Not at all as she had imagined.

He held her close as they danced to "Chances Are" by Johnny Mathis when MaryAnne began switching the music up to more modern tunes. They clasped hands, and she leaned her head on his shoulder.

She'd been asked at least ten times where Blake was. Each time someone asked her that, it had added fuel to the fire, infuriating her. Caroline only fanned the flames with her snide remarks.

They danced to the next three songs, including one called a "Tennessee Waltz." Hensley did her best to recover from her agitated state, pushing aside the turmoil from his absence along with all the other agitations.

How did couples stay married? There must be a constant state of forgiveness and an intentional pursuit of remaining content and joyful in all circumstances going on between the partners in marriage.

How else would they survive the disappointment of human faults and life's challenges?

Ready for a break from dancing, they headed for their seats. "Would you like to step

outside for some fresh air, so we can talk? Maybe we could go somewhere for a late dinner? Or take a stroll through town and enjoy the night life?" Blake's brow arched as he held her hand.

She nodded now that some of her tension had released. "Yes, let's step outside and talk about it."

But when they wound their way to an exit and stepped onto the sidewalk, Jen and Bing were arguing a short distance away. It was unlike Jen to raise her voice, but it carried to where she stood with Blake. She heard Jen mentioning Caroline. It was the frosting on the cake to a difficult evening.

"Let's just get out of here," Hensley said. "I think I'm ready to go home, to be honest."

"Sure," he nodded, seeming to understand and helpless all at the same time. "I'm sorry. It seems I've ruined the night."

She started walking briskly toward the parking lot and he followed as words tumbled out of her mouth and she swiped tears away.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm so happy you're home.

And I really and truly appreciate that you went to a lot of trouble coming home a whole week early to be here tonight.

And I know you don't have any control over the airlines, but it's not just the fact that you arrived so late. "

A solitary tear rolled down her cheek and a lump welled in her throat.

She could not remind him that the event had been important to her.

Or that he'd let her down. Or that she hadn't had a dance partner for most of the evening.

Or that she had waited for the limo that never arrived with her knight in shining armor and they hadn't been able to go to dinner beforehand.

Nor would she belabor the fact Caroline kept opening the wound of his absence and diminishing the evening with her condescending remarks.

Or that she'd missed him all week. Instead, she sighed.

“And I've forgotten the beautiful roses you brought me inside the community center .
..”

“It's all right. If I hadn't wasted so much time trying to figure out what happened to Wickham and why he didn't respond to any of my texts, I could have been here earlier. Don't worry about the flowers.”

She waved a hand to her side as they continued walking through the parking lot.

“Nor is it the fact that everyone has been asking me where you were. Or the fact I finally just drove myself here, alone, and walked in alone. And held my head up and found my sister and Bing. But now, to see them arguing, and knowing who's behind their argument, it's not sitting well with me.

” Was she rambling at this point with disappointment and frustration in her tone?

“And, well, it's just been a difficult evening with all of this happening on the one night that should have been so beautiful.

If you could just walk me to my jeep, I'd appreciate it.

I had to park in the last row because I also arrived late, because I waited so long for you, and then it was a long walk inside.

I just need to go home before I say or do something I might regret later. ”

“I understand. I am completely at fault for most of this, except that I can't control the airlines being late. But I won't say anything else that might make this worse.” He snapped his mouth shut and continued to walk beside her until they reached her jeep.

She figured he knew better than to attempt a kiss good night.

She drove home in silence, letting the tears stream down her face.

What a perfectly horrible evening! Jen and Bing had sounded very much like they were breaking up.

Was that what bothered her more than anything else?

Was she sobbing because she was heartbroken for her sister?

BLAKE SIGHED THE NEXT afternoon. He sure had messed up.

And now he paced on Hensley's front porch, waiting for the housekeeper, Sarah, to return and lead him to her.

Or for Hensley herself to appear. By now, the maid had seen him a few times before, but she sure was taking a long time.

And Hensley hadn't been answering his texts or calls.

He'd missed church, so he didn't know if Hensley had attended, but he doubted it after how the dance had gone.

So, he'd driven over in his red truck. Mainly because he couldn't find Wickham and had no idea where the fellow had parked his limo.

It wasn't in his garage. And he didn't think it was an oil change day, so where would Wickham have taken it? He'd have to figure that out later.

First things first. Hensley meant far more to him than the limo.

What to do to set things right? After last night, he feared he'd broken her heart.

His hope was that after she'd had a good night's sleep, if he took her on a date out on the town, that somehow, he might be able to make up for things and present the engagement ring he'd purchased in Rockport. Would it make up for the whole fiasco?

In truth, he'd gone to Rockport, not just on business, but to make up his mind about the most important decision of his life. Caroline had confused him, and probably Bing too, with her denigrating though subtle remarks about the Fitzwilliam sisters. But there was no denying that he was in love.

Caroline was Bing's snobby kid sister. An uppity Manhattan socialite.

And the farther away from New York that he traveled, the clearer that became.

In any case, after talking with his brother, Brandon, he'd purchased a ring.

Brandon and Stephanie were immensely happy with married life.

It had encouraged him. But last night had not turned out as he'd hoped.

He should have taken a flight home the day before, and now he kicked himself.

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The front door opened and Hensley's grandmother, Mrs. Lonsdale, stepped outside, closing the door behind her. "Hello, Blake. How nice to see you. I'm afraid to tell you that Hensley isn't feeling well."

He removed his cowboy hat and raked a hand through his hair, his brows furrowing. "I was afraid you'd say that. And I think it's all my fault."

Mrs. Lonsdale tilted her head to one side. "Come, sit with me on the porch. It's a lovely afternoon, but there's trouble in the household. Why don't we chat?"

He nodded, following her, unsure of what to expect. Would she tell him that he'd failed her granddaughter miserably and ask him not to return? Surely, she already knew that he'd shown up late for the dance and had broken Hensley's heart in a thousand ways.

He wasn't too sure he could handle a lecture, but he probably deserved it.

He'd have to grin and bear it. She patted one of the cushioned chairs facing the front lawn and he sat where she indicated.

But she'd mentioned trouble in the household.

Maybe she alluded to something else. So, he repeated her words. "Trouble in the household?"

Mrs. Lonsdale nodded. "Lula didn't come home from the dance last night.

Wickham allegedly escorted her to the dance, according to what we've been able to piece together.

I guess he managed to pick her up in that limousine of yours at some point, according to Kit.

I don't know who he found to drive it or if he drove it himself and left her sitting in the back all by herself.

But everyone is in prayer, hoping she will be returned to us unharmed.

It is likely that our reputation and hers will surely suffer a great deal of damage, at least in the eyes of the church.

Tongues will wag. Unless we can keep this to ourselves and find her quickly, that is.

But knowing Lula, someone has spotted her by now. She's kind of hard to miss."

He did his best not to chuckle at the last remark, under the circumstances, but Mrs. Lonsdale cracked a smile.

This news explained some things, like the fact that his limo had probably not come home, and that it had been used without his permission to take Lula to the dance.

But it did not explain everything. For instance, how had Hensley been waiting for it if it had arrived earlier to pick up Lula? And where was it now?

Evidently, Hensley didn't know it had arrived earlier or that Wickham had absconded with her sister.

Surely, she would have mentioned that minor detail if she'd known about it.

But no, she'd specifically said she had waited for him to arrive in the limo as he'd said he would, had his flight been on time.

It was all part of why he was as late as he was.

The limo was not at home and did not meet him at the airport.

He'd taken a taxi home, changed into his tux, and driven his truck to the dance.

And if he'd seen Wickham at the dance, he'd have knocked him silly.

"That is deeply concerning, Mrs. Lonsdale. The limo didn't come home last night either, from what I can tell." He could tell her that much. "And I'm not sure where Wickham is. Which is why I drove the pickup here."

She glanced at his truck, parked a few feet away in the gravel driveway. "And there's more. It seems Bing and Jenny have broken up, and that Caroline may have something to do with that incident."

Blake sighed. He wasn't sure what he could say about that. But he knew how difficult Bing's sister could be. She'd disposed of that porcupine puffer belly fish within the first few hours of her arrival.

"And I'm sad to say that I'm not sure if Hensley is ready to see you. She is very upset, but we all know that you don't control the airlines." Mrs. Lonsdale reached over and patted his hand.

At least she spoke with reason. That gave him some hope.

Maybe he should ask for her advice. "Mrs. Lonsdale, I bought an engagement ring for Hensley. But I haven't found the right moment to ask her or give it to her yet.

I should probably ask her father first. But it seems I've made a mess of things. Do you have any words of wisdom?"

She smiled, and nodding, leaned toward him from her seat. "Well, if I were you, I'd pull a Darcy move."

"A Darcy move?" He blinked, not understanding.

"I see you are not all that familiar with Mr. Darcy." Mrs. Lonsdale glanced at him with a question in her eyes.

"I've seen the play, but I'm not sure if I'm following you," he confessed.

"In literature, he is the best of the best where heroes are concerned. And my granddaughter, Hensley, as her mother will tell you, tends to live in a daydream world made up of all things Darcy, like many girls do. I'm sure I did at her age.

She'll respond to someone who behaves like a perfect gentleman would, like Mr. Darcy. "

He blinked again and tilted his head. He didn't have a clue about this Mr. Darcy other than he was wealthy, the ladies seemed to like him, and he was somewhat arrogant in the beginning.

He had behaved heroically by the end of the play.

But maybe, if he could keep her talking a little while longer, he could figure out her definition of what a Darcy move was all about, at least in this case.

"Ladies all seem to have a particular idea about what constitutes how a gentleman would behave. Do you think you could give me some specific examples, I mean, uh,

in this particular situation?”

She nodded. “Oh, yes. Most definitely. I’d start by finding that wicked boy, Wickham, and what he’s done with my granddaughter, Hensley’s sister, our silly Lula.

If he’s compromised her, and he has in my opinion by not bringing her home by her midnight curfew without a good reason—like a tornado, for instance—well, then he should have to make it right by her.

He’s ruined her reputation, though I know these days, a great many young ladies behave in a far worse manner. ”

He couldn’t disagree, so he nodded. Probably best not to linger on the topic of modern women and how some of them behaved.

“And then, I’d straighten out the matter with Bing and Jen.

If anyone hurts her sister Jen, Hensley won’t have anything to do with them.

They are very close, you know. And then, I’d do everything in my power to get Caroline back together with that boyfriend of hers.

Or at least put her on the next flight out of Dodge.

Maybe she’d buy a wedding dress from Hensley.

That might go a long way to setting things to right, but then we need to get that young lady on an airplane headed east. Or south.

Or southeast. Or somewhere. Anywhere but here.

She is somewhat conniving and problematic, as I'm sure you are aware, having known her most of your life. ”

He chuckled, nodding. Conniving Caroline. And problematic. That was all true. Mrs. Lonsdale didn't miss a thing. “I do not disagree with you about Caroline. She means well, but it usually comes out all wrong. And then what would you do?”

“Then, I'd talk to Hensley's father at some point.

Maybe when you find Lula and Wickham. I'd make sure you are willing and able to support my granddaughter's goals, dreams, and ambitions.

Without a vision, the people perish. If you can't give her wings to fly, you won't measure up to Mr. Darcy.

” Mrs. Lonsdale folded her hands neatly in her lap and smiled at him with a mischievous gleam in her eye, like the one he'd seen the first time he'd met her.

“And after all of that, I think you stand a good chance of becoming my grandson by marriage. That is, if you keep Hensley informed along the way, via a few texts as you check off the boxes.”

He nodded. “Understood. I'll do my best, but consider it done. I should get to work on it right away.”

“I'll be praying for you.” She rose from her seat with a smile, her blue eyes dancing.

Now he knew why Hensley had blue eyes.

“I won't delay you any further. But I should mention there is a nice little church called Wildwood Chapel in Gatlinburg.

My son-in-law is the pastor there once a month on Sunday afternoons.

They do drive-thru and in-house weddings.

He'll be more than happy to officiate a marriage between Lula and Wickham.

They'll need a license, but maybe you can figure a way around it.

They can have something public later perhaps, after her parents aren't quite so disappointed with her and Wickham's behavior.

But that chapel is only open until five o'clock in the afternoon on Sundays, so you may want to step on the gas pedal a bit.

I'd best get back inside and see if I can get anymore prayers through to Heaven. ”

“Thank you, Mrs. Lonsdale.” He slid his hat back on his head. “I'll need all the prayers I can get to pull off this Mr. Darcy thing.”

In other words, she expected him to get Wickham and Lula to the altar, and ‘right quick-like,’ as his Wyoming friends Logan, Jed, and McGuire would say.

“I believe you're almost there. If anyone can do it, you can.” She winked at him and disappeared inside the house.

He sighed but appreciated her vote of confidence. He sure had his work cut out. First, to find Lula and Wickham. Where would they have gone? It couldn't be that hard to find them, considering it was not easy to hide a limo, or Lula for that matter. She was too bold and cantankerous to hide.

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They forgot everything the minute they were together again.

—Emily Bronte

IT WAS EASIER THAN Blake expected to find Lula and Wickham.

After driving down Gooseberry Lane and having no success at spotting the limo, he turned onto Dogwood Drive and headed north.

Lula was a photographer. And what was the most beautiful thing in the area?

The mountains. And Wickham wouldn't risk his job completely.

Which gave him a hunch. He headed back to Deerpark Cabins.

After driving down each road leading to an already constructed cabin on the property, most of them tucked into secluded wooded areas, he spotted the limo parked at the last of the completed cabins.

Of course, Wickham would have chosen the one that was farthest away and the most secluded.

He parked the pickup and climbed out, his hands balling into fists as he walked to the cabin door.

He pounded loudly. And again, when there was no answer.

Wickham finally opened the door, blinking, his mouth stuck open.

Lula sauntered up from behind him, disheveled, wrapping herself at his side until it seemed as if she was hanging on his arm.

At least they were wearing robes, and if he wasn't mistaken, guest robes the cabin provided.

Blake's jaw tightened and he grimaced. "I'd knock the daylight out of you, Lewis, except I don't want Lula to end up with a wedding photo of you with a black eye, a busted nose, and missing teeth.

If you want any chance of keeping your job without me pressing charges for theft of this cabin and the limo, you'll both be dressed and outside in two minutes, ready to head to Gatlinburg's wedding chapel.

Otherwise, I'm calling the police and you're both going to jail. "

"The wedding ch-chapel?" Wickham stammered while Lula's brows shot up.

Blake crossed his arms over his chest. "You didn't think you could steal Lula's honor and the reputation of her family without making it right, did you?

You will marry the girl. You've shacked up in one of my cabins overnight, and it won't be long before the whole town knows.

What's it going to be? A happy marriage with Lula, or jailtime for you and your accomplice? "

"You wouldn't consider me an accomplice, Blake, would you?" Lula protested, her eyes widening. Softening her voice, she leaned closer to Wickham, "Not that I mind

marrying Lewis. We are in love, after all.”

“I guess it’s up to you then, Wickham. Will it be jailtime for auto theft, breaking and entering, and cabin rental theft?” Blake arched his brows, feet apart, arms crossed over his chest, and stood firm.

Wickham glanced at Lula. “I didn’t mean any harm. We were planning to make it right, and I didn’t think you’d mind about the limo and the cabin. Where’s that license, Lula, so we can show it to Blake?”

“On the counter where we left it last night.” Lula stepped away and rummaged through some papers strewn across the kitchen peninsula. She returned, holding it up. “But we aren’t ready for our elopement until I have time to shop for the perfect dress.”

Blake reached for his cell and held it up.

Wickham raised a hand. “No, no, we’ll be ready in two minutes. Lula, throw something on. We’re getting married sooner than we planned.”

“Make sure you bring that marriage license,” Blake warned. Phew! That was one less thing to worry about since everything was closed on Sundays in their county. He whispered up a prayer of thanks that the Lord had seen to that.

But Lula’s mouth dropped wide open, an indignant expression forming on her face.

“I don’t have a proper wedding dress ...

only what I wore to the dance last night.

” But one glance at Blake was all it took for her to begin sobbing, though Wickham

told her to stop blubbering unless she preferred spending the night in jail.

When they came out of the cabin, Blake told Wickham to resume his seat behind the wheel of the limo and gave him the name of the Wildwood Chapel as their destination.

Wickham entered it into the GPS. Blake held open the passenger door for Lula and she climbed into the back seat in a huff, tossing her purse in first. She'd have to sit across from him, sniffing all the way to Gatlinburg.

"I wanted the perfect dress for our wedding day." Lula pouted. "We aren't ready. No arrangements have been made yet."

"Your father will be there," Blake explained. "I'd just like to know how you and Wickham stole the limo. It's the one missing detail here."

"Lewis told me you wouldn't mind, but that I'd have to meet him at The Gathering Place," Lula informed him.

"I see. Is that true, Wickham?"

"Yes, she drove to the diner and then I drove us to the community center. We arrived early and left early. I parked across the street behind some shrubs in another parking lot in both instances so no one would notice," Lewis explained while keeping his eyes on the road. "And I apologize, sir. I overstepped."

Blake maintained a stern face. Lula continued to pout. And Wickham drove on in silence.

At the chapel, Blake found Lula's father in the vestibule and brought him up to speed on the situation while an assistant hovered nearby.

One glance at his daughter and Lewis Wickham in their state of frenzy made Hensley's father's eyes mist. He thanked Blake, cleared his throat, reviewed Wickham's license to marry his daughter, and turned a stern eye on Wickham and Lula.

She attempted another protest. "I did eventually plan on a big wedding after our elopement, but not this private little ceremony without a proper wedding dress. And we were planning on telling you about our elopement and our bigger wedding plans too."

"You can have a big wedding after you save your own money for it," her father said with sorrow in his eyes.

"I would have paid for it all, but now you've gone and thrown away our trust by spending the night with a man out of wedlock.

You will make this right before the Lord and marry this man, seeing as how you have told me for weeks on end that you love and adore him.

And you will go and live with him directly after this ceremony.

You will not come directly home. You may bring him over for dinner in a month or two, when your mother and sisters are over the shock and worry you've caused.

We'll need some space to adapt to our new son-in-law.

" Here, he cleared his throat and glanced sternly at Wickham.

"We've been worried sick about your whereabouts since last night when you disappeared after the dance.

Your mother hadn't even been to bed yet when I left for the chapel. ”

“I'm sorry I distressed you and everyone, Father.” Lula's eyes misted, but she seemed to understand her father meant business as he turned and took his place at the pulpit.

Her awkward glance at Blake reaffirmed that their options were few. Wickham attempted to straighten his sloppy tie. He hung his head, unable to do much but stare straight ahead in disgrace. As her father faced them from behind the pulpit, Wickham muttered, “I'm sorry, sir.”

Blake only had to nod and the two proceeded toward the altar.

Blake would remain present as a witness until the ceremony was over, and as added insurance that they wouldn't try any funny business.

Hensley's father kept it short. When he pronounced them husband and wife, the assistant who'd heard the entire fiasco snapped a photo and led them all to sign the official documents.

Lula's face conveyed her horror at having their photo taken in their present state, but she didn't object.

She might appreciate the memory later. Blake followed to sign as a witness.

Reverend Fitzwilliam drew Blake aside when he'd finished signing the marriage certificate and other paperwork, thanking him again. “I appreciate all you've done.”

“I'll tell Wickham to take three weeks off and give Lula a proper honeymoon, preferably somewhere away from Tennessee until things settle, but he'll need to call a cab for a ride back to his own vehicle.

I will likely assign him to a different job when he returns to work until I can trust him again with vehicles and cabin keys. ”

Hensley’s father nodded. “That’s very generous of you. I hope that they can both earn our trust again.”

The man was surely not in the best of moods, but Blake ought to ask before he lost the nerve. “There’s something else I’ve been ... uh ... meaning to ask you.” He raked a hand through his hair.

“What can I do for you, Blake? Something else on your mind?” Reverend Fitzwilliam leaned his head to one side.

“May I ask permission to ... to marry your daughter, sir?” There, he’d finally spit it out.

“Before I say yes, may I ask which of my four other daughters you are asking for?” His brows arched.

“Hensley June Fitzwilliam, sir.” Was he absentminded, or just making sure of the facts?

It was true a girl could fall in and out of love quickly.

He’d seen it happen, and not in his favor.

Maybe the man was making sure of the facts.

When the reverend grinned, he could safely assume he was not absentminded.

Blake figured it was partly his way of cracking a joke to ease the tension.

“I was hoping you’d get around to this. If Hensley will have you, I give you my blessing, especially after all you’ve done to save our family from a most deplorable situation.” Hensley’s father shook hands with him and patted him on the back.

“Thank you, sir.” Smiling, he shook hands with him and after having a word with Wickham, strode outside to the limo, and climbed in behind the wheel.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:13 am

Onward to Bing's house to deal with that mess.

He texted his friend to let him know he was on the way over.

Some prayers wouldn't hurt, so he prayed, asking the Lord for more help, especially regarding Caroline.

Then he texted Hensley to let her know her sister and Wickham were now married by her father, who would explain the particulars shortly.

Half an hour later, he parked in the driveway in front of the A-frame beside a vehicle he didn't recognize and headed inside when Bing greeted him at the door.

"Come in. We have company. Caroline's boyfriend arrived this morning from El Salvador in his private jet.

It's why I wasn't at church." Bing gestured to a man with jet black hair standing near the front windows in the living room, gazing out at the mountain views.

"Caroline is returning with him to Manhattan. They've patched things up and are getting married in a few months. "

"That is possibly some of the best news I've heard all day.

" The Lord had answered this prayer too.

Blake glanced around as they stepped closer for an introduction, but no sign of Bing's

sister.

“Where is your sister? Is she going to condone your happiness and freedom to marry the woman you love before she pursues her happiness?”

Caroline breezed into the living room while wheeling a suitcase along behind.

“Yes, as a matter of fact I am. I know I said that the Fitzwilliam sisters seemed like country bumpkins, but it was only said out of my own misery, and maybe a bit of jealousy. You two had found your happiness, but mine was missing. For that, I owe you both an apology.” She paused directly in front of Bing, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“I planted seeds of doubt that may linger for some time, but you must know, I never meant a word of it. I was wrong. Once I got to know them, I realized Jen and Hensley have more class than most ladies in my own circle of friends.” She turned toward Blake with a sincere and apologetic expression before turning back to her brother. “I owe you an apology too, Blake.”

“Accepted. Does this mean you will consider purchasing your custom wedding gown from Hensley’s Wedding Creations?” Blake crossed his arms over his chest.

Caroline smiled. “You know, I rather like the sound of that. I’ll text her on our way to the airport.

Let’s say our goodbyes. We’ll see each other soon enough at all of our weddings.

And before we head to the airport,” she motioned to her boyfriend who stepped over to them, “Blake, I’d like you to meet Carlos Maldonado, my fiancé.

” Then she held up a hand featuring an engagement ring.

Blake hadn't seen her this happy in years. She was smiling. He shook hands with Carlos. "Nice to meet you. Congratulations to you both."

Bing hugged his sister tight. "I'm going to propose to Jen today, if she'll still have me. I hope you'll be a better sister-in-law than the frenemy you've been."

Blake smiled and gave her a quick hug. Thank you, Lord! He spotted the porcupine puffer belly fish, the ugly thing back in its place. "You didn't throw it away and you gave it a prime location?"

Caroline smirked when Blake crossed to the fireplace mantle. Then they all laughed.

"WHO'S AT THE DOOR?" Kit glanced up at Sarah from her seat at the table in the breakfast nook.

Father had been home for less than an hour, and with cups of coffee and tea, Hensley and her sisters—minus Lula—and Mother, were digesting the news of Lula's wedding to Wickham.

Hensley kept staring at Blake's text. She could hardly believe Lula was now a married woman, and that Blake had spared them from so much gossip.

In a small town like Dogwood Creek, it wouldn't have taken long for their reputations to go downhill.

"It's Bing, but not for you, Miss Kit," Sarah informed her.

"For Jen?" MaryAnne's eyes widened, as did Jen's and Hensley's.

Even Mother, who paced in the kitchen leveled a curious glance at the housekeeper.

"No, he's asking for the man of the house." Sarah smiled and winked at Jen. "I'll

show him into your father's office.”

Hensley's brows shot up, and Jen's eyes widened. What a strange day this was turning out to be. Mother stopped pacing and leaned against a counter, arms crossed, contemplating Lula, no doubt. But this news caused her to perk up with a weak smile.

“I'll make some more coffee.” Emma Fitzwilliam reached for the coffee cannister. “And someone should text Lula and remind her to pick up her car from The Gathering Place before she goes on her honeymoon. Maybe Bing would like a cup of coffee ... when he steps out of your father's office.”

They all knew ‘Father's office’ was the same thing as his ‘den’ and ‘library,’ due to the fact there were so many bookshelves lining the walls and a flat screen television installed above the fireplace, his desk angled in a corner where he could write his newspaper column.

Hensley released a sigh and sipped the last few drops of coffee in her mug.

Now there would be a different kind of gossip, about Lula marrying before she and Jen did.

But that couldn't be helped. Like it or not, it was a far better kind of gossip than Wickham bedding Lula overnight at one of Blake's cabins.

That much they'd overheard Father explain to Mother.

Sarah had taken their father's dinner to him in the den ten minutes ago, but now she led Bing through the living room and into the den to have a word with him.

Hensley and Jen raced past their mother on tiptoe to the dining room to listen at the other door connecting to Father's office.

But they could only make out a few words and returned to the breakfast nook when the floor creaked minutes later.

Sarah returned to the kitchen shortly after. “Bing is waiting on the front porch and would like to speak with Jen. Should I tell him you’ll be there in a moment?”

Mother smiled, nodding, her eyes dancing. “Yes, tell him Jen will be right there.”

Jen rose from her seat, took two steps forward, and froze. She spun around. “How does my hair look?”

Hensley giggled and rolled her eyes. “Go, Jen! He won’t care what your hair looks like. It’s fine though. Your knight in shining armor has arrived ...” She shooed her onward.

When Jen stepped out onto the front porch, Hensley, Kit, MaryAnne, and Mother, crept into the parlor and crowded around a front window, peeking at the discussion between Bing and Jen. Sarah pulled Grandmother away from her crochet to participate in the spying.

The talking between Bing and Jen went on for a little while, but Hensley and the ladies of the household managed to remain hidden amid the folds of the drapes.

Bing held Jen’s hands. Then, he went down on bended knee.

Hensley released a sigh. If only she could squeal to release the joy she held for her sister.

Father chuckled from somewhere behind them as Bing kissed Jen’s hand, and they all turned and shushed him.

Bing was on bended knee, after all, and presenting a jewelry box with a ring inside it!

A few seconds ticked by, but Jen was saying yes, flinging her arms around Bing.

He picked her up and swung her around. Then the couple burst through the front door into the foyer.

One by one, the family filed out of the parlor as if they had no idea of all that had transpired.

Jen held out her hand, showing off a sparkling diamond ring .

Hensley, jumping up and down as she embraced the happy couple, was so happy herself, she could almost burst. Except for the fact Blake had not come to her side yet. Had she ruined it between them? Pushed him away for good?

Bing spoke up then. “Hensley, my sister has reunited with her boyfriend. He’s from El Salvador.”

Hensley’s brow arched. This news she had not discovered from Blake in a text yet.

“She’ll be texting to ask if you would be willing to create a custom wedding gown for her if she sends the measurements and if you can mail it to Manhattan.”

Her cell beeped with two incoming texts, one after the other. Caroline. Then Blake.

“I think that could be arranged. I’ll n-need some ideas of what kind of dress she has in mind,” Hensley stammered. This sounded like good news. “She’s texting me now.” And Blake’s text echoed their current conversation.

Bing smiled. “That’s great. She’s flying to New York this evening, but she asked me to thank you ladies for putting up with her during a difficult time in her life.”

This was very good news indeed.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE Fitzwilliam family opted for breakfast in the formal dining room because of its view of the rear garden through the French doors.

Hensley took the day off. The weekend had been exhausting, to say the least. She placed Kit and MaryAnne in charge and off they went to the boutique, leaving her, Jen, and the rest of the household in peace.

With Lula away on her honeymoon, the house seemed exceptionally quiet .

“I think I’ll take a stroll in the garden and drink my coffee out there. Everything is in bloom ... and it’s such a nice sunny morning,” Hensley announced.

Mother nodded as she nibbled at her scrambled eggs. Father muttered something similar, buried in his edition of the newspaper. Jen glanced up and smiled at her with a nod, but she returned to gazing at her engagement ring. Grandmother nodded, clutching her coffee mug. “That’s nice, dear.”

Hensley slipped through the French doors and stepped down to stroll along the brick garden path.

How could it be that Blake had managed to resolve all of the issues that had only yesterday been ripping them all apart?

She didn’t know exactly, but a man like him was hard to find.

Would he come to her soon? Should she go to him?

Had he given up trying to win her affection because she’d been so upset on the night of the dance?

But while she contemplated this very thing, footsteps sounded on the bricks.

She turned to see Blake coming toward her.

She set her coffee aside on a bench. They met in the middle, and she clasped hands with him.

It seemed surreal, the two of them in the garden, early in the morning, when they were usually both at work.

“Blake ...” Where to begin? The last time she’d seen him, it hadn’t gone so well.

But things had changed. How could she ever begin to thank him?

He’d rescued Lula, saved their family from malicious gossip, somehow encouraged Bing to restore things with Jen, and he probably had encouraged Caroline to order a custom wedding dress from her boutique.

Did he have anything to do with her return to Manhattan? Perhaps that too.

“Hello, Blue Eyes.” He smiled, those dimples showing.

“Hello.” A nervous laugh escaped her lips as heat warmed her cheeks and she glanced away. Before her stood the man who had done so much for her and her family too.

He looked down, finding her eyes once more, their gazes melding, locking on each other.

“Tell me ... I have to know. If you tell me to go away and never bother you again, I will. I will accept your answer, wishing you only happiness and everything good. But please tell me if I have any hope at all of winning your hand after the mess I’ve made of things?”

And before you answer, you must know how much I promise to support all of your dreams, hopes, and plans.

There is so much I want to do for you, and for your business too, and for us.

Tell me, do I have any hope? Is love in bloom for us?

Can we create our own garden of joy, love, peace, and faith?

” He waved a hand toward the mid-spring blossoms on their right.

Peonies, mounds of phlox, marigolds, petunias, and snapdragons—all of them spreading their delicate petals toward the sky. “Or am I forever lost without you?”

When had they fallen in love? She couldn’t say for sure, only that she knew they had. “Love is in bloom, my darling.” Her arms reached up and clasped around his neck, a smile on her face.

“Is it true?” His eyes searched hers. “You will marry me?”

Ahh, how she had waited for this moment! Yet now that it was here, she was perfectly enraptured and tongue-tied. But words weren’t needed. She was nodding, and their lips met for a long and fiery kiss amid the garden blooms and butterflies.

THE END