

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

*Love Inspired*TM®

Rescued by the
Firefighter
Gail Gaymer Martin



Mills & Boon Love Inspired

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Rescued by the Firefighter

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A Fresh Start Paula Reynolds is looking for a new job, a new home, a new everything—except for love. Determined not to repeat old mistakes, she's staying away from romance. She never counted on falling for handsome firefighter Clint Donatelli. Clint is used to saving lives, but with the beautiful Paula, he faces a challenge. Getting to know her is a daunting task, especially since he's just as wary of relationships. When he learns a stunning secret from her past, he must choose—to live the way he's always lived, or trust in a new love.

Содержание

MILLS & BOON	6
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	22

A Fresh Start

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“You seem to know what it takes
to cheer me up.”

“Distraction, but it’s too far to drive here all the time. I’ll have to think of other ways to preoccupy you more often.” He grinned, his index finger tapping his cheek. “How about...”

She took advantage of his pause. “How about you being my distraction?” Her pulse skipped as the thought grew and the words slipped out.

He looked surprised but it faded to a wide smile. “That’s the best idea I’ve heard in a long time. I’m happy to do the job, ma’am. I promise to be one big distraction from now on.”

She loved his smile. “I hope you keep your promise.” He opened the car door and she slipped inside, aware that telling him about her mother had lifted a burden from her shoulders. She’d never told a living soul, and he’d listened without judgment and made her feel less guilty than she’d felt in years.

GAIL GAYMER MARTIN

A former counselor and educator, I’ve enjoyed this career as an author, writing women’s fiction, romance and romantic suspense since my first book in 1998, with this being my fifty-second novel. My books have been honored with many national awards, and I have more than three and a half million books in print. I’ve also authored *Writing the Christian Romance*, released by Writers Digest Books. A cofounder of American Christian Fiction Writers, I’m also a member of the ACFW Great Lakes Chapter, RWA and three RWA chapters. When not writing, I enjoy traveling, speaking at churches and libraries, and presenting writing workshops across the country. Music is another love, and I spend many hours involved in singing as a soloist, praise leader and choir member at my church, where I also play handbells and handchimes. I sing with one of the finest Christian chorales in Michigan, the Detroit Lutheran Singers. I’m a lifelong resident of Michigan and live with my husband, Bob, in the Detroit suburbs. Visit my website at www.gailgaymermartin.com, or write to me at P.O. Box 760063, Lathrup Village, MI 48076, or at gail@gailgaymermartin.com. I enjoy hearing from readers.

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But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light,
we have fellowship with one another,
and the blood of Jesus, his Son,
purifies us from all sin.

—1 John 1:7

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Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Recipe](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Questions for Discussion](#)

[Extract](#)

Chapter One

Paula Reynolds looked down the church aisle and watched the guests being seated. She felt as jittery as the bride. She checked her watch and studied her cousin. "How are you doing?"

"Nervous...and anxious." Ashley sent her a playful grin. "Today my life changes forever."

Paula gave a nod, unable to voice the words that were caught in her throat. Forever had been her cousin's hopes when she married Adam, but fate had had other plans. Ashley had endured a bitter

blow when Adam had died in Afghanistan, leaving her and a baby son he'd never met. The memory overwhelmed Paula.

She moved closer, trying to avoid crushing Ashley's wedding gown, and gave her a hug. "I'm so happy for you."

Ashley's eyes grew misty. "I know you are." She held Paula in her embrace and gave her a squeeze.

"Don't wrinkle that gorgeous dress." She eased out of Ashley's arms and shifted back toward the doorway to wait for the music to signal her down the aisle. A bridesmaid. She'd never have believed it six months ago.

Images swept through her, filling her with longing. She wished she'd had siblings of her own, but she smiled now, enjoying the friendship of her two cousins, who'd hurried to her side when they'd learned of her mother's death. They'd opened their arms as if she were another sister. With their recent closeness, Ashley had asked her to be a bride's attendant. Make-believe sister or not, her cousins' love touched her more than anything had in years.

Silly how she'd worried that Ashley felt obligated to ask her, and to give Ashley an out, she'd insisted the honor wasn't necessary. Thankfully, her cousin's determination won over, and when Paula accepted, her heart had tripped and the ripple of pleasure surprised her.

Ashley had not only insisted she participate in the wedding, but the bride-to-be solicited her sister, Neely, and her to help select an appropriate wedding dress for a widow. They found the lovely gown Ashley wore today, a calf-length cream-colored dress with three-quarter sleeves and scooped neckline with a formfitting waist that fell in soft folds over Ashley's trim figure. Today her cousin looked gorgeous as she stood close to her father, who waited to walk her down the aisle.

Ashley beckoned to her again, concern on her face.

Paula hurried to her side. "What is it?"

"Is something wrong? You were looking at me, and I thought—"

"I was admiring your dress." She chuckled. "We all loved it the moment we saw it."

Tension vanished from Ashley's face. "Look at you. I've never seen you in a gown. You're beautiful."

No one had called her beautiful before. She lowered her gaze to the pastel coral dress she wore, a color in autumn leaves floating from the trees outside the church. "Thanks. I love it."

Images of fall flashed through her mind, a time of rejuvenation as the summer foliage took a rest anticipating a rebirth in spring. That was what she wanted for herself. Her lingering memories needed to be buried so her life could sprout new hope. Though her optimism didn't always deaden her difficult past, little by little she'd seen the sun. She had her cousins to thank for that.

"I love this time of year."

Ashley's voice cut through her thoughts. "I know. It's when Devon and I settled in as a couple following my accident." Her eyes grew misty. "I'll never forget waking that day with a gorgeous angel—"

"Angel?"

"Okay, it was Devon, but he was like an angel. He was peering at me and holding poor little Joey, who was so frightened." She blinked tears from her eyes. "He saved me in so many ways. He heard Joey crying and then saw the downed tree and came running."

"He's that kind of man, Ash, a gift after all you went through." Her cousin's remembrance filled her heart. She couldn't picture herself being rescued by anyone.

Ashley glanced at her dad and then her watch. "I wonder what's taking so long." She lifted concerned eyes to Paula. "Is Devon up front yet?"

Paula stepped back to the doorway and shook her head. "He'll be there." She drew back to her stance near the wall, her eyes on the chancel. The ceremony should have started five minutes earlier, but that was life, too. Things didn't always happen as planned.

With Ashley's past heartbreak in her mind, Paula wished this time her cousin's marriage would last a lifetime, the kind of union she'd dreamed about for years. Though still single at thirty-five, Paula would still enjoy Ashley's wedding and sometimes let her thoughts consider marriage to a wonderful man—whether it would happen or not.

Organ music diverted her from her thoughts. The men were filing out from somewhere, and she gave Ashley a thumbs-up. Her heart skipped as she began her trek down the aisle. Ahead, Devon, his brother, Derek, and his firefighter friend Clint Donatelli observed her slow pace to the front. Though uncomfortable with all eyes on her, she managed to concentrate on the happiness she'd found living in Ferndale, welcomed by her cousins and Uncle Fred, who had graciously invited her to stay with him until she found her own place. She'd do that one day. Soon, she hoped. But that precluded finding a job and finalizing her mother's estate. Too much to think about today.

The scent of the flowers drew her back, and she gazed at the men, still observing her snail-paced journey. She'd grown fond of Devon with his sturdy frame and not one ounce of fat—just solid muscle. So was his friend Clint, handsome in his dark suit, tall and lean, his Italian heritage reflected in his dark brown hair flecked with gray and classic features. But the stereotypical Italian image ended when it came to his deep blue eyes.

Clint was her idea of a perfect man, but those dreams, as much as she loved them, seemed out of reach. Her relationships with men had always ended in disappointment. Sometimes worse.

Drawing her focus from Clint, she concentrated on her long, slow trek. When she reached her place at the front, she turned to admire Neely gliding down the aisle, wearing a hunter-green dress shimmering in the light from the windows and carrying a bouquet the same as hers, a blend of autumn flowers—golden black-eyed Susans, orange roses, flame calla lilies, green hydrangea blossoms and burnt-orange hypericum berries.

The music grew louder, introducing the bridal fanfare. The guests rose and faced the entrance as Ashley moved forward on her father's arm. Startled by her tender feelings, Paula blinked to clear her blurred vision as tears sneaked from her eyes and formed rivulets down her cheeks. With everyone's attention on Ashley, she brushed away the moisture, digging deep to shoo away her emotion. This kind of reaction had been unwelcome in her life. Whatever bad happened, she'd always buried her emotions, unwilling to give way to something as useless as tears.

Ashley nudged her sister with the bridal bouquet, and Neely grasped it as Ashley and Devon exchanged vows. The familiar words swept over her, leaving her with questions. How could anyone promise to love someone forever, to be faithful and true to them in sickness and health until death? Her parents' lives had provided no example of love or faithfulness. Her own experiences left her empty and frustrated.

Instead of wasting time thinking about the past, she needed to focus on the future, just as Ashley was experiencing today. She studied Ashley's and Devon's faces, seeing what she'd never seen in her own reflection. Even Neely's gaze toward her husband, Jonny, seated in the second row, was filled with a kind of beauty that she'd always considered part of a fairy tale—Cinderella or Sleeping Beauty awakened with a kiss.

Her own experiences identified more with the Beauty facing the Beast but without the loving tears that turned the beast into a handsome prince. Instead of tears, her emotion had turned to ice. The man who'd promised her a lifetime of happiness but never offered her a ring had left her with a wounded heart and an empty purse. A longtime relationship filled with promises as cold as a winter ice storm.

But today the moisture in her eyes unleashed more positive thoughts. Could the new door that had opened with her uncle's family unlock her heart and her trust, as well? Life didn't always offer such choices. Yet here she was in a new environment surrounded by a supportive family.

As gentle as a breeze, the wedding kiss ended, and Ashley reached for her bouquet. On Devon's arm, she smiled at the guests as they moved down the aisle to greet them in the narthex before they

left for the hall. Neely latched arms with Devon's brother, and Clint stepped to Paula's side. Her pulse skipped when he locked his arm to hers, noting his strength beneath the dark suit that complemented his over-six-foot frame.

Her reaction frustrated her, but she managed a smile and ignored her pulse, which was galloping like an unbridled mare. Somewhere in her subconscious, an alert sounded. Vic had been out of her life for almost three years, but she still knew better than to even think romantic thoughts. Not again. She'd fallen prey before. Reacting to someone she barely knew put her on dangerous ground. Yet, despite her wise counsel, Clint melted the ice in her veins and sent warmth coursing through her. Her mental struggle floated away on the organ music. Today was about Ashley's wedding and not some kind of ridiculous fairy-tale moment.

* * *

Clint guided Paula down the aisle, surprised at her response when he'd taken her arm as the others had done. He didn't think of her as timid, but he'd felt her guard mount at his touch. When they'd met for the ceremony rehearsal, she'd stood back, observing before she became involved. Beneath her quiet demeanor, he sensed her mind snapping. And that was what did it. She'd aroused his interest. No one had done that for years. He'd chalked it up to her vulnerability. Firefighters had a penchant for helping people in trouble. Though she smiled and chatted once she'd warmed up, beneath her smile, he sensed something deeper churning inside a locked trunk. Yet she couldn't hide those lovely eyes, the color of caramel, which seemed to match her long, wavy hair.

He almost shook his head at his concocted analysis. The woman was new to town. Some people took longer to get comfortable. He'd spoken a little to her and sensed she wasn't a churchgoer. Yet faith seemed a stronghold for her family. It was what had helped Ashley through the loss of her young husband, a man who'd never seen his newborn child other than in photographs. Clint's chest constricted, wondering how he might feel being denied that amazing privilege of seeing a child created from the love of a man and woman.

A smidgen of envy wheedled into his consciousness. Nothing good ever came of envy. Not one thing. Envy caused displeasure and longing, sometimes resentment. Envy thwarted what lay ahead and signaled lack of trust in the Lord. He dismissed this negative thought and pinpointed a new goal.

He hoped the occasion would lower Paula's guard. He would enjoy learning more about her, and he juggled ideas how to make it happen. His discouragement grew while standing in the reception line. Seeming on edge, she appeared to know few of her relatives and spent most of her time explaining who she was by mentioning her mother, Dorothy, who'd died recently. If she wasn't comfortable with her relatives, what hope did he—a stranger—have?

The last guest greeted them before heading for the reception hall, but he'd been warned they had to stick around for photos. He studied Paula's expression and took a chance. "Do you mind posing for pictures?"

"Do you?"

He jerked his head back, an instinctive reaction to her abrupt response. "Not really."

"Me, neither."

Her short response held a playful tone, and she made the cutest face, her nose wrinkled while the corner of her mouth curved to a faint grin. He plowed ahead. "Do you think we can escape?"

"If you know Ashley, you already have the answer."

He liked her snappy responses. "Then we'd better give in and follow them."

She released a dramatic sigh and hooked her arm through his, different from her earlier reaction, which made him curious. They followed the others to stand beneath the lovely cross where the stained-glass windows puddled brilliant colors on the carpet.

"Ready to plaster on a smile?" He gave her arm a squeeze.

"Ready as I'll ever be. How about you?"

Making a move, he slipped his arm behind her back and guided her toward the photographer. “Same here.”

She considered him a moment and, to his pleasure, she didn’t draw back.

Rather than scaring her off, he left well enough alone. He’d acted like a naive schoolboy, noticing for the first time that girls were different. Today the same awareness slithered down his spine. It was natural. Four years had passed since being with a woman who attracted him.

He’d pretty much steered clear of women until now, since Elise had walked out of his life without one backward glance. Why she’d waited so long, so close to their wedding day, he’d never know. No wonder he’d been confused. Perhaps one day he would figure out what he’d done wrong.

Trying to be subtle, he studied Paula from a peripheral view. She didn’t seem ready for anything either, so who was to say he and Paula couldn’t be friends? Friendship served both involved. Fun, laughter, companionship. Maybe that was all he needed—time to adjust to a woman’s companionship. It might be easier than he thought.

Paula touched his arm, an inquiring expression on her face. “Come back to planet earth. The photographer is giving you a look.”

So was she, and he liked it.

* * *

Music filled the hall as Paula entered with Clint at her side. She spotted the deejay near the dance floor, a middle-aged man who’d probably been entertaining wedding parties for years.

“I think our seats are over there.” Clint beckoned her to follow, and behind him she admired his physique as he guided her to the bridal table. At first, she’d felt trapped, and it made no sense. Clint had been pleasant company, polite and tempting her smile to appear. For too long, she hadn’t smiled much, and, since coming to stay with her uncle Fred, she’d found herself chuckling at his amusing comments and her cousins’ easy wit. Today she discovered the same kind of playfulness in Clint.

Though his comments didn’t draw out belly laughs, they tickled her. Sometimes he echoed her own terse responses, teasing innuendos that he tossed out on the fly. Nothing at all like Vic. When she allowed herself to face the truth, the “trap” was different. She’d felt knotted in a web but not a spider’s dinner, instead a maze luring her to follow a path different than she’d experienced before. Though tempted by the adventure, a thought struck her. Had Ashley put Clint up to entertaining her? Maybe he was the one who really was trapped.

Irritation bristled down her back. Why dwell on what had been? Somehow she had to stop comparing Clint to Vic. Better she let the present cover the ashes of her past. Beauty from ashes.

“Are you all right? You’re quiet.” Clint pulled out her chair and waited for her to sit.

She managed a pleasant look. “Thinking.”

He slid the chair beneath her and studied her a moment, his dark blue eyes gliding across her features and causing unfamiliar sensations to roll through her belly. “Problems?”

The single word caught her unguarded. “Not really. I was...I was trying to recall where I’d heard the phrase beauty from ashes.”

“Scripture.” He sat beside her as other attendants ambled to the bridal table. “I’m not good at telling you where in the Bible.” He shrugged. “But I know it’s there.”

“Thanks.” He’d impressed her, and what he’d said made sense. Only God could take ashes and make them beautiful. Sometimes she thought about church and faith, realizing life would have been different if she’d had something...someone to lean on. Clint had strength to lift a tree. Definitely strong enough to lean on. Still, he wasn’t God.

“I’m guessing there’s more on your mind.”

Her head snapped upward, nearly giving her whiplash. He’d shifted the chair toward her, and in her preoccupation, she hadn’t noticed.

“I didn’t mean to impinge on your thoughts. Sometimes I can’t stop myself from probing.” He rested his hand on her shoulder. “I suppose that’s the firefighter in me. We need the facts. Details. Saving property and lives need quick thinking.”

“But I don’t need rescuing, so you don’t need facts.” She managed a smile.

He shrugged. “Most of us do at one time or another.”

“I guess we all like details. Tell me about you.” Her knack for reversing the conversation gave her control, and she could avoid talking about herself.

“Firefighter...but then you know that. Single.” He held up his left hand and spread his fingers.

No ring, but she’d known that. “How have you escaped so many women looking for a husband?” Instead of a smile at her teasing comment, he couldn’t hide his frown before managing a grin.

“Lucky, I guess.”

Cover. She’d used the same technique. She turned in the chair, her knees brushing his. “You’re kidding, I know.”

He gave her a crooked grin and shrugged, but his eyes probed hers a moment before he looked away. “Truth is I was engaged once, but it ended before the wedding. I’m glad, since I don’t believe in divorce.”

The statement reminded her of her earlier thoughts in the church. How could two people promise a lifetime of love and faithfulness when so much of the world didn’t seem to value it at all? “That’s your religious belief?”

“Yes and no. It’s biblical, but it’s also a gut feeling. I’d only marry if I knew deep in my soul this person loved me with all her heart, and she trusted that I felt the same. Too many things change in life, and I don’t think marriage should be one of them. We need to hang on to a few constants. Faith is one of those I cling to.”

The word cling gave her pause. Her faith fluctuated from one day to the next. “You’re lucky.”

“I’m blessed.” A frown slipped to his face. “Are you saying you’re not a believer?”

His expression made her reluctant to speak. “I wasn’t raised in any faith.”

Instead of drawing back, he eased forward, as if longing to ask about her beliefs, but silverware tinkled against china and glass, and Paula turned to see what caused the commotion. She spotted Devon leaning forward to kiss Ashley as the guests cheered and tittered. She’d forgotten that old kiss-the-bride tradition.

Toasts to the bride and the table blessing ended and, grateful for the break in conversation, Paula eased back in the chair as the waitstaff delivered food to the table and the meal began. Conversation buzzed through the room, and though she and Clint talked, the topics were general and unimportant. The issue of faith seemed to hover above them.

As dishes were cleared, the music began. Clint rose and extended his hand. “Care to dance?”

She hadn’t danced in years and the idea of being in a man’s arms—Clint’s arms—appealed to her. Yet again the question rose. Did he feel obliged to dance with her? Despite her questions, she followed him to the dance floor, her own longing taking precedence. The swish of the silky fabric against her legs awoke her feminine self, a persona she’d ignored the past few years.

On the dance floor, he pulled her close, his arms holding her fast yet with a tenderness that eased her. He glided effortlessly, their feet moving in sync, their bodies swaying to the rhythm of the music, a love song that fit the occasion. Others had joined them, and Paula felt less conspicuous. The closeness to Clint filled her with longing, the desire to go back in time and relive her life differently.

She recognized a good man when she saw one, and Clint fit the image. Her thoughts turned to Ashley and Devon’s marriage, a day of joy and happiness for two people she hoped would enjoy a forever life together. Though Vic had dampened her dream for a while, she felt a determination to move forward. The new environment, new friends, new experiences gave her the opportunity to find happiness.

When she looked up, Clint was studying her, his beguiling eyes engrossed as he observed her. Beneath her hand, his powerful frame reflected not only his physical strength but his solid character. He would make a wonderful husband for someone. Her pulse tripped, sending her mind into unfamiliar places.

As Devon and Ashley twirled past, he caught Clint's attention, and when the song ended, Clint guided her to their table. "I'll be back in a moment. I think the groom wants me for something." He tilted his head toward Devon and hurried off.

The intrusion caused her to wonder what was up, but a few moments later, Ashley broke away from her task of greeting people and slipped to her side. Ashley sent her a coy grin as she sank into the empty chair. "You and Clint seem to be getting along very well."

Paula's heart skipped again, and she struggled to keep color from rising to her cheeks. "He's being a gentleman. I think he knows I'm a stranger here...even among relatives. I haven't seen these people in years, and they don't really know me."

Ashley rested her hand on Paula's. "I think it's more than that." Her grin needed no words. "But Clint is a gentleman. That's for sure."

"What do you mean by 'more than that'?" Although she understood, she wanted to hear what Ashley had to say.

"He finds you enjoyable company. That's what I see." Hope lit Ashley's face.

"He makes me laugh. Nothing seemed funny while I cared for my mother." She pictured the pain her mother had suffered. It didn't leave room for frivolity. "It's been a long time since my life has seemed..." Words escaped her, and she delved into her vocabulary to find the right way to explain. "Normal, I guess."

"It's nice to see both you and Clint comfortable with each other." Ashley shook her head, a nostalgic look washing over her face. "Did I ever tell you when I met Clint?"

She shook her head, anxious to hear something new about him.

"When I was pinned under the tree, Devon stood over me with Joey in his arms, but another voice slipped beneath my dazed confusion. Clint. I could tell he was nice just by the way he spoke to me."

She agreed, though she wished Ashley had more to tell.

Ashley shivered. "Even though I met Devon, when I think of that day I freeze. The storm came up so quickly, and I ran out to move Joey's wagon and put my car in the garage. A couple of minutes, I thought, so I'd left him sleeping on the sofa." She shook her head. "That was a lesson learned. I'll never leave Joey alone for a second now. He woke when the tree fell against the house and came outside looking for me. In my rush, I'd left the side door open. He couldn't find me. Devon said he was crying when he heard him."

"That's scary." She'd heard Ashley relive those horrible moments more than once. But out of bad came good. "It's wonderful, too, Ash. Joey and Devon found you buried under the limbs. Today proves how great that day was."

Her cousin chuckled. "I know, but I keep reliving it. Devon told me how Joey kept calling to me, trying to wake me up."

She patted Ashley's hand. "Devon is a real hero."

"He is. A true hero." Her mind wandered a moment before she continued, "Clint's the same kind of guy. A good man who's still single." Ashley arched her brow. "You know he hasn't dated much at all, from what Devon says."

"I didn't know." She'd sensed it, though, but Ashley's reference triggered more questions. "He mentioned his broken engagement. Do you know what happened?"

"Devon doesn't say much, but from what I understand it was totally unexpected, and it left Clint wondering what he'd done to end their relationship."

Paula's chest tightened, recalling the same unwelcome experience she'd also encountered. "Perhaps he did nothing wrong at all. He's totally thoughtful and nice." She pictured his endearing smile and quirky comments. Someone that sweet and good-natured had to be easy to be with. "His fiancée may have been the one with the problem."

Ashley nodded. "You know, I think you're right. Now all you have to do is help Clint see that."
"Me?"

Her cousin rose with a playful expression, yet beneath it was sincerity.

"Why me?"

"No specific reason. I just think you'd be the woman to do that." Ashley squeezed Paula's shoulder. "I need to get back to our guests, but I wanted to tell you that I'm happy you've met Clint." She spun around, gave her a crooked smile and moved toward the dining tables.

Paula gazed ahead, looking past the tables until she spotted Clint. Why would Ashley think she could do anything for anyone? The only thing on her mind at the moment was to get a job and find a house to move into. She couldn't take advantage of her uncle for too long. He'd invited her to stay until she got settled. Settled was the key word.

The thought smacked the truth. She'd never been settled. Not really.

Chapter Two

"How was the honeymoon?" Clint gave Devon a wink as he strolled to his locker to slip into his work gear.

Devon arched his eyebrow, a silly taunt on his face. "Were you worried?"

"Not one bit. I knew you were in good hands." Clint gave him a thumbs-up. "Ashley can handle you." More than a week had passed since the wedding, and while he'd missed seeing Devon at the fire station, he'd found Paula on his mind more than his good friend.

"You're right, Ashley's amazing." Devon turned to face him. "In all seriousness, the longer I've known her the more I admire her and the more I love her."

Clint's chest tightened, picturing Paula and what he liked about her. He'd be happy to see the end of his worries about trusting again so he could take steps to form a friendship with her. After the incident with Elise, his motto had become "Get hurt once but not twice."

"Seriously, though, the honeymoon was wonderful. I had never been on a cruise, and the Caribbean is beautiful—scenery and summer weather." He took an imaginary key and locked his lips. "But enough yakking. I'll have photos and you can see for yourself."

"Can't wait."

Devon's expression let Clint know he'd recognized his playful sarcasm. But for once, Devon was wrong. Clint had never cruised, either, and wouldn't unless he had someone with him to share the experience. He really wanted to see the photos.

Devon's locker door clanged shut, and Clint's mind snapped back to his task. As he slipped into his work gear, he reflected on what he'd really wanted to know from Devon. Had he seen Paula since he'd been back or had Ashley said anything about Paula mentioning him?

Though he'd had a great time with her and thought she'd enjoyed his company, too, he'd hesitated asking to see her again. His hesitation made him want to kick himself. But Paula made him uncertain. She seemed to have built a wall and stepped behind it. If he moved too fast, he could easily find the barricade a permanent shield.

And then he posed a question to himself. What did he want from her? A relationship hadn't been a priority for years. Involvement sometimes led to marriage, and he wasn't positive he wanted to marry. At thirty-seven, he liked being stuck in his own ways, and marriage meant making changes, adjusting to someone else's likes and dislikes.

Clint closed his locker and strode in for roll call before digesting and discussing the information passed on by the previous shift. Devon, the on-duty lieutenant, listed the tasks each of the crew would

be responsible for, and when he finished, Clint headed into the equipment room to assess the gear he might need during the day.

As he checked off the equipment assigned to him, Devon appeared at his side. “We’re having a little party Friday night for the wedding attendants and a few others. All the women want to see our gifts and the photos, so we thought it would be fun. I hope you can come. We’ll have pizza. It’s casual.”

As if he’d been invited to an audience with Queen Elizabeth, Clint felt his pulse take off in a gallop. He monitored his zealous reactions. “Sounds great. I’ll be there.”

Devon squeezed his arm and moved on to his duties while Clint stood a moment to deal with the unbelievable reaction he’d experienced, particularly assuming Paula would be there. If he couldn’t control his emotions better than that he needed to go into hiding. He’d prided himself on being a staunch, capable firefighter who could handle a life-and-death job every day. Emotions were locked tight so his mind could make the quick decisions that each dire situation needed.

What had happened to that skill today?

He shook his head and turned his mind on the training session and the next tour of the firehouse he would lead. School would be out soon, and one of the treats for elementary children was visiting the fire station. This duty shone as one of his favorites. He’d always loved kids and, sometimes, never having children of his own hurt worse than the day his marriage plans died.

Though his heart had healed, he couldn’t help thinking about Elise. What had driven her away? What had changed her mind about their marriage?

Dumb questions, and what difference did the answers make? He needed closure, he sensed, like people did with a shocking death. Those who grieved always pondered what had happened or what they could have done to make a difference.

He had looked back on the situation and had come to the realization she’d fallen for someone else. Probably the jerk in her office she talked about so much. He’d been married, and at the time, he’d dismissed the possibility. But marriage didn’t mean as much to some people as it did to him. Vows were made and God blessed marriages. To him, marriage meant forever.

* * *

Paula crumpled into one of her uncle’s easy chairs and rubbed her temples. She’d had another job interview, which again left her with a hopeless feeling. Though she had the numerous skills they’d listed, she didn’t have experience with their software program. Then, another strike against her appeared to be her newness to the area. When they looked at her résumé, they noticed she hadn’t worked a few months before her mother died. She’d been her caregiver. Work had been impossible.

Most businesses looked for someone with stick-to-itiveness and experience, but if no one would give her a chance, how could she get the experience? Another one of these conundrums that made no sense but seemed to be prevalent in the world of business.

The back door opened, and Paula pulled up her shoulders. Though five foot nine, today she felt a lot shorter. She needed to lift her head and face her uncle with confidence. He always wanted details of her job hunt, and she wanted to sound positive even though she wasn’t.

Ashley swung around the archway, and when she saw Paula instead of her uncle, a grin flew to her face.

“Home from the hunt?” Ashley said.

“The fox found a hiding place today.”

“No luck?” Ashley sank onto the sofa. “You’ll find something. I’m confident. I’m keeping my eyes and ears open, and I’m sure something will come your way.”

Paula nodded, managing an upbeat expression. “I know. Job hunting takes time.”

The side door closed, and her uncle’s voice sailed into the room. “A job well done.”

She had no idea what he meant, but she hoped it had nothing to do with her employment status.

He ambled into the living room and stood near the archway. “Did she tell you?”

Paula looked at him and then turned back to Ashley, not sure who he meant.

“Dad, you’re more excited than I am.” She grinned at Paula. “I decided to sell my house. Dad helped me make sense out of what I really knew was best but what was hard for me to do.”

“Selling the house.” Paula nodded, understanding her quandary. “I know it holds lots of memories, Ash. Good memories.” Her own mother’s home came to mind. That house held no memories she wanted to preserve. “But you’re making new memories now, and it’s best to let it go.”

“You’ve all made sense. I thought renting it would work, but then Dad reminded me of the difficulties in renting a residence—maintenance, repairs and bad tenants. It hardly seems worth it even though the house is only down the street and Devon would have helped, but—”

“It would be asking a lot of him to keep two houses in good order. When would you two have time for fun?” Paula looked past her uncle, noticing the two children were missing. “Where are Joey and Kaylee?”

“Neely wanted to take them to the park.” Her mouth curved to a full grin. “I’m so happy Neely’s expecting. She and Jon wanted a baby from day one, and now she’ll have her own little Joey or Kaylee to spoil.”

Though her cousins’ happiness made her smile, part of her envied Ashley and Devon’s big steps into marriage plus becoming a parent to each other’s child, especially now that Kaylee’s troubled mother had died from an overdose. It had been hard on Kaylee, but her awareness of her mother’s illness and unhappiness had softened the sad situation.

Marriage had not made Paula’s list of desires, so the question of being a parent rarely entered her mind, but when it did, it sometimes stopped her cold, asking herself if she could be a good parent without having a role model. One thing she knew. Love was the key to so many things in life, and how could she not show love to a child? Ashley’s love for Joey and Kaylee, Devon’s daughter, guided her cousin’s every step, and Devon had an amazing natural knack for being a thoughtful and loving father to both children. They had become her parental role models. Late in her life to learn, yes, but she knew no one better.

Ashley had grown silent a moment, a frown settling on her face, and Paula didn’t understand the problem. Paula turned to her uncle, wondering if he had something to clue her in.

Finally, Ashley came back to life. “Sorry. I know this is the right thing to do, but I love that house and it’s hard to let go. Believe me, it’s not just my memories of Adam. It’s where I realized that I had the strength to stand up under pressure, where I learned to be a loving single mother and still hold a job, and where I awakened beneath the tree branches one day and looked into Devon’s face, a neighbor I’d seen but never met. That day changed my life.”

Paula brushed moisture from her eyes, no longer trying to hide it. “You’re right, Ash. The house has a wealth of amazing memories. One day, I hope to have a...” Before she could finish her sentence, an idea struck her. She needed a place to live, and owning a house would provide a sense of permanence to a possible employer, but more than that she loved Ashley’s comfortable house and felt certain it had more than enough space for her.

When she refocused, Ashley’s curious look caused her to confess her idea. “I have a thought.”

“A good thought?” Ashley’s tentative response made Paula grin.

“Very good, I think. My mother left me everything, and I need a house. I don’t want to go back to Roscommon. It’s a dead end for me there. Do you think—”

Ashley jumped from the sofa and flew to her side, where she plopped on the chair arm. “Paula, that’s an amazing idea. Perfect. You’d be close to us, and I would know the new owner is someone who cares about the memories and, even better, is someone we love.” She turned toward Uncle Fred. “What do you think, Dad?”

“You don’t need my approval, and I think it’s a good idea, except...” He turned his gaze from Ashley to her. “Would you feel restricted to make the house your own, Paula? If you’ll feel restrained, or Ashley...” He faced her. “If you’ll resent Paula redecorating or even renovating, then it’s not a good idea. You both need to consider that.”

Paula knew how she felt, but her uncle's question put the possibility into a new perspective. "That's something we have to consider, and Ash, you need to talk it over with Devon." Though the possibility thrilled her, a problem lay ahead, and the reality drowned her excitement. "But face it, I don't know what I'm talking about. I don't have a job yet. I need to put a clamp on my enthusiasm. I can't make payments without work, and I'm not sure how long it will take to settle the estate. Mom had savings, but I've used some of it to live on these past weeks." The situation crushed her spirit. She wasn't a kid facing life for the first time. She knew hopes were one thing. Reality was another.

"But Paula, we can—"

"Ashley, I couldn't get a mortgage right now." Her excitement died a quiet death. "I don't even have a down payment without nearly wiping out my mother's savings, and I don't know how long it will take to sell her house. I hope it's soon, but I have no guarantee."

Ashley shook her head. "We can work that out, and we're not in a hurry. A sale by owner doesn't restrict us resolving that issue, either. You're right, though. I'll talk with Devon, but I'm sure he'll have no reservations." She leaned over and kissed Paula's cheek. "I love the idea, and even thinking about it, I'm relieved."

Ashley's positive attitude should have lifted her spirit, but a woman of her age didn't go off the deep end. Her old resentment returned. She'd allowed Vic too much leeway, and while she wasn't looking, her own savings had dwindled to little. He'd walked away, leaving her in his dust with nothing but empty hopes and an empty bank account. How could she have been so stupid?

"Hold on, Ash. Really, I need to take time. I'd love the house, but I have to use common sense. I contacted a Realtor and mother's house should be on the market now. I'll call them and check the status."

Ashley's excitement faded. "Okay, but we'll still give it thought and I'll talk to Devon and see if he has any ideas."

Ideas were fine, but she had to keep her head. Having a home of her own tempted her to take chances, but getting a grip on her overexuberance, wisdom needed to come first. She'd been stupid once. Let it only be once.

They gave each other a playful handshake, and though it was lighthearted, Paula faced the depth of the decision. Problems could be resolved, but they took thought and time.

Ashley hugged her and gave her dad a peck on the cheek, then headed to her car while Paula sat and pondered the rash decision she'd wanted to make. Since moving from her mother's home and being on her own, she'd only lived in an apartment or flat, and though she liked the possibility of owning a home, it tied her down and forced her into a commitment to stay there. Still, since coming to Ferndale, she'd wanted a place to call home, a real home, and she liked the idea of being around Clint. He'd lingered in her mind no matter how much she tried to push him out. She hoped they could become friends.

His tender smile washed over her, the crinkles around his eyes, the few silvery strands that highlighted his dark hair, the flex of his strong arms as he moved. Her past relationships broke into her thoughts and she blocked the images. Men appeared in and out of her life with no heart and no depth. She'd begun to think most men were like that. Her father had been, as far as she knew. He'd walked out on them, apparently with no looking back. Vic had kept the apartment and sent her packing. But Devon and Clint, even her uncle Fred, proved that some men were different. Some had the capacity to care and love...really love.

That had been her problem. She'd made rotten decisions because she wanted to be loved and had no idea how to make it happen.

And it never did.

* * *

Clint parked on the street and made his way to Devon's front door. Before he rang the bell, the door opened, and Ashley greeted him. "Good timing. I just put out some appetizers." She motioned him inside. "We'll order pizza a little later."

"Sounds great." He stepped through the door, his gaze sweeping the living room and dining room. He recognized Devon's brother and a few of the others, but he didn't see Paula. His breath hitched as he wrestled a frown from his face.

"Make yourself at home." Ashley swung her arm toward the dining room, where he saw food spread on the table.

Disappointed, he headed toward the appetizers. He'd come to the party, and he'd make the best of it.

"Clint."

He paused and turned her way.

"Some of the guests are in the backyard. We've been blessed with a bit of Indian summer." She grinned. "Drinks are there, too."

Hoping she hadn't seen his reaction, he called a thanks over his shoulder and inspected the hors d'oeuvres, his stomach knotted with anticipation. He slipped some veggies and dip onto a paper plate, took a couple of taco chips and guacamole and pushed open the backdoor, trying to focus on getting a cola. But the bluff ended there. His true purpose was to see Paula.

And he saw her when he stepped outside. She sat in a canvas folding chair, the sun glinting streaks of gold in her hair, today the color of caramel. Beside her, he recognized one of Ashley's friends, and he hesitated to interrupt. Instead, he found the cooler loaded with soft drinks and, on the picnic table, he spotted pitchers of iced tea and lemonade and made his decision.

While he scooped ice cubes into a plastic cup, his gaze swept the guests, hoping to spot a firefighter or someone else he knew. But no one passed by that he'd consider a friend. Maybe he'd missed someone inside.

As he reached for the lemonade pitcher, a piping voice calling his name stopped him. When he turned, he saw Kaylee bounding toward him with Joey on her heels. He set down his glass and shifted his attention to the little girl. Her arms stretched upward, and he grasped her, spinning her around while avoiding wiping out the table.

She giggled, and noting Joey's envious look, he set her on the ground and crouched beside the two cute kids. "How you doing, slugger?" He tousled Joey's head and gave him a squeeze.

"Good." Joey's loving grin sank into his heart. "Kaylee's my sister now."

She giggled and put her arm around his back. "He lives in Daddy's house and not down the street."

"I heard, and I saw you both at the wedding. You looked so beautiful, Kaylee, and Joey, I've never seen anyone more handsome in a tuxedo."

The boy's face beamed. "Handsome like my new daddy."

"Exactly." He hated to dismiss the kids. Their loving nature stretched his heart and made him yearn for the same kind of joy, watching his own little boy or girl—maybe both or more—grow up to be adults he could be proud of, but that joy hadn't happened. He didn't know if it ever would. His attention slipped to Paula before he managed to refocus.

"Joey. Kaylee." Ashley's voice drew nearer. "You're supposed to grab something to drink and then go back inside and play the game you set up."

Hangdog looks spread across their faces.

Ashley patted their heads. "Your auntie Neely isn't going to stay long, and she's—"

"Cuz of her big belly with the baby."

Kaylee's information caused Ashley and him to muzzle their chuckles. Clint gave Ashley a wink and both kids a hug before they did as they were told.

She moved on, and before he finished pouring his drink, the woman Paula had been talking with passed by, and he noticed Paula alone, an empty chair beside her. He grasped the paper plate in one hand, his drink in the other, and ambled her way, hoping she looked pleased when she saw him. His wish came true.

“Do you mind?” He tilted his head toward the chair.

“Not at all.” She moved an unsteady folding tray closer to his chair. “It’s been a while.”

Too long, as far as he was concerned. “It has been.” He settled into the chair.

“I noticed you over there with the kids.” She swung her hand in the direction of the drinks table.

He loved that she’d noticed him. “They told me they’re brother and sister now. They were glowing. Great it hasn’t been a problem.”

“Ashley and Devon did a good job preparing them.” She fell into silence.

He joined her, remaining silent for a moment until he could respond to her first comment. It had been a while since he’d seen her. It’s not what he wanted, but his lack of confidence with women had taken hold. He braced himself for what he needed to do. Make progress. “I heard through the grapevine—” he shifted his elbow toward Devon heading his way “—you might buy Ashley’s house.”

“That’s the rumor.” She grinned but said no more.

Before they could continue, Devon stuck out his hand for a shake. “Glad you made it. I invited a couple of guys from the station, but they’re not here yet.” He winked at Paula. “I can tell that’s no problem since you know this lady. You see the crew all the time.” Devon chuckled. “And she’s better-looking.”

Being subtle was not Devon’s forte. Even without his friend’s encouragement and his attempt to monitor his emotions, Clint’s heart responded. “Absolutely.” He managed a smile that he hoped looked natural. Being relaxed with a woman, especially one he liked, escaped him. It seemed harder work than double shift at the station.

“I’ll let you two enjoy your conversation.” Devon gave Clint’s shoulder a squeeze, winked at Paula and turned to leave but slowed before pivoting back to them. “Oops, I forgot.” He slipped a photo packet from his shirt pocket. “I’m supposed to be letting people take a look if they want.” He gave Clint a poke in the shoulder. “I know you were interested.”

He held out the envelope, and Clint grasped it, avoiding comment.

Devon paused. “You ought to take a cruise like this, Clint. But you don’t want to go alone.” He gave him another wink and strolled away.

Clint sat a moment clutching the photos. “He’s not very subtle, is he?”

Paula chuckled and took the envelope from his hand.

He wished he could dodge Devon’s obvious comment and suspected Paula was thinking the same. Everything between them was so new and needed time, nurturing in a way. Still, how could he handle a relationship that seemed like work and yet held a promise that drew him forward?

Paula opened the envelope and pulled out the stack of photos. He followed along as they viewed the shots glowing with beautiful sandy beaches, sunsets spreading across the ocean seascape, hammocks between palm trees and a candlelight dinner, Ashley and Devon dressed in their finest.

“Lovely.” Paula’s voice sounded airy as she turned to him. “I’ve never seen a place like this.”

“Me, neither.” So many words bunched into his mind, but only thoughts he had to keep to himself. They barely knew each other, and yet she seemed a longtime friend.

They sat in silence again until Paula cleared her throat. “Getting back to your question about the house.”

Weighted thoughts lifted from his shoulders.

“I’m seesawing over what to do about the house. Devon and Ashley are encouraging me and offering leeway on the deal, but I’m using common sense.”

He wondered what she meant by leeway but let it slide. “It’s a really nice place, but that is a big step. Why not live in your mother’s home?”

As soon as she heard him, she scowled. “Her house is in Roscommon, partway up north. I don’t have any reason...anything to keep me there.”

She’d covered her tracks on the comment, but he could guess what she avoided saying. Being reminded that her mother had lived in Roscommon, he was glad she’d decided to sell the house. In Ferndale she had family and, he hoped, a growing friendship with him.

“I know buying a house is a big step. Ashley’s house fits my needs, and it’s in this area.” She glanced away and pressed her lips together.

He could see she was fighting temptation. She wanted the house, and he could only pray she held on until buying wasn’t financially risky.

“But I can’t be rash.”

It was too late to cover his relieved sigh. “Good thinking.”

A faint frown flickered on her face. “My finances aren’t quite resolved yet. Some money was left in the estate, but to buy the house, I need a job as well as the income from the sale of mother’s property.”

He recognized the problem, knowing the value of homes had dropped in the past few years and selling was at a snail’s pace. But Roscommon. Was there work in that small town to motivate people to buy? His practical nature let questions seep into his mind, but he turned off the flow before he put his foot in this mouth again. Paula didn’t seem to welcome his financial viewpoint. “Any hope of finding a buyer?”

“Good news is the house already has a bid on it, and the Realtor said it looks good. It’ll be a relief to get rid of that problem.”

Her references to relief and problem aroused his curiosity again, but her reference to a job sounded right to him. Maybe she had a good head on her shoulders. “I hope it works out.” From her expression, he’d obviously disappointed her. She’d expected his enthusiasm, but his parents’ way had been solid. Until the money was in hand, the offer was only a dream.

She nodded and fell silent again.

Questions dug into his mind, ones his parents would ask about budgeting and saving money, but the probing could end their amiable conversation. He headed for the safest topic. “Do you have siblings?”

She shook her head. “I’m surprised my parents had me.” As the words left her, she grew silent, her expression reflecting her shock that she’d said that much.

He sat glued to the seat, his lips pressed together, unable to think of anything safe to say.

“I’m sorry, Clint. I’m sure that sounded crude, and I’m surprised I said it.”

“Maybe you needed to.”

Paula tilted her head as if weighing his comment. “You may be right. I tend to hold in things until they explode.” Looking uneasy, her attention drifted toward a couple of new guests who’d arrived. She dragged in a lengthy breath. “I should explain, I suppose.”

He didn’t try to stop her. Instead, he grasped his drink and leaned back in the chair, giving her time to decide what she wanted to say. Her expression created an unexpected ache. He’d suspected she buried things she didn’t want to deal with or think about. Her comment proved he’d been right.

“I was never close to my parents. My dad split when I was still young. I hardly remember him, and my mom led a guarded life, one that didn’t involve me. I don’t think she ever said ‘I love you’ to anyone.”

His chest constricted, air escaping his lungs. Everyone needed to be loved. He’d grown up hearing those words from his parents, and he knew that Jesus loved him. The childhood song swept through his mind. “I’m sorry, Paula. The words ‘I love you’ are precious.”

She nodded without looking at him. “I can’t believe I’m telling you all of this.” She looked away for a moment.

“I like getting to know you.”

“Really?”

He nodded, aching from the look on her face. “My life wasn’t perfect, either. Not by a long shot.”

She studied him as if to make sure he meant what he said. “Thanks.” She raised her shoulders. He waited.

Her shoulders slumped as if carrying the weight of her past.

“I’m here, Paula.” He tied down the other words longing to be spoken.

Her head turned toward him like a weather vane in a faint breeze.

When her eyes met his, he spoke those bottled-up words. “And I’m listening.”

A wash of questioning rippled across her face before she took a deep breath. “I moved away from home as soon as I could. Took some college classes and worked a job to help pay for an apartment I shared with a couple of girls. When I finished my associate degree, I got a full-time job and took courses to work on a bachelor’s degree, but I never finished.” She shrugged. “It’s difficult working and going to school. I was dead tired all the time. I decided to put the dream to bed for a while.” She shifted and focused on him. “As life goes, I never went back to college.”

“That happens. I started classes at Michigan State, but then got the firefighter bug. College isn’t necessary for the job, although it can help someone move up in the ranks. I plunged ahead, passed the written, physical and medical exams, and then earned my certification as an EMT.”

“I’m impressed.” She lifted her plastic cup and took a sip.

“Don’t be. It’s a job someone has to do, but I love it. Saving lives and helping people in trouble gives me an opportunity to do what I believe is important. You know the old saying, ‘What would Jesus do?’”

Her head inched upward. “Should I be honest?”

His eyebrows raised, and he forced them down. “Please.”

“I don’t know what Jesus would do. That’s another part of life I missed out on.”

“Religious training?”

“My mother wasn’t a believer, I suspect. No Sunday school or church. Nothing.”

“But that doesn’t mean you can’t be a believer. That’s something in the heart, not always in the home.”

Her expression darkened.

Concerned, he leaned forward. “I hope I didn’t offend you. I just meant that my faith deepened as life went on. I was born into a faith-filled family so I saw it in action, but it didn’t deepen until I experienced life and saw faith acted out each day.”

“I suppose.” She stared into the distance for a moment, then continued. “I’m surprised Neely and Ashley have a religious foundation. Their mother and mine were sisters. Maybe if I’d had that kind of upbringing, my life would have been different.”

“Hard to say why siblings aren’t always the same.” The urge to encourage her to study and grow in faith stirred through him, but he feared the results. “Maybe their dad was the influence.”

A faint grin etched her mouth. “Probably was. Uncle Fred’s down-to-earth, funny and very thoughtful. He’s quite a character.”

“He is. I get a kick out of—”

“Pizza.” The word rang out as Devon came through the back door, holding a number of Jet’s Pizza boxes, while Ashley made room on the picnic table. “Time to eat.”

Eating was the last thing Clint wanted to do. Paula had opened up, spilling out some of the hurts and situations that had molded her into the person he wanted to know better. But as others headed toward the table, Paula rose, and he followed, letting the subject drop. He sensed there was much more to tell, but today he’d made a little progress in getting to know the woman who’d become the center of his thoughts. Thoughts he couldn’t control. Ones that demanded attention.

Pizza restricted their conversation, leaving him with the undaunted urge to rescue Paula from the hurts and damage from the past. He sat unmoving, the desire growing in his mind. He'd rescued many from flames and other tragic situations.

But this was different. Was rescuing Paula even possible?

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