

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired®

A Mother to Love

Gail Gaymer Martin



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Серия «Mills & Boon Love Inspired»

Аннотация

An Unexpected Family Angie Bursten wants to find love on her own timeline. Tired of her family's interference, coworker Rick Jameson comes to the rescue—as her pretend boyfriend. Angie starts to spend time with Rick and his adorable daughter, Carly, and what began as a hoax soon feels all too real. Betrayed by the woman he's married, single dad Rick is slow to trust. But seeing Angie with Carly, he can't ignore the way he feels for his beautiful coworker. And when Angie helps Rick with the toughest battle of his life—gaining full custody of his child—there'll be no more pretending. If they can open their hearts, Rick and Angie have a real shot at happily-ever-after.

Содержание

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An Unexpected Family

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Two days with Angie felt like a gift for him and Carly.

She made life fun and meaningful. And yet a flicker of concern tightened his chest. He had to be careful. He'd already feared her hesitation to plant today was because of something he'd said.

"If we're finishing the planting tomorrow..." She paused and looked at Carly. "We might have time to go the park today."

"The park? Really?" A gleeful giggle escaped Carly. "Can we, Daddy?"

"If we have time, why not?"

Carly jumped in place. "Why not?"

Angie gave him a wink, pleasure filling her face. She hurried down the row, selecting a few more perennials, and after he loaded her choices in the cart, he pushed it toward the cashier.

Many times, things he longed to know flew into his head, but those kinds of questions needed time. Instead he treaded lightly. A lifetime didn't happen in a day. Angie clung to a private past she seemed unwilling to share. He could learn a lesson from her silence.

Already he'd revealed too much.

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May the God of hope fill you with all joy
and peace as you trust in Him,
so that you may overflow with hope
by the power of the Holy Spirit.

—Romans 15:13

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Angie's Crock-Pot Fiesta Chicken

Dear Reader

Extract

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Chapter One

Angie tripped over another box and suppressed a groan. Moving was the pits. She rubbed her shin and noticed another nick to her already bruised and scraped body. She couldn't forget she'd still be looking at her piled-high boxes without the help of her coworker's toting and lugging.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and she pulled away from her newest wound and planted a pleasant look on her face. "How are you doing?"

"I think that's the last one." Rick Jameson came through the archway, a faint grin on his lips, nice lips she'd noticed recently. If they weren't such good friends, she could easily fall for him.

"You're the greatest." She opened her arms and headed toward him.

He stepped in and joined the friendly hug.

The flex of his strong arms beneath his T-shirt made her sigh just a little. She drew in a breath, bedazzled by the exotic scent of his aftershave. "What are you wearing?"

He drew back. "A T-shirt and jeans?"

His questioning look and response made her laugh. "I meant your aftershave."

His expression melted into a grin. He shrugged. “Jungle something. Why?”

“I love it. Flowers and foliage after rain.” She arched her brow. “Good choice.”

She didn’t care what it was named. It smelled better than her cucumber melon moisturizer. She studied Rick’s expression, wrapped in his scent, and winced. She knew she looked horrible, dressed in rags with only a swipe of lipstick and a comb run through her hair. “I’m grateful for your help, Rick.”

“Anytime, Angie.” He tweaked her cheek and tucked his hands into his pockets. “Anything else?”

She eyed the stacks of boxes along with another million things she needed to do, but she couldn’t ask Rick for more help. She motioned to a stack. “I need to tackle these boxes myself. Most of it’s for—”

Her leg vibrated before her cell phone’s ringtone sounded. She drew it from her pocket and eyed the caller. “It’s my sister. I’ll call her back.”

He shook his head. “Answer. I can let myself out.”

She lifted a finger to stop him, wanting to enjoy his company just a little longer without using the time to work. She tapped the answer button and stepped into the kitchen. “Connie. Sorry, I’m busy. I have a man here helping me at the new house, and—”

“A man? What’s he like?” her sister asked.

Angie cringed, realizing her mistake. “A friend. That’s all.” She rolled her eyes. One more offer to fix her up on a blind date

and she would scream.

“Nothing serious?”

“Connie, no.”

“Good, because I’ve found the perfect man. He’s single, good-looking, a bit quiet, but—”

Her internal scream took flight. “But I’m not interested. I’ve told you a hundred times. Two hundred times.” Before her sister said another word, she darted back to the living room doorway, her gaze on Rick. “Anyway, I’m seeing someone right now.” Her eyes locked with his.

“You are.” The decibels ripped through her eardrum. “What’s he like? Is he good-looking? You can’t leave me hanging.”

The thought of hanging sounded good at the moment—preferably Connie. “I have to go, sis. Talk later.” She hit the end-call button before her sister resisted further.

She exhaled. As she gazed at Rick, her imagination soared. She wished they were... Impossible. They were friends. “Sorry.” She looked at his inquisitive face, and her heart skipped. “Can I offer you a cup of coffee or something before you go?” She glanced over her shoulder at the boxes piled in her kitchen. “If I can locate the coffeemaker.”

He chuckled, a sound she loved to hear. His smile and laugh always made her happy. She waited, hoping he would stay.

Rick eyed the boxes and grinned at her. “How many hours will it take?”

She managed a feeble smile, her mind still clinging to her sort-

of lie. “I need the distraction.” She beckoned him into the kitchen and headed for the boxes.

“Let me help.” His voice came through the doorway before he did.

Rick’s gaze followed her as she dug deep in a carton and, before she had a moment, he slipped the box from her hand while his eyes searched hers. She sensed he wanted to say something, yet couldn’t, and it left her confused.

Without direction from her, Rick located the pot and the individual brewing cups and popped them into the machine and added water. “Mugs?”

She waved her hand at the boxes. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

He shrugged and in a moment gave her a victorious look. “Voilà!” He held the mugs in his hand, then placed a cup on the coffeemaker and hit the brew button.

She loved seeing him appear comfortable making coffee and being domestic. “You surprise me.”

“Why?” He glanced over his shoulder, then grasped the mug and brought it to her.

The scent of coffee eased her tension. “You look experienced in the kitchen.”

“It’s that or starve.” He popped in another cup and turned back to her. “It’s one of those things single men with a child have to do.” He looked at her again before smiling and turning back to the coffeemaker.

His daughter hadn't entered her mind. Though he'd mentioned Carly on occasion, Angie sensed he would rather not talk about his situation for some reason. "Coffee tastes good."

He slipped onto a chair and set his drink on the table. "I hope you don't mind my saying this, but the phone call seemed to upset you." He glanced away. "Sorry. It's none of my business."

She flinched, facing the exaggeration she'd told her sister. "You're perceptive."

His brow arched, and he waited.

"To be honest..." And this time she would be. "I'm tired of my mother and sister trying to fix me up with blind dates. I want to scream when they come to me with some trumped-up idea of this wonderful single man who's a bit quiet but he is very nice. Usually the guy's main fun is bird-watching or reading. Nothing wrong with either hobby, but it doesn't make dating them sound particularly enjoyable."

Rick averted his eyes until a laugh burst from his chest. He gave her a one-shoulder shrug. "Are you telling me you're not into the nice quiet bird-watcher type?" His words splintered through his chuckle.

Finally, Rick seemed like the man she knew at the office, and she needed the usual. She'd been thrown by the unexpected emotion that had arisen earlier. "Laugh all you want." She found the image funny, until the crux of the issue struck her. "Today, to stop her, I sort of lied."

"How does one sort of lie?" He gave her a crooked grin.

“You can’t. I’m not much of a churchgoer, but I know right from wrong, and I feel awful.” She pondered her comment.

“Explain. Now I’m curious.”

His expression took the edge off her guilt. “I told her I was seeing someone.”

“Seeing someone?” His face blanched and confused her. “Are you?”

She shook her head.

“Then it’s not a sort-of lie.”

“But I was seeing someone.” She motioned to the doorway. “I stood right there and looked at you. Get it? I was seeing—”

“Right.” He blinked before he added a disbelieving grin. “Got it...more than once actually.”

She gave him a poke. “You know the old saying about web of lies, right?”

Questions still hung in his eyes.

“Now my sister wants details. What he looks like, his interests, everything. Next she’ll want to meet him.” Her head spun with her concoction. “I have to tell her what I did.”

“But now she’ll give you a little peace. No more blind dates.”

A blast of air shot from her lungs. “You’re right. It was worth the exaggeration. That’s what it was, right? Not a lie.”

“Whatever you want to call it.” He arched a brow again and took a long swig of his coffee. “I should get going.” He stood. “But don’t forget, Ang. If you need help, I’m willing.” He gave her arm a shake. “I only have Carly on weekends. I hate the

limited time with her, but that's our agreement, and I avoid tension with her mother. It doesn't help our relationship. For now I'm stuck with short visits." He tilted his head with a half grin, but she noted sadness beneath it. "Guess that gives you a look into my life."

"At least you've been married. Not me." Her comment drew her back to unwanted places. "And you have your little girl. I know you love her more than anything. It shows."

He responded with that proud-daddy nod. "You're right. I cherish her. And you saw how it was when my marriage ended."

"Three years ago. That's how long we worked together." She thought back. "Or was it more?"

"Four, I think. You came to the office when Carly was almost one. She's turned five and goes to kindergarten."

"Really?" The years had flown past since they'd first met.

Rick stepped toward the doorway and waved. "I need to be on my way, but remember what I said."

"I will." She followed him through the living room.

When she stepped onto the porch behind him, he turned and gave her a hug. "I hope the rest of your unpacking goes well." He added another squeeze, stepped down to the sidewalk and headed to his SUV in the driveway without looking back.

Her chest pressed against her lungs as she watched the SUV back out to the street. She still felt his strong arms around her. After she gave a final wave, she drew her gaze from his car and stepped toward the door feeling as if she'd lost something

precious.

Pulling her mind back to her empty reality, she noticed a woman heading toward her from across the street.

Her curiosity rose as the neighbor stepped onto the sidewalk and strode up her driveway toward her with a grin. Angie smiled back, guessing the woman wanted to be the first to meet the new neighbor.

“Hi.” A container in one hand, the woman extended the other. “I’m your neighbor Rema.”

She grasped the woman’s hand. “Angela Bursten. It’s nice to meet you.” Her greeting stretched the truth again.

“Welcome to Lilac Circle.” Rema released her hand and motioned toward the driveway. “Sorry I missed your husband. I look forward to meeting him.”

“Husband?” Heat rose up her chest as she understood Rema’s reference.

“I noticed him pulling away as I started across the street.” Rema eyed her and grimaced. “I assumed he was your husband.”

Angie drew back, managing a chuckle. “No. He’s a coworker who volunteered to tote some boxes for me. No husband here.” The admission left an unwelcome reminder, yet Rick’s smile hung in her thoughts.

A questioning look flashed across Rema’s face, and Angie recalled Rick’s hug on the porch. A sigh slipped from her. She didn’t owe her an explanation and didn’t have one. Warmth spread through her, and she recalled the wonderful sensation.

Rema gave her a sympathetic look.

“Speaking of boxes, I have them stacked all over inside, otherwise I’d...” Her discomfort grew as she sought an amiable goodbye. “But I appreciate your welcome, and—”

“I understand.” Rema extended the container. “I brought you a little welcome gift. Homemade.”

Angie’s heart sank. Now she was on the spot. “That was very thoughtful.” As she pulled the container closer, a sweet scent wrapped around her. “And it smells delicious.” She glanced over her shoulder at the mess. “Rema, if you don’t mind falling over boxes, you’re welcome to come in.” She opened the screen door, motioning the other woman inside.

Without hesitation, Rema slipped past and stood inside the doorway.

“Have a seat, Rema.” She motioned to the living room.

Rema moved into the living room, and Angie placed the housewarming gift on a lamp table before also taking a seat, knowing what she should do but unable to deal with it today. Angie eyed the woman, trying to think of something to say, but Rema saved her from worry.

“Did you notice the house for sale on the corner?” Rema gestured to the head of the street. “We’ll be having another new neighbor soon.”

“No. Sorry, I hadn’t noticed.”

“A number of people have looked at the house. Spring seems a good time to sell.” Rema gazed into space as if she had something

on her mind, and though uneasy, Angie waited before trying to end their conversation and the visit.

As if awakening, Rema patted her lips with a napkin while curiosity grew in her eyes. "So why aren't you married?" Her brow fluttered to an arch before lowering. "Divorced? Or are you widowed?"

Startled, Angie organized her thoughts. She could have said she was never asked, but that wasn't something to share with a stranger. No matter, she still had hopes. Serious hopes but... She dropped the thought and shrugged. "I never got around to it, I guess."

"I'm surprised. You're very pretty." Rema's admiring gaze shifted to the window as a scowl rose on her face. "But you've made a wise decision."

Angie waited for the punch line, but Rema's expression underlined her seriousness. Not wanting to broach the sensitive topic, she manipulated the conversation back to Owosso. "Tell me about the town. I've seen a few of the lovely old buildings almost set back in time, and I spotted the Curwood Castle. It's a historic town, I know, but what else is interesting?"

Rema's face brightened, but then Angie realized she might have opened Pandora's box when she needed to finish unpacking. She waved her words away. "I'm sorry, but why don't we save this for another time? I'm sure you have things to do, and I need to get to work." She rose and stacked the dishes. "Thanks so much for coming. And thanks for this wonderful treat. I'm sure it's as

delicious as it smells.”

Rema took her unsubtle hint and rose. “You’re welcome. It’s nice to have a new neighbor so close. The last person living here was a crotchety old man who sat outside giving everyone the evil eye. You’re a welcome relief.”

“Th-thank you, Rema. Hopefully we’ll have another friendly neighbor in the house for sale down the street.”

“I hope so.” She put her hand on the doorknob. “I’m sure we’ll be best friends soon enough.”

Angie didn’t know what to say, and when Rema stepped outside, Angie closed the door and caught her breath. She wanted to be neighborly without coffee klatches or hanging over the fence. She preferred being with her friends, people who meant something to her.

Rick’s image filled her mind. Their friendship had blossomed without effort. If not for her lack of confidence in relationships, she might have given thought to him as more than a friend a couple of years earlier. Lately her feelings had strengthened even more since they’d been spending more time together outside work.

The images flying into her mind throughout the day had got out of hand. She’d never known a man so thoughtful and caring. Although they were friends, he treated her like someone significant in his life. He made her feel like a woman and not a commodity. Yet her hope fell flat when she thought about the corporation where they worked. The company didn’t tolerate

employee romances. She tried to forget the work awaiting her. She pulled back her shoulders and forced herself to head for the boxes. If nothing more, they would be a distraction. She hoped.

* * *

Rick folded the completed file and slid it into his desk drawer before turning off his computer. The clock hadn't alerted him of the time, but his stomach had. He rose and rolled his chair under the desk, his hunger guiding him to the company lunchroom. Although restaurants were nearby, he usually brought a lunch, finding it more economical.

As he entered he grinned to find Angie already seated. He'd learned that her stomach and his were often in sync. That wasn't the only way they were in sync, either. He faced that more and more. She'd grown as a friend and even more as someone he wanted to be with. So often she remained in his thoughts, and he liked thinking about her.

She gave him a wave as he headed to the refrigerator. With his lunch bag in hand, he settled beside her at the table, noting her sandwich of meat rolled in a lettuce leaf and a delicious-looking muffin that dripped with icing. The incongruity made him chuckle.

"What's funny?" She grinned at her lettuce wrap and muffin as her eyebrow arched. "A welcome-to-Lilac-Circle gift from a neighbor. I can't let them go to waste." She tilted her head toward the refrigerator. "And if you don't think it's too hysterical, you might enjoy the one I brought you."

This time his brows lifted. “You did?”

She smirked. “You know I did.”

He hurried back to the fridge and found the muffin in a lunch bag with his name on it. He was touched that she’d also thought of him.

With the treasure in hand he settled beside her and sipped from a juice box from his lunch bag. “I know. I was desperate.” He held up the container. “It’s Carly’s, but I’ll have another supply in the house before this weekend.”

“You’re a good dad, Rick.” She took the last bite of her lettuce wrap, her focus shifting toward the muffin. “I think I’ll get a coffee.”

She slid back the chair and headed around the corner to the counter that held the coffee urn. As she hurried away, he admired her. He understood how she stayed trim. She lived like a rabbit, eating veggies and lettuce sandwiches. The occasional sweet treat was rare for Angie.

The odor of strong coffee surrounded him before she set it on the table and sat back down. “Smells like that stuff was left over from yesterday.”

She took a careful sip, and her nose wrinkled. “The day before, I suspect.”

They both grinned while she pulled the wrapper off the muffin. He bit into his sandwich, watching her take a bite of the luscious-looking treat. “That’s from a neighbor?”

She nodded, taking a moment to swallow. “Rema, to be exact.

It was very sweet of her on one hand, but not convenient.” She lowered her head and brushed away her comment. “Anyway, the muffins are delicious.” She swiped a bit of icing from the edge. “You may have seen her as you pulled away.”

He shook his head, recalling he’d seen only Angie standing on the porch, her eyes on him.

“The problem was the piles of boxes, and the house was a mess. And she was a bit odd.”

“Odd? In what way?” Because Angie was so rarely judgmental, her comment surprised him.

“She was pleasant enough but seemed sort of sad. More like depressed.” Angie’s face sank to concern.

He wanted to cheer her. “Some people are sadder than others.”

“And blunt.”

His grin grew. “Sometimes you’re—”

“No, I’m not.” She gave him a coy look. “Maybe a bit, but not like this. She asked me why I wasn’t married.”

He drew back, agreeing it was a very personal question. “How did she know you weren’t married?” He glanced at her finger, aware she’d never worn a ring as long as he’d known her.

An uneasy expression slipped across her face. “She thought you were my husband.”

“Why would she think that?”

She gave a one-shoulder shrug. “We hugged on the porch, I guess. But from her other comment, I still wonder.”

“Huh?” She’d stumped him, though he did recall her hug.

He admired Angie's open affection, so different from Glenda's. She'd become cool after they'd married, and he'd never understood why.

"When I told her I wasn't married, she said I probably made a good decision." Her eyes widened. "Don't you think that's odd to tell a stranger?"

He did, but he sought an explanation. "I suppose it's not if she's divorced or in a bad marriage."

"You're right." She thought a moment. "Anyway, I didn't pursue the conversation."

"You didn't? What happened to your inquisitiveness?" His own was piqued, curious how Angie had explained she was still single. He'd asked himself the same question.

She rested her elbow on the table and leaned closer. "Don't worry. I'm sure I'll learn why. She told me we would be great friends."

They both grinned, and she let the conversation slide. He didn't like seeing Angie on edge. Her upbeat spirit had won his heart, and he'd befriended her for that reason, along with her ability to make the best of even bad situations. She found something positive in most everything. "Seeing your grin gave me an inspiring idea." An idea that was sort of one-sided, but she might like it. "Can you use any more help this weekend?"

"Hard to tell, but I know I want to do some things in the yard once I'm done emptying the boxes." Her expression shifted to what appeared to be interest. "Why? Are you volunteering?"

“With an ulterior motive.” A guilty nudge hit his chest. He loved spending time with Angie, but he couldn’t tell her that. “I have Carly this weekend, and you’ve never met her. Since you’re out of the apartment now and in a house, I thought Carly might enjoy a yard to play in. I like to take her places, but I can never think of anything.”

“Rick, I’d love to meet her, and if we plant some flowers, she could help.”

“Are you sure? She’s only five.”

“Give her credit, Dad. Five-year-olds can do lots of things when you teach them.”

“I suppose.” He took his finger and dug into a hunk of the muffin. “This smells wonderful.”

“It is, but my hands are sticky, and I need to get back to my desk.” She jumped up, slipped her chair under the table and grabbed the lunch trash. As she passed him, she gave him an elbow and leaned close to his ear. “See you tomorrow, and, Rick, I’m really looking forward to meeting Carly on Saturday.”

Since others were in the room he only nodded. He sensed that a couple of the guys figured he and Angie were a thing, even though the higher-ups discouraged coworker dating. If they only understood that a man and a woman could actually be friends without romance. The thought shivered down his back. Right now romance was off the list, but could he and Angie remain friends? And even more, did he want to be only a friend?

As the question struck him, reality sneaked in. Their work

made it nearly impossible, but if he did get involved with a woman, Angie would be the only one who would interest him. No one could get to his heart as she seemed to do.

Get to his heart? Adrenaline shot through him with the impact of his thoughts. Speculation like that had to end. Between company policy and a friendship he valued, impractical emotions could put their relationship in jeopardy. And now he'd involved Carly.

He closed his eyes. It might be impractical and chancy, but the feelings were there. He had to back off or slow down. A weight struck his chest. Or throw caution to the wind and let things happen. He'd messed up by allowing himself to get involved outside work. There they could be friends. In the world, friendships could grow and burst into something wonderful.

Carly might be his guide. If she appeared uncomfortable with Angie, then he would have little choice. His daughter needed security right now and, as her father, he had to listen.

As his thoughts sank deep, the weight grew heavier on his heart.

Chapter Two

The next day Angie hurried through the house, unpacking the last few boxes and making her living room come to life with lamps and decor except for the walls. She'd need help for that. She did everything she could to distract herself from the uneasy feeling that had settled in her.

"I'm being silly." Her voice escaped into the room. Definitely

silly. She needed a fresh perspective, and her gaze shifted to the bright window where she saw the sun spilling onto the grass, trees and landscaping around her home. Though well tended, her yard lacked flowers, and those little changes would make the house her home.

Needing a break, she slipped her house key into her pocket and stepped outside. The warmth struck her arms and the scent of lilacs swept past her. The blossoms on the trees were abundant, and the aroma floated on the air. The street name had captured her if not the house itself. Who didn't love lilacs?

Deciding to get a closer look at her neighbors' flower beds, she bounced down the sidewalk and turned right toward the jog in the road, her body buoyed by a renewed spirit. Rick had helped her so much, and she had only a few things to do to finish making the house livable. The neighborhood also lured her to anticipate new friendships even though Rema and her sadness hadn't made the most upbeat impression.

Rema hadn't dropped by since the day she'd appeared with the muffins, and Angie's concern had faded. Since her visit, Angie had noticed Rema's husband coming and going. He seemed to keep late hours and she wondered about his career...or whatever it was that kept him away.

Instead of her original attitude toward Rema, the thought of her as a wife with so much time alone and without children softened Angie's heart. One day she should invite Rema over or drop by her house for a visit. She'd never been inside any other

houses on the street, and she'd like to see what they were like.

She exhaled and studied her surroundings. She looked toward the corner and noticed the house for sale did have a sold sign and she'd missed it. While her attention darted from one side of the street to the other, she admired the flower beds and the variety of foliage. She would add plants to her landscape soon. Looking at the displays today made her anxious to tackle the flower beds.

As she approached a yellow ranch, she noticed an elderly man on his knees digging into the soil, a flat of flowers beside him. Age didn't stop some people. She picked up her step as her shadow slipped past him.

He noticed and looked at her over his shoulder. "Hello, there."

She faltered, pleased to see his smiling face, which reminded her of her grandfather, long gone to heaven. She grinned back. "You're busy, I see."

He hoisted himself up, taking a moment as if to balance himself before stepping closer. "I had tulips and spring flowers here, but they're gone, so I'm adding a few more plants. If my wife were here, she'd have pushed me out the door a week ago with her honey-do list." His eyes twinkled.

"My grandma had one of those lists, too."

His eyes searched hers a moment. "You love family, too."

She nodded, though aware she'd neglected hers in recent years.

"Too many young people go off and don't remember where they came from. Know what I mean? Their roots and their faith

training tossed into the wind.” He tilted his head. “Are you a woman of faith?”

Guilt crept into her heart. “I grew up in a Christian home, but I’ve been rather delinquent about acting on it.”

“Hmm. I knew you had the foundation. Sometimes I can just tell.” He gave her a wink. “I’m Elwood Barnes, but my friends call me El.”

She extended her hand. “Angela Bursten, and my friends call me Angie.”

El eyed his hand and brushed it off on his pants before he grasped hers. “Nice to meet you. I hope you’re enjoying your new home. I think you’ll like most of the neighbors.” He chuckled as if he’d told himself a joke.

“I love the house.” A grin stole to her mouth. “And I’ll love it more when I get things settled. You know how it is.” She shrugged. “I’m still finding places for everything and working out the kinks.”

“I know about kinks.” He did a little bounce from the knees. “I have a few of those myself.”

Cute as could be, he made her chuckle. “I think you’re doing well, Mr. Barnes, and I’ve had help moving in, so I can’t complain.”

He tilted his head toward the Durbans’ house. “You meet Rema?”

She eyed him a moment, questioning why he’d asked. She didn’t suspect the sweet man to be a gossip. “Yes. She dropped

by with some delicious muffins, and we had a short visit.”

“Rema could use a friend or two.” A twinkle lit his eyes. “I hope she made a good impression, and I suppose the muffins helped.”

Grinning, she gave a nod as Rema’s words echoed in her thoughts—*I’m sure we’ll be best friends soon enough*. “I don’t see her husband much.”

His smile faded. “Trey...” He paused a moment. “He travels a lot. I think Rema’s lonely.”

Lonely. She’d been lonely, too, at times, but moving and Rick had filled her life with new expectations.

“Married?” El glanced at her left hand.

“No, not yet.” Yet? “No” would have been good enough. She managed to control a frown. “But a good friend from work came over and toted the heavy stuff. He’s a very kind man. Probably someone like you.” Angie spotted a hint of pride puffing his chest.

“Thank you.” He shook his head. “So this fella is just a good friend. Nothing else on his mind?”

An image sparked in her mind. Life with Rick? She found him attractive, but she’d avoided thoughts of anything more. At least, she tried to. “Right. Rick’s just a friend, and that’s good with me.” But her true feelings and reactions confounded her.

“Good girl.” He patted her arm as concern fell across his face. “Please, don’t think I’m the nosy neighbor or the morals police. I just admire young people who value the Lord’s expectations.”

“My parents gave me strong values.” Again she thought of her relationship with Cal and his friends. She’d let her values slip there, anticipating a ring on her finger. What a mistake. “And I don’t see you as being nosy. I think you care about people, and you’re a man of wisdom.”

“Thank you, but the Good Book’s filled with wisdom. I just have a good memory.”

His wit tickled her. “El, it’s nice to meet you, and I know if I need a little wisdom I can come to you, especially with that good memory you mentioned.”

He gave her a wink. “Love to have you, and you’ll find other good people on this street.”

She loved his smile. “I’ll let you get back to work and finish my stroll so I can face mine again. I’m determined to get things put away so I can get outside, too.”

He laughed and waved as she returned to the sidewalk and her trip around to the circle and back. Yet as she walked his comment about Rema being lonely knotted in her chest. Though she didn’t want to take on a needy friend, she couldn’t neglect her, either.

She headed back home on the far side of the street, admiring her new house as she approached. As it often did, Rick’s image popped into her mind. But so did El and his encouragement to read the Bible, as if it was something she needed. Maybe it was. She’d been without the Lord for a while, and like Rema, she’d been lonely, too. Lilac Circle had opened doors for new friendship and now El had reminded her of another friendship,

one with the Lord. Like all new friendships, it would take time.

* * *

Though she'd slept poorly, Angie looked forward to the day and Rick's visit. She bounced down the stairs with a sense of accomplishment. The linens lay in a closet in neat piles, her clothes stacked in drawers lined with scented paper, and her cosmetics and personal items had found their logical place in the bathroom drawers and cabinets. She'd even settled on which paintings and wall decor would look best in each room.

The extra bedroom had become a guest room, though she rarely had overnight guests. It looked neat with the bed made and a couple of knickknacks in appropriate spots to add a little life to the room. The second floor was finished except for hanging the wall decor.

Rick's visit added a bit more hope. He could hang the pictures and anything else she'd selected to adorn the rooms while she made decisions about what to tackle in the yard.

She'd meant it when she'd told Rick she looked forward to meeting Carly. Rick seemed to dote on the little girl, and she'd learned enough to know that things weren't always smooth between him and his ex-spouse. Problems didn't make a good environment for their young daughter. Yet she had confidence in Rick. He would never do anything to hurt his daughter, so she suspected when trouble came he did all he could to hide it from Carly.

She poured coffee into a mug and nibbled on a buttered

English muffin. Nothing else appealed to her. Egg? French toast? Pancakes? Although they sounded good, pancake recipes seemed to be for more than one person. She shook her head at her thoughtlessness. She should have invited Rick and Carly to breakfast.

To help pass time she busied herself by lining pictures along the walls where she wanted them hung, and she laid a couple of items on the bed that she thought might look nice in the bathroom—a cute wall clock set in a floral motif and a small shelf to hold a miniature vase and a pin box that had belonged to her grandmother. For her home office, she'd laid out a tapestry from her grandmother's home as well as a dry board to jot notes to herself.

She eyed the kitchen clock. Nine. She suspected they'd be there soon, but with a little one, maybe not. Before she could question his arrival any longer, a sound from the driveway alerted her. She ran to the living room window and peeked out.

Her heart skipped a beat upon seeing his car. She spotted Rick leaning into the backseat, releasing Carly's booster-seat straps. The girl jumped out, cute and spunky, her eyes the same shape and hazel color as Rick's and bowed lips that must have been like her mother's. Rick's were full and more rugged than his daughter's bowed ones.

Without waiting for their ring, she hurried to the door and swung it open. At work, Rick wore a sport coat or a shirt and sweater, but today he had dressed in jeans and a deep gold polo

shirt that highlighted the gold in his hair.

Rick looked up and gave a wave. "I hope we're not too early."

"Not at all. I've been up for a while." She hated to tell him she hadn't been able to sleep and had thought about his visit throughout the night. She pulled her gaze from Rick's and focused on the child. The girl had her daddy's hair, the same golden brown with cute bangs and the sides curved beneath her chin. "Hi, Carly. I'm so glad you came to visit."

The child gave her a shy look and glanced at Rick before her hazel eyes darted back to Angie. "Thank you."

Polite and sweet. Angie's heart gave a squeeze. She could see why Rick's life revolved around the little girl. "Come in. I was just having breakfast."

Rick's smile faded. "Oh, I'd hoped I would catch you before that." He lifted a paper bag she hadn't noticed. "I brought you a breakfast sandwich."

Her chest constricted. "Really? I couldn't decide what to eat, so I'm nibbling on an English muffin."

"Well, stop nibbling. I have a sandwich for each of us. Even Carly wanted to give it a try."

She stood back, holding open the door as they entered.

Rick headed straight for the kitchen with Carly on his heels. When she came through the doorway, he'd pulled three packages from the sack and eyed the coffee carafe. "Do you have enough?"

She nodded and pulled a mug from the cabinet. "Here you go, and, Carly, would you like milk or some orange juice?"

The child glanced at her dad, who gave a nod. "Milk, please." Angie grinned and poured a glass of milk from the carton.

They gathered around the table, and when Rick bowed his head, Carly followed. As if a belated thought, he looked up. "Do you mind?"

"Mind? No, please." Angie folded her hands and waited.

Rick gave Carly a nod. The child eyed her before beginning the prayer. "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest..."

The prayer leaped from the recesses of Angie's mind. How often had she heard those words spoken around the table? Her father's voice rang through her head and, fighting tears, she had to force herself to look up when Carly finished. "Thank you, Carly. I used to say that prayer when I was your age."

"You did?" The five-year-old looked at Rick with question. "Is the prayer really old?"

Angie pressed her lips together to control her chuckle. Rick struggled with the same reaction as he explained it was very, very old. "Even your great-grandmother knew that prayer, Carly."

The child seemed to ponder what he'd said as she delved into her breakfast sandwich. After two bites her expression made it clear she enjoyed it.

Angie enjoyed hers, too, but then she remembered Rema's delicious muffins and wished she'd saved a couple. Maybe she'd have to learn to bake. Kids loved cookies, cake and muffins. Out of the corner of her eye, Angie watched the girl, hoping the child felt welcomed. "Carly, your daddy tells me you're in

kindergarten.”

Carly’s face lit with a grin, the sandwich forgotten. “Uh-huh and do you know what?”

“No. Tell me.” Angie leaned closer, enjoying the child’s animation with her hands raised as if ready to applaud.

“Our teacher gives us fun homework.”

“Fun homework?” She drew back, never remembering a time when she’d thought homework fun.

Rick’s eyes twinkled. “I reacted the same way until she explained. The teacher has them go outside for activities. They had to find samples of leaves, wildflowers and acorns, and then she gave the children a list of things to find in their yards.” He grinned. “See. That’s fun homework.”

“I imagine it is.” She got a kick out of the child’s exuberance.

Carly’s eyes widened. “And guess what I found.”

Angie shrugged. “A pinecone?”

“No. I found a dandelion.”

“I remember dandelions.” Angie pictured the yellow flowerlike weed, the bane of all the adults when, later, its puffy seeds landed in their yards. Yet her mind shot back to a day when her mom had put a dandelion beneath her chin and told her if it left a yellow stain she would find her true love. So much for dandelions.

Rick stood. “I noticed the house on the corner has a sold sign already.”

“I saw it yesterday. A new neighbor will move in soon, I

suppose.”

His sandwich gone, Rick wiped his mouth and motioned toward the archway. “Which reminds me, where do we start?”

His eagerness tickled her. “How are you at hanging pictures and things?”

“A pro.” He gave a playful grimace. “Okay, I’m not exactly a pro, but I’m not bad. I have a good eye, but I’m even better if you have a level.”

A level? “Is that one of those wood things with the little bubbles?”

An odd expression came over his face, and then, as if a light had turned on, he chuckled. “I suppose a person could describe it that way. Apparently you don’t have one.”

“Apparently.”

“I can eyeball it. It’ll be fine.”

She loved his eyes, a deep tan sprinkled with gold dust. They twinkled as if they were mischief looking for a place to happen. “I’m sure you can eyeball it. You have very nice eyes.” She snapped her fingers. “How about a measuring tape? I have that along with a hammer and the right kind of nails for frames and things. I asked at the hardware store.”

“Sure, a yard stick or tape measure works.” He drew back his head with a tilt. “And you even asked at the hardware store.”

“I did.” She flashed a silly smile as he appeared to study her.

His look gave her goose bumps. Not the scary kind but the kind that confused her. His eyes drew her in as if he read her

mind. And when his dimples flexed, then vanished, she sensed he'd told himself a joke, probably about her. His subtle sense of humor was one of his attributes she loved. But today only tension grasped her. She waited to see what he'd say or tell her what he wanted, but he didn't say a word.

Instead he looked away without a response and slipped his hand into his pocket. After a moment, he took a deep breath. "Well?"

She rose from the table, buoyed with excitement. "If you're ready to get started, let's go. I don't want to hold you up from—"

"That's no problem." He winked at Carly. "You and I saved the whole day for Angie, didn't we?" She gave him a smile and nodded. "We have nothing else waiting, and we know you want to buy some flowers and get some planting done."

"I do." She pointed to the staircase. "So, let's get busy. I'll show you what needs to be done upstairs, and while you're doing that, Carly can help me decide on the flowers."

"I can?" Excitement flickered on her face along with the telltale dimples that validated she was Rick's daughter.

"Absolutely." She loved seeing the child's enthusiasm. "You can even help me plant some of them. How's that for an idea?"

"Daddy, I can help plant." She bounced on her toes.

"I know. Angie is a glutton for..." He rolled his eyes. "Never mind."

Carly tilted her head. "What's a glutting?"

"A really nice person, I think." Rick patted her head as his

eyes shifted to Angie. "Let's see what you have upstairs."

She beckoned him to follow. Carly joined him as they traveled from room to room while she pointed to the various items needing to be hung.

"You really have a nice place here, Ang. I didn't pay attention when I was toting boxes."

Ang. No one had called her that since her dad had years ago. It had been a special signal they were pals. He'd never had the son he'd wanted, so she'd become his buddy. She loved their relationship. He'd taken her fishing and sometimes had let her help him do minor car repairs or maintenance. She'd forgotten it all now, but it had meant the world to her then.

Her mind snapped back and she shrugged. "Sorry. I went on a short memory trip. I like it here, too. Thanks."

He gave her a playful wink and didn't seem concerned about her distraction.

When she had finished pointing out the tasks, Carly joined her downstairs without looking back, and they headed outside. As she studied the yard, Carly did the same.

Angie lifted a pen to the notepad she'd brought. "What do you think? Where should we put the flowers?"

Carly skipped across the lawn and selected an empty space in front of the lilac bushes that would experience morning and early afternoon sun before being dimmed by the shade of the foliage in late afternoon. "That's a good spot, Carly." Her mind sought the kinds of flowers that could work, ones that thrived with partial

shade.

“Back there.” Carly pointed to an area along the fence just beyond another cluster of large lilac shrubs.

She studied the place, which would have full sun most of the day. “That’s a good place. We could plant roses.” She made a note.

Carly spun around and headed back to her. “Roses are pretty.”

“They are.” She tucked her arm around the child’s shoulders, not sure how she would respond, but Carly drew closer without hesitation. Angie loved the feeling of Carly beside her and enjoyed showing affection to the little girl. From what she’d learned from Rick, Carly’s mother worked a job that resulted in travel and long office hours. The girl spent hours in an after-school program and often child-care services.

Angie’s chest tightened, picturing the bubbly child, eager to please and anxious to help, being raised by people other than her mom. Angie understood that some jobs were demanding and the woman had to make a living, but she couldn’t alter the emotion she felt for Carly. A lump formed in her throat and startled her. She’d been well loved by both parents as a child, and she wanted that for Carly.

She and Carly moved to the side of the house and into the front yard, where beds had once held flowers. They made notes of the kinds of plants she could buy. Though she had enough ideas to cost a fortune, she knew she could start small and add perennials each year.

Taking a break, they sat on the porch steps and talked about different kinds of flowers. Though Carly knew more about flower colors than kinds, she mentioned roses and tulips. Planting bulbs in autumn would add colorful spring blossoms to the landscape. Angie made a note in her book to help her remember.

“What do you like to do for fun, Carly?” The question came out of nowhere.

Carly looked thoughtful as if she had too many to list. Yet no ideas seemed to come.

“How about swings and slides at the park?” Angie watched her face brighten.

“We have swings at school.”

“Can you go up high on them?” She watched the girl’s face twist in thought.

“I don’t know how.” She faced Angie. “Do you?”

Tender feelings slid through Angie. “You’ll learn when you’re bigger, but one day we’ll have to take you to a park. Your daddy can push you a little bit high.”

“Really?” Her eyes sparkled. “And can we go on the slides?”

“You can. I think I’m too big.” She pictured herself trying to squeeze her hips down a slide. The picture made her smile. “Does your daddy take you to the park?”

“No, but we go shopping and buy groceries. And he takes me to the hamburger place that has tunnels and ladders, and he watches me play.”

“That’s fun. I don’t think they had that kind of play area when I was a little girl. You’re lucky.”

“I am, because my daddy is fun.” Her head lowered as if in thought and then popped up. “Daddy reads me stories, and we laugh. And he buys us pizza.”

“You are a very lucky girl.”

“Maybe he’ll buy you pizza, too.” She looked thoughtful before nodding her head. “I’ll tell him to.”

Angie silenced her gasp. “You don’t have to. Let’s see if he thinks of it by himself.” All she needed was to have him think she’d put the bug in Carly’s ear to invite her for pizza.

Carly nodded. “Okay. Let’s see.”

“See what?” Rick came around the corner of the house, a bright smile on his face.

“Nothing.” Angie jumped up. “We were talking about playing on swings and slides at a park. Carly would like that.”

His eyes widened. “Good. We have a park somewhere near us. Good idea.”

She suspected Rick hadn’t thought of the park. The child needed fun and ways to play, and she wondered what they did together other than grocery shop and eat burgers and pizza. Little kids needed stimuli.

His unexpected appearance surprised her. “Are you done with everything?”

“I think so. Do you want to check?”

The thought ran through her head and out again. “No. Later.

Let's go to the nursery for the flowers."

"Let's go." Carly clapped her hands and skipped toward the car.

Rick reached for her, but before he captured Carly she spun away from him toward the car, wearing a silly grin as she beckoned to him to follow. A tender feeling oozed through Angie as she viewed the father-daughter antics. Though she had lost confidence in men and had no desire to marry, today a sweet sensation ran through her, and for once she understood the joy of being a family. With the image in her mind, she melted.

* * *

Rick pulled into Sunburst Garden and parked. He hadn't felt this alive in years. Carly's smile and excitement sent guilt creeping up his back. Why hadn't he thought to teach her things like planting a flower or doing simple tasks? She'd cozied up to Angie as if she was a female Pied Piper. Though logic said he should feel a bit envious, he didn't. Seeing his daughter's spirit higher than the treetops—and over such simple things—lifted him into the clouds.

He jumped from the car and headed for Carly to unhook her booster seat, but she'd already loosened the belts and slipped out of the shoulder strap as Angie opened the door for her. She bounded from the SUV, skipping around them as if she had swallowed jumping beans. The sight made him laugh. "You are a bundle of energy."

"I'm excited 'cause Angie said I can help plant flowers." Carly

gazed at Angie with admiration. "I've never planted flowers."

"Okay, but if you're good at it, then I'll put you to work at home." He gave Carly a wink.

Carly loved the idea and skittered ahead of them through the nursery gate into the outdoor area filled with all types of perennial plants.

He held back, longing for time to talk with Angie, but he suspected that wouldn't be easy with Carly's exuberance.

Angie found a shopping cart and placed an empty flower flat in it and then pushed it along with Carly hanging on to the handle. Rick followed, amazed at his little girl's attraction to Angie and the whole idea of planting flowers.

Angie beckoned her toward the annuals inside the building and pointed to a flat. "See these flowers, Carly?"

She nodded. "They're pretty."

"They're called wave petunias, and they're beautiful when they grow in a garden, so I want you to pick out the colors that you like and put them in this box." Angie picked up a box of pink petunias and set them in one of the little compartments. "We'll fill this flat with all kinds of colors that you like, and they will grow so big you'll be surprised."

"I get to pick them myself?"

Angie nodded. "I trust you'll do a good job, and I'll be right here."

Rick's head spun hearing the dialogue between the two. Carly moved up and down the lengthy row, studying the plants as if

she'd been asked to make a necklace from the crown jewels.

Angie stood back, an amazing smile on her face, her rounded cheeks rosy. Even without lipstick, her lips were pink. They curved in a warm smile. "Look at her, Rick. She's a little treasure."

He agreed. "I wish her mom could see this. Glenda's work keeps her busy, and sometimes I feel she pays little attention to Carly. I hope she doesn't notice." He lowered his head and faced his own weakness. "And sometimes I don't think I'm much better."

"Come on, Rick. You're a loving person, and you dote on her when you talk about her."

"I know. I love her more than I can say, but sometimes I'm at a loss. I never would have thought to let her select flowers for a garden or help plant them. It's something a mother thinks about, I guess. Watching you, I feel inadequate."

"Stop thinking like that. You're creative. At Carly's age, she's learning all the time, and you can help teach her things she'll remember always."

"You're giving me more credit than I deserve, but thanks. I hope you're right." He touched her arm, feeling her soft skin beneath his fingers. "I'm definitely learning from you."

She gave a head shake and shifted her gaze to Carly, who'd begun to fill the flat with thoughtful choices.

"Angie." He drew in a breath, not wanting to ruin the moment or the day. "You'd make a wonderful mother. I really can't

understand why some man hasn't snapped you up before now." The only thing that made him know she'd heard him was the expression on her face.

Her brow furrowed a moment before softening. "To be honest, Rick, I was never asked."

He drew back, unable to grasp what she'd said. "You're kidding. That can't be."

"But it is. I don't tell people this. Once I thought I'd found my true love, but..." She shook her head. "It wasn't meant to be, and after I looked back on it, I realized it would have been a mistake. I've never been open enough to arouse a man's interest, since...since—"

"It was the motorcycle guy, wasn't it?" He recalled the impact the man's death had on her.

She nodded. "We were too different. He knew better than I did. I still thought he'd ask me, but he was killed before he might have." She gave him a feeble grin. "But the 'might have' is unlikely. He loved his bike, camping and hanging out with the guys and their girls. That wasn't me."

"Then what was the attraction?" The image bogged in his mind. The picture she painted wasn't the Angie he knew.

"I think it was the unknown, the surprise and unfamiliar. I was pretty straightforward. Raised to get an education and a good job. Do all the right things. Go to church. He lived on the edge, and I wished I could be more like that, but..."

"But it doesn't suit you." Angie had become a woman he

admired, one who would be a wonderful mother and a loving wife, a wife who would pitch in and work toward their mutual dreams.

Dreams. The word stopped him. His dream, not hers, and he'd already warned himself. His heart sank.

"It didn't suit me. Not at all. When I really thought about the lifestyle, it frightened me. Still, I wanted to do something to stimulate my very mundane life."

"And your faith? Are you still a churchgoer?"

She looked away, tension tightening her jaw. "No, I drifted. Too far, I'm afraid."

He slipped his arm around her shoulders. "It's never too far or too late, Angie. God's bigger than that. Your faith is still there. You just put it to sleep for a while, but with sleep comes renewed energy. Faith doesn't stray too far."

Angie nodded, her gaze shifting to Carly. "You've done a wonderful job with her, Rick." She strode to Carly's side and helped her set the flat of flowers on the bottom shelf of the cart. "Now, let's look for some roses."

Carly's eyes widened. "Roses smell pretty, but they have thorns."

Rick slipped behind Carly, his hands resting on her shoulders. "Sometimes beautiful things have thorns that scare you away, but if you're really careful, they're worth all the trouble." His gaze slipped to Angie, and he sensed she'd caught the analogy. From her expression he'd surprised her as much as his admission

surprised him. He caught the handle of the basket. "Which way?"

Angie pointed toward the outside, and when she turned, he followed her. They made their way down the rows and found the roses in an area close to the back of the nursery where many kinds and colors were on display. She and Carly studied the plants, and Angie settled on some Knock Out roses, which she said bloomed all summer. Carly picked out some long-stemmed blossoms.

"Good choice, Carly," he said. Angie signaled him to lift the plants into the cart while she watched Carly study other ones. An expression on her face warned him she had something on her mind. "Are you sure you want all these?"

"I love them." She smiled at Carly. "This young lady did a good job of choosing some beautiful roses. But..."

When she faltered, he knew he'd been right. "But what?"

Angie eyed Carly before answering. "It'll take a long time to plant these, and I'm thinking that today may not be the best day."

He raised an eyebrow, letting her know he suspected she had left some things unspoken. "How long can flowers sit without being planted?"

"No more than a day or so. I'll need to keep them watered."

"What about tomorrow? Carly and I could come after church and finish the job." His pulse skipped at his impulsiveness. She may have had enough of them. "That's if you'd like us to."

Her face brightened. "I'd love you to come if you really don't mind."

Carly's eyes sparkled. "Can I help?"

"You sure can." Angie slipped her arm around Carly's shoulders and gave her a hug. "I've never had such a good helper in my whole life."

"Daddy." Carly bounced on her toes. "Can we come tomorrow?"

"If Angie wants to put up with us another day, we sure can."

Carly clapped and twirled, then grabbed the handle of the cart and eyed Angie. "Are we done?"

"If you're planting tomorrow, I have a few more ideas." Angie chuckled Carly under the chin. "What do you think?"

Carly gave a nod and waited for her to point the way.

They followed Angie down another row while his own excitement grew. With Angie's willingness for them to return Sunday, he wanted to twirl down the rows as Carly had done. Two days with Angie felt like a gift to him as well as Carly. She made life fun and meaningful. Yet a flicker of concern tightened in his chest. He had to be careful. He'd already feared her hesitation to plant today was because of something he'd said.

"If we're finishing the planting tomorrow..." She paused and looked at Carly. "We might have time to go to the park today."

"The park? Really?" A gleeful giggle escaped Carly. "Can we, Daddy?"

"If we have time, why not?"

Carly jumped in place. "Why not?"

Angie gave him a wink, pleasure filling her face. She hurried

down the row, selected a few more perennials, and after he loaded her choices in the cart, he pushed it toward the cashier. Many times things he longed to know flew into his head, but those kinds of questions needed time. Instead he trod lightly. A lifetime didn't happen in a day. Angie clung to a private past she seemed unwilling to share. He could learn a lesson from her silence. Already he'd revealed too much.

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