



Grayson Roberts had determined a long time ago never to date a non-Christian. After all, his parents' lack of a faith in God ruined the first fifteen years of his life. And the way Adrian Stewart's eyes shifted when he mentioned praying for their success, he had a feeling she didn't share his beliefs.

So why couldn't he shake her from his thoughts this afternoon? They hadn't even spoken that long and never in person. All he had was a first impression through a computer screen.

"Gray?" Diane, the head of accounting, stood in his doorway. "Payroll is messing up again." Her hair frizzed around the edge of her braid, as if she'd clasped her head in her hands multiple times that day.

"Okay. Let's see what's going on." Gray followed her back to her workspace and clicked through the multiple screens open on her computer.

"How long before we get the new software?" Diane sank into a chair next to him.

"Just a few more weeks. First of June, we start training." He clicked on a couple of different boxes and ran the program again.

Maybe this time, all the information needed would pull correctly. Otherwise, it would be a late night.

“It can’t come soon enough. This program is so outdated it seems to grow problems by the hour.” Diane waved at the screen. “This new one better work more efficiently.”

“I’ve heard nothing but good reports about it.” Gray pressed his hands together, sending up a quick prayer that all would be right when he opened the report back up. “Ta-da. How’s this look?”

Diane peered over his shoulder, motioning him to scroll through the data so she could see more. “Yes. Yes, it looks like it’s at least mostly there this time. Much closer anyway.”

“Good.”

“Any hope of moving up the start date on the new program?”

“I don’t know. It sounds like the training lady is due some vacation time before she heads our way. I can’t imagine taking that away from her. Plus, I don’t think we’re quite set up to start it here, anyway. They’re adding a few things we requested. And we need to work out everyone’s schedules so they can sit through her sessions while others cover their workload. It’s a lot to organize, and we still have a few hoops to jump through.”

“I may go talk to Riley about it anyway. Every week I fear we’re tempting fate to keep using this antiquated software.” Diane pulled the report off the printer and waved it at him. “It’s at least worth looking into.”

“Let me know what she says.” Gray saluted her as he walked back downstairs to the IT department.

The thought of seeing Adrian sooner set a battle waging within him. Sure, he was excited about getting his hands on a program to make payroll and client data easier to work with. But, more than that, he wanted to see if the woman on the computer screen was as intriguing in real life as she was hundreds of miles away.

And that was probably the stupidest thing to focus on. Especially if she didn’t believe in prayer. But those few minutes

online together were enough to leave a lasting image of her eyes and smile in his head whenever he stopped to daydream for a minute. Enough to make him hope Vice President Riley would agree with Diane and try to move up their start date.

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BRAD MADE sure Adrian didn't work many more days. The next Tuesday, she found herself driving south on I-55 toward Arkansas. Her parents had moved to a small town northeast of Little Rock the year before her senior year of high school. This was the longest they'd lived anywhere.

Growing up, her family ended up moving about every three years. She'd lived in one town for six, but just like every other place, it didn't last.

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel until her knuckles turned white. *Stop thinking about it. That part of your life is over.* She pried a hand off the wheel to reach over and turn up the volume on the radio. Maybe Taylor Swift could drown out her past, even while she headed towards it at seventy miles an hour.

It wasn't that she didn't love her family. They just didn't understand. Yes, her dad chose preaching as his profession and couldn't turn his back on it, but why did it seem like his job was more important than his daughter? She followed the signs through southern Missouri and into Arkansas. Just another hour and a half. Still time to turn around ...

She straightened her shoulders and readjusted her hands on the steering wheel. No. She'd keep going. There was nothing for her to do back at her apartment in St. Louis this week. A road sign noted the number of miles to Memphis, but she'd get off before then. The towns her father chose to work in were never big enough to be close to an interstate. She saw her exit, took a deep breath, and pointed her car west.

At least Danielle promised she'd be there with the kids tonight. Adrian's sister lived in Little Rock with her husband but

spent quite a bit of time with their parents. Adrian wasn't sure if it was to make up for the fact that Adrian spent almost no time with them or if she just really liked being there.

To distract herself from her anxiety, Adrian focused on everything she'd need to do when she started the job in Memphis. Gray had been in touch, saying everything was going great and that he looked forward to working with her. She still couldn't put her finger on precisely what it was about him that made her feel so fluttery inside.

She'd seen handsome men before and not reacted this way. And it wasn't like she'd seen him more than the short video conference the other day, so she didn't know much about him at all. But still ... he hit a vibe inside her that made her yearn to get to Memphis faster.

She checked the rearview mirror but couldn't see the road sign for Memphis anymore. *I'm supposed to be thinking about work, not coworkers.* She laughed at herself. *Actually, I'm not supposed to be thinking about anything work-related. I'm on vacation.*

The house the church provided for her parents was a simple, one-story brick ranch with three bedrooms and a den. Her mom was working in the front flower bed when Adrian pulled her Honda into the drive.

No one could deny Adrian and Danielle were related to their mom—all had the same heart-shaped face, hair color, and hazel eyes. As Mom stood up and brushed dirt from her knees, Adrian imagined she was looking at herself in twenty years. If that were true, she'd age well. Beth Stewart still appeared younger than her fifty years, although Adrian noticed a few more grays mixed in with the brown hair. Her mom's face lit up as Adrian got out of the car.

Even after everything that had happened the last few years, her mom's hug was warm and comforting. Some of the tension seeped from Adrian's shoulders as her mom's arms squeezed her close. She breathed in the scent of sunshine and soil that took her back to years of helping her mom work in gardens they

might have to leave before harvest. Adrian shook that sad thought away and reveled in the hug.

“How are you, sweetie?” Her mom pulled away enough to look Adrian in the eyes.

“I’m fine.” Adrian turned and grabbed her bag and pillow out of the car. She was only planning to stay a few days. Three seemed to be the maximum number she could be with her family before things got too heated, so she usually left after two and a half.

“Not sure what I’m supposed to do with time off, though. Brad insisted I take a week of vacation. He said I had too many vacation days saved up, and he was tired of seeing them go to waste.”

“Everyone needs a break now and then.”

“I guess.” Adrian followed her mother into the house. The cinnamon scent of her favorite cookies filled the air, and she breathed in deeply—snickerdoodles. All was as it had been the last time she visited. Old school pictures on the wall of the living room, dining table half-piled with projects her mom was working on for one organization or another, several pairs of reading glasses lay waiting, each assigned to its own piece of furniture.

Her mom waved toward the hall. “Your room is ready as always. Lay your stuff down and come have a cookie.”

Though Adrian pleaded not to move here since it was right before her senior year of high school, she’d ended up here for a year. Still, this had never felt like home. Down the hall, the room remained locked in time, with her old twin bed, the cheval mirror she’d begged for one Christmas, her high school diploma and graduation picture in matching frames on the wall. Her various yearbooks sat on a shelf along with other high school mementos she’d left behind.

She ran a finger around the glass she got at prom, full of the petals from her corsage. She hadn’t even wanted to go, but Danielle insisted. Wandering back to the kitchen, she sat on a stool at the bar. Her mom had a plate of cookies and a mug of

coffee ready for her. She took a bite of a still-warm snickerdoodle and sighed. No one could get them as soft and chewy as her mom.

“It’s a shame you won’t be here through Friday.” Her mom took a sip of coffee. “The singing is this weekend.”

“Mom—”

Her mom held her hands up as if to surrender. “I know. I won’t push it. But a mother can miss hearing her daughter sing, can’t she?”

“I’m sure Danny and her family will come.”

“Of course. But, oh, to hear you two sing together again ... that would be a bit of heaven on earth.”

“Maybe we can do some show tunes together tonight.” Adrian took another bite of cookie, trying to figure out how to change the subject. She was not going to a gospel singing. There was no need for her to sing songs she didn’t mean to a God who didn’t love her.

“You know that’s not the kind of song I love to hear you sing.”

The backdoor opened before Adrian could reply. Her father walked into the kitchen, his focus on the mail in his hand. He glanced up and gave her a smile that didn’t quite reach all the way to his eyes, as if he wanted to test the waters before he gave her a full-hearted one. How sad that she got a warmer smile from Gray Roberts on a video conference than from her parents.

“Hello, A.” Her dad always referred to his daughters by their first initials. He said he did it because he couldn’t really come up with a nickname for Adrian and didn’t think it was fair for Danny to have one when she didn’t.

Adrian stood and side-hugged him. “Hey, Dad.”

“I was just trying to talk Adrian into staying for the singing this Friday.” Her mom stood and gave him a light peck on the lips.

“I didn’t pack much for my visit. I still need to go back to St. Louis and get my stuff before I can head to Memphis next

week.” Adrian didn’t offer an apology. She wasn’t sorry she’d miss the singing. She’d planned it that way.

“The girl is busy, Beth. Maybe another time.” Her father snatched a cookie and walked out to the den.

Her mom sat back down at the counter. “Your sister should be here in a little while.”

Adrian nodded. “I talked to her the other day. She said the kids are excited to see me.”

“You won’t believe how much they’ve grown. Timmy is loving preschool, thinks he’s big man on campus. And Seth is so sweet and loving. No terrible twos for him. He has lots of snuggles for his Nana.”

“Sounds a lot like his mama.” Adrian had been the wilder one of the twins. It had never surprised her that Danny got married and settled down to raise a family right out of college.

“They’re both sweet boys.” Her mom picked at a spot on the counter with her thumbnail.

“Want some help with your weeding? I think I interrupted you.”

“Sure. That would be nice.”

She followed her mom outside, and they knelt side by side in the warm dirt, cleaning out her mother’s flower garden. The sun was warm on her back, and Adrian pushed up her sleeves. She’d forgotten that Arkansas warmed up faster than St. Louis and Chicago. Neither woman spoke, just worked in silence.

In high school, Adrian never had any trouble talking to her parents. Now it seemed like every conversation led to a road one or the other of them didn’t want to go down. If this was how the next two days would be, Adrian might never take a vacation again.