



Katie chose to wear a short-sleeved, golden-yellow knit dress for her Friday date with Nathan. With an empire waist and pin-tucked bodice, the skirt fell just below her knees. She carefully smoothed her curls back into a chignon at the nape of her neck. Small gold teardrops dangled from her earlobes, and bone-colored pumps graced her feet.

She gazed at her reflection in her mirror, satisfied with her appearance. Katie enjoyed dressing up, and she hadn't had many opportunities to do so recently.

Although she looked forward to the play, she still didn't feel entirely right going with Nathan. "If it's doubtful, don't do it," kept popping into her mind, and she pushed the warning down each time.

She didn't want him to see this as any more than a date between friends, but she knew he wanted a significant relationship with her. *Now that I'm a Christian, did you ever think God might want us together?* kept ringing in her ears. She knew her answer to his question, and he wouldn't like it.

Glancing around her apartment, she turned on a light in the living room and picked up her purse and coat that lay on the sofa. She'd wait for him outside.

A blue pickup truck pulled up to the curb. Nathan got out and came around the truck, stopping suddenly when he saw her. His raised eyebrows and open mouth bespoke his surprise.

“I thought you’d be waiting in your apartment.” He smiled. “You look nice.” He opened the truck door for her. The navy-blue sport jacket and light blue dress shirt he wore with khaki dress pants complimented his coloring.

“Thank you.” She climbed into the truck as gracefully as possible, Nathan’s hand on her elbow. The interior was new and clean.

Katie took a deep breath and blew it out as she fastened her seatbelt before he opened his door and slid in behind the wheel. He had the radio playing softly, tuned to a country music station. Neither of them seemed to have much to talk about at first.

Katie clasped and unclasped her hands. “You got your truck.”

Nathan smiled. “You remembered how much I wanted one.” He sighed. “Yeah, she’s mine and the bank’s.” He patted the dashboard. “How’s work?”

She didn’t want to discuss her job with Nathan. “It keeps me busy. There are good days and not-so-good days.”

“Are you sorry you became a nurse? Do you ever think of doing something else?”

“What do you mean?” She frowned. Why did he think she’d want to do anything else?

“You were a pretty good actress.”

“That was so long ago, and I was immature.” She shook her head. “I have no regrets about my choices, except ...” She bit her lip and looked away, remembering that long-ago day and the little boy who would never call her *Mama*. She still believed adoption had been the right choice for him, but she regretted that she had given in to Nathan’s urging rather than saying no to his request for sexual favors.

He glanced at her. “Except ...?”

She turned her face away and closed her eyes, pausing until she could control her emotions. “I chose the right career. I love

nursing.” She faced him in the dim light. “I can help so many people, and I know I’m where God wants me.”

That was close. She’d never make herself that vulnerable to Nathan again. “Acting isn’t a career for me. I’d rather use drama as a ministry, which I do at church.”

He shrugged. “Well, do you ever want to get out of Greenlawn?”

“It’s funny.” Katie crossed her ankles. “Most of the kids in my class have moved away. They couldn’t wait to get out of Greenlawn.” *Like you, Nathan, when you deserted me.*

“I’m content to live here. I have my nursing job, I have a good church, I’m involved in drama, and I have my friends. God has been good to me and has given me a way to use my gifts for Him. But if God has something for me somewhere else, I’d be willing to go.”

He glanced at her. “Like if you had a romantic interest?” The corners of his mouth turned up.

Traffic had thickened, and he prepared to make a left turn.

Katie studied his handsome profile for a moment. With wavy black hair, blue eyes, and a ruddy complexion, he was an attractive man. She chose not to respond to his question, not wanting to encourage him or cause an argument. Agreeing to this date had been a mistake. It would be better for them to go back to Greenlawn now.

However, he already had tickets, they were almost there, and he hadn’t said or done anything to threaten her. Besides, she wanted to see the play. She quietly watched the passing scenery in the descending darkness.

Dinner with Nathan proved to be more comfortable and pleasant than she expected. She couldn’t find fault with his attentive and polite treatment of her. They talked in general terms about their college experiences, and she learned that Nathan hoped one day to own his own real estate business. He had a good job and goals for his life, and he was active in his church. Not once did she feel he would take advantage of her.

The one-thousand-seat church auditorium filled rapidly as time for the opening curtain approached. The lights dimmed, and the audience quieted. The opening scene drew Katie into the drama. She kept her hands carefully folded in her lap as she concentrated on the activity on stage.

“They’re good,” Katie whispered to Nathan at the end of the first act.

“Told you.” His smug look irritated her.

As the story unfolded on stage, she evaluated the scenery, the costumes, and the acting, making a list of ideas in her mind for the drama team at her church. As the curtain closed on the last scene, she’d been so involved in the play, she was shocked to find Nathan sitting beside her. The audience applauded, and the actors took their bows.

Nathan stood and looked down at her, smiling. “You liked?” She avoided his gaze.

“It was wonderful, Nathan. They portrayed Peter so well, and they stayed true to the Bible.” She stood and lifted her coat from the back of her seat. “Thank you for inviting me to come with you.”

He took the coat from her. “My pleasure.” His hands lingered momentarily on her shoulders as he helped her put on her coat. She stepped away from his touch.

As they made their way out of the building amid a crush of people, his hand pressed against the small of her back. She let it stay because of the crowd. Nathan spoke to several people, and she said *hi* to two young men she’d met at the drama conference.

Her heart sank when she saw the length of the reception line. They’d be there forever.

“Do you want to speak to the cast?” Nathan asked. “We have plenty of time.”

“No, thank you.” She didn’t want to prolong her time with him.

Once they were outside, Katie stepped away from his hand,

and they walked, without touching, to his truck in the large parking lot beside the church.

“Want to stop somewhere for coffee?” He started the engine.

Katie shook her head. “No, I don’t think so, thank you. It’s getting late.” The lateness of the hour didn’t really matter as much as the company.

“Oh. Okay.”

Katie knew she hadn’t responded the way he hoped she would, but his disappointed look didn’t sway her. Her decision was right, and she wouldn’t give him false expectations again.

On the ride home, she chattered about the play. He occasionally commented, but for the most part, he paid attention to the traffic and his driving.

He pulled up in front of the apartment house, opened the door for Katie, and took her hand to help her as she stepped out of the truck. She pulled her hand from his. He walked beside her to the door.

“Thank you for tonight, Nathan. I enjoyed the play.” She removed her door key from her purse.

“We’ll have to do it again.” He stepped closer. She retreated a step. “Maybe we can go to their Christmas play. I’ll watch for the dates. In the meantime ...” He looked above her head and then back at her. “How about tomorrow? The state park is still open, so we could hike to the fire tower and pack a lunch. We could light a fire in one of the firepits.”

She began shaking her head before he finished. “No, Nathan. You’re a good man, and I’ve enjoyed this evening, but I’m going to be honest. I don’t have feelings for you, and I won’t pretend I do. I can’t go out with you again.”

Frowning, he grasped her shoulders. “You know how I feel about you, Katie. Let’s give it a little more time to make sure you’re sure. You’re the love of my life ....”

She put her fingers on his lips. “No, Nathan, I’m not the girl for you. A long time ago, we had an infatuation that got us ... into trouble.”

He jerked his face away from her touch, and she dropped her hand to her side. Touching him sent the wrong message, as did agreeing to go to the play with him.

“The girl of your dreams is out there somewhere. Go and find her with God’s help. I’ll be your friend but nothing else.”

He let go of her. “There’s someone else, isn’t there?” His clipped tone and fisted hands revealed irritation. For the first time, she felt threatened.

She shook her head. “No, Nathan. How I feel about you is just between us. There’s no one else. I’m not in love with you, and I don’t want a relationship with you.”

She hadn’t seen Jackson since their surprise meeting at the Senior Home. She was telling Nathan the truth.

He grabbed her arms. “Katie, please ...” She shook her head, and he let go. “You’re the girl of my dreams, Katie Mann.”

He walked quickly to his truck and drove away. She watched his taillights disappear as he turned the corner. Shaking her head and blowing out a breath, she unlocked the door of the apartment building. Since it was after eight o’clock, the residents needed a key to get in. She made her way upstairs to her apartment.

She hadn’t made any promises to Nathan concerning their relationship, and she doubted the sincerity of his declaration. For herself, she felt only relief that she’d refused his offer.