



The thump of the door woke Genevieve with a start the next morning. It took a moment before her surroundings made any sense. With the speed of a ninety-year-old woman, she rolled from the bed, stretching her achy muscles. If she decided to stay in here too many more nights, she needed to find a more comfortable mattress. She rubbed the small of her back as she padded down the hallway to their room.

The bed was unmade, clothes tossed across the end of it, as if Scott hadn't been able to decide what to wear that morning. In the bathroom, little black hairs littered the sink area, and the toilet seat saluted her from its upright position. She let out a puff of frustration. She hadn't really believed things would magically change overnight, but it would have been nice, nonetheless.

A glance at the clock showed she was running later than usual. She picked up her pace and got ready for work. The note tucked under her coffee mug was almost so small she missed it, but its fluttering movement caught her eye when she picked up her cup to go. She plucked the paper from the counter and recognized Scott's familiar hen-scratch.

*I'm still not sure what happened yesterday, but I'd really like to talk things through after work today.*

She rolled her eyes. Scott almost never got home early enough on a Wednesday night to do more than scarf a sandwich on the way to mid-week Bible study. She wiped up the ring of coffee he'd spilled earlier, grabbed her own caffeine, and headed out.

The school hallways echoed as her low heels clacked down the linoleum floors. In a few minutes, these corridors would fill with hundreds of voices and locker slams and sneaker squeaks and giggles. The cacophony wasn't something everyone could handle, but Genevieve loved her job as school nurse. Despite the fact she and Scott worked only a few doors away from each other, they almost never crossed paths here anymore. She glanced through the office window where he hunched over his desk, furiously scribbling away in a notepad. Could they find a way to have a conversation without emotions getting in the way this evening?

Opening her door, she flipped on the lights. She pushed the button for her computer to start up, a slow task most mornings, and then wandered down to the teachers' lounge to check her mailbox. As she flipped through several faxes and memos, Valerie Malone came up and swatted her shoulder.

"Still on for lunch today?" Valerie, the art teacher, had planning period right after lunch, so every now and then she snuck off to the local diner with Genevieve for something other than cafeteria food.

"Sounds great." Genevieve straightened her stack. "I've been hankerin' for a Frisco."

"Mm. That does sound good." Valerie leaned against the copy machine she'd set humming. "Although I usually order a cheeseburger anyway."

"Always time to change your mind between now and then."

“Your car or mine?” Valerie tossed a stack of papers on the long table in the center of the room and then started her next set.

“Mine sounded funny this morning.” Genevieve shrugged. “Better take yours this time.”

“No problem. See you around noon.”

The bell rang to start the day right as she stepped into the hallway. She picked up her pace to beat most of the stampede. Only a few teenagers had her dodging to avoid their phone-focused meanderings before she made it back to her office. She pulled the bottom half of her Dutch door closed and sat at her desk to enter medical releases into the student database.

Everything was computerized, and it made life easier in some ways, but more difficult in others. Especially when she had to make out the scribbles of a harried doctor who faxed over releases on ancient machines, which often left several lines missing.

“Hey, Nurse Stewart, got a bandage?” A lanky boy with curls hanging over his ears and neck stuck his head through her doorway.

“Sure, Troy. What happened this time?” She opened the drawer with basic first aid supplies and pulled out a box of various-sized bandages.

“So, we might’ve been playing paper football before class, and might have gotten into it a little too much.”

She raised an eyebrow. “You need a bandage for a cut from a paper football?”

“More like a pencil that got thrown after an interception when the kicker got mad.” He held up his hand sporting a gash along one finger. “I was the unfortunate goal post.”

“What kind of pencil did that?” She gently pressed the wound with an alcohol swap to clean it before handing him the bandage.

“I guess he’d been chewing on his eraser or something, the

metal part was bent, and it stuck out far enough that it caught my skin as it whizzed past.”

“What class was this in?” She signed his hall pass.

“Ms. Daughtry’s Algebra II.” He waved his pass. “Don’t worry. She already sent the other guys to your husband, and now it’s my turn. I had to get this first. Thanks, Ms. Stewart!”

She shook her head. Scott didn’t fool around with kids acting stupid to the point of people getting hurt. Would Troy still be smiling when he headed back to class? The boy wasn’t a real troublemaker. Just a handful.

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SCOTT REFILLED his coffee cup with a second dose of caffeine as he contemplated the conversation he’d overheard. He knew Valerie and Gen were friends but had no idea they regularly had lunch plans. Not that he could’ve joined them even if he’d been invited. Not enough time between meetings to get away.

Would Genevieve admit to Valerie what was bothering her?

It didn’t matter. Valerie would never break her friend’s confidence and tell him what was discussed at their gabfest. And he wouldn’t want her to. Mostly.

Back in his office, he found two boys waiting. “Bit early in the day to start your shenanigans, isn’t it?”

He motioned them into his office and then listened to their rather crazy explanation of a paper football game gone wrong. Once the third boy joined them, he wrote them all lunch detentions and reminded them to be more careful in the future before sending them back to class. One problem dealt with. How many more to go?

His email held a crazy number of unread messages. A lungful of air leaked through his lips as he waded through them, dealing with what he could. Parents wanting to meet with a teacher regarding their children’s grades. A school board

member with a question about prom. Several teachers requesting time off or supplies. A reminder for yearbook orders.

He frowned as he noticed several messages all containing similar complaints.

*Coach Drake cut the basketball practice short again the last two times. I don't mind my son having more time for homework, but I worry about whether or not the team will be ready for play-offs next month.*

*Simon said Coach Drake let them go an hour early yesterday. Has something changed in the way school does practices? I just wanted to make sure I was getting the whole story.*

*We had arranged a ride for Blake after practice yesterday, but we didn't realize the boys would get out early. He had to sit in the cold for forty-five minutes because his ride wasn't supposed to be there yet. Did I miss a memo?*

What was going on? Maybe something had come up in Drake's personal life, and he needed to end before the scheduled time. Still, he needed to communicate better with the parents. Scott scribbled a note to himself to talk to the basketball coach who'd replaced him the year before.

Up until now, there hadn't been any problems that he'd heard of, but three messages at once threw up a flag. It was awkward, because he didn't want to come across as knowing better than Drake how to coach the team. But at the same time, it was his job to reprimand the new guy.

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed again.

Wasn't it enough to have problems at home? He had to have more added to his work life?

A rap at his door brought his attention to the secretary standing there.

“What’s going on, Marian?”

“Dress code violation, Coach Stewart.” She bobbed her grey head to somewhere behind the door. “Tansy Michaels.”

“Bring her in.”

Marian ushered the teenager in. This was the third time this year, and Scott wondered if something was going on outside school to cause her to act out repeatedly. Tansy crossed her skinny arms and waited. Marian stood right inside the door.

“Tansy, you know why you’re here?” Scott made sure to keep his eyes directed at her face and nowhere else.

“Yes.”

He paused a moment, debating whether or not to insist on the “sir.” Probably not worth it today.

“You know the rules. Ms. Marian will help you call someone to bring you something more appropriate. If no one can come, you’re going to have to wear something out of the lost and found bin that meets dress code. And I’ll write up another lunch detention slip.”

That table would be full today.

Tansy nodded and turned back toward the door without waiting for anything else.

Marian exchanged a look of sympathy with him. Something told him her mind was wondering similar things to his. If anyone could squirrel something out of the recalcitrant teenager, it would be Marian. She was the best secretary he knew.

Maybe he should set Marian on Genevieve.

He shook his head and returned to his emails. Not yet. Hopefully, he could talk to her tonight between work and Bible study.

GENEVIEVE'S MORNING inched along in the normal way. Another bandage. A temperature taken of a girl who only wanted out of her chemistry test. A check for headlice that fortunately turned up clean. A couple doses of ADHD meds distributed. Several other records updated. Still, it was nice when noon rolled around, and she could escape for a bit. She flipped her "out to lunch" sign around and locked her door behind her.

"Hey, girl. Ready?" Valerie leaned against her white Mustang.

"You bet." Genevieve slid down onto the black leather seat and shook her head. When her friend first bought this car, everyone thought she'd gone completely nuts. Now, she couldn't imagine Valerie in anything else. The car suited her free spirit and love of fun.

"What's that look for? Missing your fuddy-duddy sedan?" Valerie revved her engine, making the guys sitting at the picnic tables outside the cafeteria holler and wave.

"I like my fuddy-duddy sedan, thank you very much." She patted the console. "I still can't believe you bought this thing."

"I'd wanted one since I was in high school. When Clara moved out, I figured, why not?" Valerie's only child had been gone for two years now. "Besides, Parker likes it too."

Did Scott have any feelings about Genevieve's car? Would he pay more attention if she traded in for something like this? *Don't be ridiculous.* She gave herself a mental chide. *This car wouldn't be practical if we ever have kids.* And there was another ramification of her ultimatum. Would she ever get to be a mom?

"Earth to Genevieve." Valerie's voice brought her out of her emotional thought process. "You okay?"

"A lot on my mind." To put it mildly.

“Well, come on. Let’s go eat.” Valerie pointed at the diner they were parked in front of.

How had she missed the whole drive? She followed Valerie through the doors and to their favorite booth. Sometimes it was nice to have your best friend’s brother own the local eatery. When Val let him know they were coming in that day, Jimmy always saved their spot.

“The usual, I suppose?” He scooted in next to Valerie with his memo pad in hand.

“You know me so well.” Valerie lightly punched his arm.

“Only since you were born.” He rolled his eyes. “Cheeseburger all the way except onions. Extra fries. Diet soda.” His gaze shot over to Genevieve. “Whatcha in the mood for today, Genny?”

“I’m thinking your Frisco sandwich. And iced tea.”

“Sweet, right?”

“With extra lemon.”

He nodded and jumped back up to fill their orders.

“So, what constitutes ‘a lot on your mind.’” Valerie brought them right back to where they’d left off—exactly what Genevieve had hoped to avoid.

She fiddled with the piece of paper holding her silverware in a bundle. “I don’t know, Val. It’s like everything is ... wrong.”

“Wrong? Like, your job? Your house? Your health? What?”

Genevieve waited until after their drinks had been delivered before answering. No need for this to get out any further than necessary yet. “Like between Scott and me.”

Valerie choked on the sip of soft drink.

Genevieve passed her some napkins to mop up the splatters.

“Sorry.” Valerie waved a hand in front of her face as if the slight stir of air would dry the tears in her eyes from the coughing fit. “I thought you said things were wrong between you and Scott.”



“I did.”

“Genevieve Stewart, you can’t be serious.” Valerie leaned back and crossed her arms. “You and Scott were perfect together from the moment you realized you wanted to be more than coworkers. Really, before that. You just wouldn’t admit it for a while.”

“I thought so too.” Genevieve rearranged the salt and pepper shakers in the middle of the table. “But it’s like everything has changed.”

“Everything, meaning what?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes, it seems like there’s nothing he does that doesn’t annoy me—the way he leaves the toilet seat up, misses the hamper, spills things and doesn’t clean them up. And that’s only in the few minutes he’s home. I can’t honestly remember the last time we had a date. Or even dinner together. His job takes up every moment except the few he’s sitting in his recliner watching sports.”

Valerie leaned forward, but then straightened again as their meals arrived. Once the waitress left, she reached for Genevieve’s hands and gave them a reassuring squeeze. “The honeymoon stage is over now. You’ve hit a rough patch. That doesn’t mean you can’t get through it. Those all sound like things pretty much every married couple goes through.”

Genevieve wanted to believe it with all her heart. But she remembered too vividly the fight from the night before.

“What’s that look?” Valerie asked before biting into a fry.

“I’m not sure we *can* get through it.” Genevieve wiped some sauce from the side of her sandwich before taking a bite.

“Well, not with an attitude like that.”

Genevieve wrinkled her nose. “It’s hard to explain. I’ve thought about this over and over and over again, but I keep coming to the same conclusion. This isn’t going to work.”

“You can’t be serious. You’ve only been married for what? Four years? You’re still getting to know each other. Good grief!

Parker and I are still getting to know each other, and we've been married twenty-five this June."

"Valerie, I'm not kidding. That list I gave a minute ago is the tip of the iceberg. There are always little hairs in the sink. A toenail was on my toothbrush last night. In my *mouth*, Val! And he didn't even act fazed by it when I told him."

No reply from across the table.

Genevieve glanced up from her food and widened her eyes. "Are you laughing at me?"

"I'm sorry." Valerie wiped her lips. "The way you said it or something. It caught me off-guard." She took a sip of soda. "Okay, keep digging. I really don't think this iceberg is as deep as you think it is."

"From the first week of our marriage, we've been having dinner with my parents on Tuesday nights. But ever since he moved from being a coach and algebra teacher to the principal, I think he's only made it to three. That's almost two years. Last night, when I headed out, he actually asked where I was going. As if it wasn't something we'd done over and over on the same night. It's like all he can think about is his job. Half the time, I'm sort of surprised he makes it to worship services."

"Genevieve, have you talked to him about this?" Valerie wiped up the last of her ketchup with three fries.

"That's what my parents asked last night." Genevieve set aside the last fourth of her sandwich. "Every time we try to talk, we end up fighting. I moved into the guest bedroom last night."

"That's not going to help solve things." Valerie shook her head. "Maybe you need a go-between to help you guys talk it out without the arguments. Marty does counseling, you know?"

"My parents pointed that out too. But I don't know." She tucked her payment under the edge of the plate. "I don't even know if Scott would want to do something like that."

"You'll never know until you try." Valerie gave her a side-

hug as they walked back outside. “And marriage is definitely worth trying for.”

“I’ll think about it. But I make no promises.”

“I’m glad you’ll at least give it some thought.” Valerie paused a moment before starting the car. “Honey, we’ve been friends a long time despite our age difference. I watched you two fall in love. You can make this work if you want to.”

“What if Scott doesn’t?”

“Has he said that?”

“No.” Genevieve shook her head. “In fact, he reminded me of a pinky promise we made before we got married that we wouldn’t bring up divorce.”

“There ya go.”

Genevieve thought for a moment. As soon as she started talking about this yesterday, everyone had pointed her in the opposite direction of where she thought she was headed. Were they right? How could she be sure?

“Tell you what. You’re the second person to suggest counseling with Marty.” Genevieve pointed to the sky. “If God sends me one more sign that it’s what we need to do, I’ll try to work up the nerve to bare my soul to someone who’s known me even longer than you have.”

“I’ll be praying He sends that sign soon.”