

A heartwarming story of forgiveness and redemption! There were moments that I laughed out loud, and moments that I was brought to tears. A wonderful story, and a great reminder of God's love and the work He is doing in our lives.

— STEPHANIE M. ~ AMAZON CUSTOMER

This is such a heartwarming romance. I enjoyed it from beginning to end, and I'm looking forward to more from this author!

— M. H. ~ AMAZON CUSTOMER

A Summer in Shady Springs is a sweet story of redemption and romance. It was hard to put down! Right now, when the world seems so dark and sad, this is a perfect read to remember the all-important hope we have in Christ (and the fun and joy of being young and in love, too!).

— KRISTEN B. ~ AMAZON CUSTOMER

A Summer
in
Shady Springs

Shady Springs Book One

Sarah Anne Crouch



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*For my mom, without whom this book
would not exist. You are my hero.
Thank you for believing in me.
I love you big!*



*M*adeleine pursed her lips in thought. I really don't want to do this. She rose from the table to refresh her coffee and

reflected over the email she'd just received.

Congratulations on your finished painting for the hospital! Your mom sent lots of pictures, and I think it's absolutely beautiful!

I know you are very busy and important nowadays, but I was hoping you might still have time for your favorite Aunt Clara.

Our church is wanting to put a mural outside of our new children's wing, and I immediately thought of you. I showed some of your pieces to the elders, and they agreed your style is exactly what we want.

We wouldn't be able to pay much, but I can throw in free room and board! Please let me know as soon as you decide. And even if you say no, I still want you to visit your poor old aunt very soon.

Aunt Clara might have tried to disguise her motives, but a job for the church was simply too convenient. Returning to that

town, working for those people, might be more than Madeleine could handle.

She settled down to type a refusal, but the longer she sat, the harder it was to come up with a decent excuse. She was finished with her latest project and didn't have anything terribly pressing to work on—nothing that paid, at least, except a part-time job waiting tables at a BBQ restaurant in downtown Kansas City. And money was important. Ever since Madeleine had moved back in with her mother after college, she'd been actively saving for a down payment on her own place, but the starving artist stereotype wasn't too far from Madeleine's reality. She should jump at the chance to paint for cash, even if it wasn't much.

How can I say no to Aunt Clara? She couldn't, of course. Aunt Clara had been a source of stability in her life when her parents' marriage had fallen apart and her mother decided to move away from their tiny hometown to the much larger metro. She couldn't deny her aunt this favor, even if painting an entire mural would take a few weeks. Madeleine groaned as she cradled her head in her hands. She had to do it. She had to take the job.

Slowly, painstakingly, Madeleine typed out a reply accepting the offer, although she made sure to sound as reluctant as possible. She wanted Aunt Clara to know this wasn't a task she'd be taking on lightly. And she didn't want to give any sort of impression that she might be changing her mind about God and the church any time soon.

Before she sent the message, Madeleine paused one last time. A whole summer in Shady Springs, Arkansas? With Aunt Clara's church? The same congregation that had abandoned her mother and her when they most needed help?

I'm delaying the inevitable. Madeleine knew, no matter what, she would accept her aunt's proposal, and dragging out her response would not change things one bit. Maybe it wouldn't be

so bad. It had been ten years since she left Shady Springs. A lot could change in ten years.

In a moment of bravery—or stupidity—before she could rethink her choice, Madeleine clicked SEND. It's too late now. The email is out there in space, making its way over to Aunt Clara.

Madeleine reclined in her chair and expelled a big breath. Another glance at her inbox revealed an even more disturbing sight. Is that who I think it is? How did he even get my email address? She opened the message and scanned its contents. She quickly deleted it and then emptied the trash folder.

Hands shaking, Madeleine closed her laptop. Why was it that on this particular morning, her past was determined to haunt her? What kind of summer had Madeleine signed up for?

* * *

“Need me to put those away?” A.J. Young poked his head into the classroom of his colleague, Clara Lewis. He was more than happy to lend a hand after Clara had helped him so many times.

“Thank you, A.J. I think I'll take you up on that offer.”

Clara was surrounded by boxes of books and lab equipment. The sheen of sweat on her forehead and slightly glazed look in her eyes did little to diminish her inexhaustible spunk. Clara Lewis was small in stature but large in personality. Her blonde hair was always cut in a sensible but pretty style—short enough to not get in the way of a chemistry experiment, but long enough to still frame her face nicely. The few laugh lines around her mouth and eyes were marks of a joyful soul. Only one wrinkle, right between her eyebrows, gave a hint to the great pain Clara had suffered.

A.J. lifted everything onto the built-in shelf at the back of the room. “I can't believe your classroom is so clean and organized.” He surveyed the empty space. With all of the happy chaos that

usually filled the room, he'd never realized how big it actually was. "It must be time for summer!"

Clara sighed good-naturedly and leaned against one of the sturdy wooden tables. "Between end-of-the-year meetings, supply inventory, and packing my room, I'm ready for a break."

After teaching history and coaching track every day for two years,

A.J. couldn't imagine staying in this profession for another twenty. All he knew was that deep in his heart, he believed this was where God wanted him to be right now. Working with high school students was fulfilling and fun, and getting to learn from talented people like Clara Lewis made the job even better.

"Do you need me to stack those tables?" He pointed to Clara's hefty-looking perch.

Clara laughed. "Thank goodness, no. These things are a thousand pounds. I wouldn't be able to move them even if I had your help. The summer crew will take them out once it's time to wax the floor." Clara stood and dusted off her hands. "I think that about does it. I only have to turn in my paperwork, then it's summertime and easy living for me. How about you?"

"I've turned everything in already, but I'm sticking around a couple weeks for summer school and working at the church building the rest of the time." Even during vacations, A.J. enjoyed staying busy. Mowing lawns and mopping floors didn't require any lesson planning or mental strain from him and were a lot better than sitting around the house.

Clara's phone pinged.

"Ah! I've been waiting for an email ..." As Clara read her phone screen, her face transformed from expectant to concerned to elated. "She said yes! Oh, A.J.! My niece is coming to paint the church mural!"

"That's wonderful news, Clara! I'm sure it'll be nice for you to get to visit with her." A.J. knew from experience how lonely

and long a summer break could be, and his heart lifted knowing Clara would have some company to keep her occupied.

“It will.” Clara turned her attention to A.J. with a glint in her eyes. “She’s single, you know. And she could use a good man.”

A.J. took that as his cue to leave. “I’d better go.” He chuckled nervously. “I’ll see you later.”

He’d already taken off down the hallway when he heard her call after him. “Wait! She’s really special! I’ll show you a picture!”