



After breakfast and a morning jog, Madeleine left to scope out the spot for the mural. Clara had given her a key to the church building to keep while she worked on the project, so she packed her tape measure and a notebook into her car and drove four blocks to the back parking lot of the building. Admittedly, driving such a short distance was a little silly, but Madeleine was meeting the preacher soon and didn't want to show up sweaty, ruffled, and frizzy from the humid summer air.

The hallway was dark and quiet when Madeleine unlocked the door, and her eyes adjusted slowly. As her vision cleared, Madeleine spotted a collage of pictures on a bulletin board. They showed smiling families eating at a picnic, playing silly games, and decorating cookies together. The congregation sure has grown since I was here last. Madeleine couldn't remember having many friends her age from church in Shady Springs. They certainly hadn't had any fun, family-oriented activities. Maybe things have changed more than I thought.

One photo in particular stood out. A group of kids and their parents posed and grinned with their arms around each other. They looked genuinely happy to be together. Madeleine couldn't

help but smile, too, and she turned the hall corner a little lighter on her feet. She'd accepted this job out of love for Aunt Clara, but now that she'd seen the faces of the children for whom she would be painting, she had a connection with the project she'd been missing before. Something about their smiles reminded Madeleine of happier times at the Shady Springs church. Vacation Bible School, singing at the local nursing home, her Sunday Bible classes—not every memory of this congregation was bad.

Madeleine roamed the halls, searching for her mural space. Enough dim light flowed in through the windows that she could barely make her way around, but this wing was new, and her faded mental map of the building was not helpful. Finally, she found a large, blank space on the wall outside the “Family Life Center” with a sign reading “Coming Soon!!! A mural by famous artist Madeleine Mullins!”

Madeleine rolled her eyes and chuckled as she flipped on the nearby light switch. This sign reeked of Aunt Clara.

She took the tape measure out of her pocket and began recording the length and height of the space, then drew a few rough sketches of the hallway, including doors, outlets, and anything else pertinent to her work. She also pulled out her phone—almost as good as her DSLR camera—to take some pictures of the wall. She hadn't realized how quiet the building was until she heard a noise.

Slam!

Madeleine jumped and fumbled to catch her pencil and notebook. Was the sound just a church member slamming the front door? Maybe Sam had come to meet her here instead of the restaurant. Or was it someone more nefarious?

“Hello?” Madeleine called out timidly. Silence. Perhaps she could yell a little louder. “Hello! Who's there?”

Silence again. Maybe she'd imagined the noise, and no one was there after all.

Thump.

Nope, definitely someone there. She would have to investigate.

Madeleine opened the nearest door to find something to use as protection, just in case. The room appeared to be a children's classroom, and they must have been studying the Armor of God because Madeleine found a long, wooden sword labeled "Spirit" at the front of the room. Brandishing the weapon in one hand and her phone in the other, Madeleine reentered the hallway.

Thud.

She followed the source of the noises until she was fairly certain she was around the corner from the intruder. Madeleine took a deep breath and jumped into the hallway, crashing into a tall man and accidentally whacking him with the sword in the process, landing on her rear end.

She scrambled backward. Looked up. Felt completely ridiculous because the auburn-haired guy—young, handsome guy—was wearing earbuds and carrying a phone. And nothing about him suggested mal-intent. In fact, a bright yellow bucket spinning down the hallway suggested he was actually here to mop the floors.

"I'm so sorry!"

"Who are you?" His voice was shocked but not harsh.

Madeleine's cheeks burned. "Madeleine. I'm so sorry! I called out, but no one answered, so I thought—but of course you were wearing headphones, or you would have heard me—and obviously you work here, since, you know, you have a mop—" Shut up! Stop talking! She clamped her mouth closed to prevent any more words from leaking out. The young man stared at her, dumbfounded, and for a moment, Madeleine wished she could sink into the floor. Turn into a puddle he could mop up.

But then he smiled. And it was the most handsome grin she had ever seen. Her stomach filled with butterflies as he burst into laughter.

“Is that a sword from the props bin?”

“Yeah, I ...” Madeleine’s embarrassment fizzled away as relief that the young man wasn’t an angry intruder—and wasn’t upset with her—washed over her.

“I’m A.J.” He offered a hand to help her up from the floor. “You must be Clara Lewis’s niece.”

“Guilty.” In more ways than one.

Madeleine took his hand, noticing how strong and calloused it was.

He pulled her up easily, making her forget her embarrassment for a moment.

A.J. had the build of someone who was used to hard work, but his easy smile and teasing eyes told her he had a fun-loving streak a mile wide.

“Famous artist, Madeleine Mullins in the flesh. How could I be so lucky?” He looked genuinely pleased to meet her, despite the fact that she’d attacked him only moments before.

Madeleine’s heart skipped a beat as he flashed another smile.

“You’ve seen the sign, I presume?” She guessed that was how he knew her name.

“Oh, sure. It’s all Clara has been able to talk about ever since you agreed to come.”

“She’s a very proud aunt.” Although I wish she would turn the pride down a notch.

“And a dedicated matchmaker.” A.J. produced a photo from his pocket—a wallet-sized picture of Madeleine, something Clara had probably printed from her social media profile. Madeleine’s face must be a bright vermillion by now. Could she possibly humiliate herself even more?

“I don’t know what to say. I can’t believe she did this. I’m sorry.”

A.J. grinned. “She thinks very highly of you.”

“Perhaps a little too highly.” Madeleine would have words with her aunt when she got home.

“We’ll see.” A.J.’s mouth turned up at the corner. “I assume I’ll be seeing a lot of you this summer. I come in to clean and mow and do some general maintenance.”

Madeleine liked the idea of seeing more of A.J., but she didn’t want their first meeting to be exactly how all their encounters would unfold. “If that’s the case, maybe we should establish some ground rules.”

A.J. raised his eyebrows.

“For example,” Madeleine said, “you could call out before you come into the building. That way I don’t accidentally hit you. Again.”

“Sounds reasonable enough.” A.J.’s face fell into its previous mischievous smile. “And perhaps you could be a little more careful when wielding dangerous weapons.”

“Deal.” Madeleine grinned back. “I hope I didn’t hurt you too badly.”

“No.” A.J. lifted his sleeve and inspected his shoulder. “Only a flesh wound.”

“Good.” Madeleine checked the time on her phone. “I should probably pack my things. I’m supposed to meet Sam in a little while to talk about the mural.”

“Well, Madeleine Mullins, famous artist, I hope we do not meet like this again.”

“I agree, A.J. Next time, no weapons and no surprises.”

“Deal.” A.J. stuck out his hand to shake.

Madeleine shook his hand and returned his smile. She regretted meeting A.J. the way she had. And she was horrified that Clara had been passing around her picture. She hoped not too many other guys had gotten the hard sell from Aunt Clara. In fact, she hoped A.J. was the only one.

* * *

What just happened?

A.J.'s head was still spinning from his brief interaction with Madeleine Mullins. He'd known she was pretty from the picture Clara gave him. Why had he even kept that thing? Madeleine must think he was a creep for carrying around a photo of her in his wallet, although the expression on her face had been priceless.

A.J. shook his head, turning to retrieve his cleaning supplies. He chuckled as he walked down the hall. The young woman definitely knew how to make an impression.

As he rolled the mop bucket over to the sink to fill it with water and soap, he remembered what Clara had shared about Madeleine. He knew she was an artist and that she wasn't a Christian. He knew she used to live in Shady Springs and now lived in Kansas City with her mom. It really wasn't much to go off. And the little information he had hadn't been enough to prepare him for his ... encounter ... with Madeleine.

This wasn't the first time A.J. had witnessed the infamous matchmaking of Clara Lewis, but it was the first time he'd been on the receiving end. Resisting Clara had been a lot easier when he'd never actually met Madeleine. Now he knew she had a fiery personality to match her incredibly good looks. But a romance wasn't meant to be.

A.J. would certainly try to be nice to the girl, but he couldn't see anything more than friendship happening between them. Madeleine wasn't a Christian, and faith was the most important thing in his life.

He'd been going to church as long as he could remember, and he'd always loved leading prayers or preaching sermons. But the moment that A.J.'s life changed had actually been years after he became a Christian, the summer before he went to college.

A.J.'s church had just hired a new youth minister who worked very hard all year to make sure his teens knew their scripture well. And then he worked even harder to give them a week at church camp they'd never forget. Every day they studied

the book of Romans and what it had to say about God's love. On the last night, each student wrote down sins they struggled with on a shoe box and built a wall at the end of a large pavilion. After a rousing sermon and moving song service, the youth minister read from Romans 8:38-39 "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

As he read the verses, a wooden cross swung down and knocked over all of the boxes covered with their sins. A.J. had known but never truly internalized that God had forgiven him once and for all. And nothing in the world would stand between Him and His children. At that moment, A.J. decided he would do his best to never let anything come before God. And a couple years later, he decided he really wanted to work with kids, just like that youth minister.

A.J. lifted the mop. A twinge pulled at his shoulder. Maybe he wouldn't be anything more than friends with Madeleine, but he couldn't deny she'd made a lasting impression. His shoulder certainly wouldn't let him forget her quickly.

At the very least, A.J. wanted to share with Madeleine what his youth minister had shared with him. God wanted a relationship with her more than anything in creation, and Jesus had died to make it possible.

Whether or not A.J. would be able to become good friends with Madeleine, he hoped he had a chance to see her again soon.