



“*H*ey! Excuse me. This salad is still terrible.”
Madeleine turned toward the direction of table nine, trying her best to keep a smile on her face. “I’m so sorry to hear that.”

The salad was the second she’d returned, and the third plate overall for the rowdy group. Technically, they were at tables nine, ten, and six shoved together. Despite their “Sunday best” attire, they had all been on their worst behavior since the moment they walked into the restaurant, complaining about the music, the temperature, and the slow service. She just knew they would want their check split six or seven ways across all three tables.

“Do you see how wilted the lettuce is?” The lady shoved her plate in Madeleine’s face. “I can’t eat this.”

“Well, ma’am, the meat on the brisket salad is pretty hot, and sometimes the lettuce wilts a little from the heat. I promise you all of our food is very fresh.”

The woman stared back with her lips pursed. “I’d like to see your manager.”

Madeleine sighed and nodded. “Of course. I’ll go get her

right away.” She turned and walked to the kitchen, breathing deeply and counting to ten.

“Staci. It’s table nine. I can’t make them happy no matter what I do.” She rubbed her temples. “I hate Sundays so much.”

“Me too, sweetie. I’ll see what I can do.” Staci patted her on the shoulder and marched off to do battle.

Madeleine grabbed a pitcher of water and made the rounds to her other tables. She hated how a difficult customer always sucked up all her attention and threw off her rhythm. Normally, she was a great waitress, but on days like today, she couldn’t perform her best and would be better off curled up in a ball at home.

Staci returned from table nine and gave Madeleine a small smile. “I comped the salad and gave them a free ice cream.” She typed on the cash register.

“Seriously, Stace? Now they’ll be around an extra half hour.” Madeleine groaned.

“I know. It was the only thing that would get them to stop complaining.” Staci grimaced apologetically.

“I guess I should go take their order again.” Madeleine started toward the table.

“No need. I got it already. You just worry about your other tables right now.” A receipt printed from the register, and Staci ripped it off.

Madeleine sighed in relief. “Thanks, Staci. I owe you one.”

Staci barked a laugh. “One? You owe me at least a hundred, girl.”

“True.” Madeleine grinned now. “How can I ever repay you?”

“Maybe you could start by staying in town instead of heading off to Arkansas this summer.” Staci cocked her head and lifted her eyebrows.

“I wish I could ... it’s not that easy. I owe my aunt about a

million more favors than I owe you.” She headed off to her other customers.

After another two tables had come and gone, the busboy was finally able to clean off tables nine, ten, and six and return them to their proper places. Madeleine shouldn’t get her hopes up for a big tip, but her heart sank when she saw what they’d left.

“It’s a Bible tract.” Madeleine slammed the pamphlet down on the counter by the cash register.

Staci sighed and shook her head. “I’m so sorry. It’s always the worst ones who do that.”

“I wasn’t expecting much, but I thought they’d at least give me something.” She growled. “It’s like they come in here just to make us feel small.”

“They do a great job of it, too.” Staci shook her head.

“I know there are decent Christians out there, like my Aunt Clara.”

“And my grandparents.” Staci pointed a finger at Madeleine.

“But the people we serve on Sunday afternoons don’t make anyone actually want to be a Christian.”

“Amen, sister. I don’t want to spend any more time with Christians after working lunch today.” She held up her hands as she marched off with the receipt.

Madeleine sighed. She didn’t particularly want to spend any more time with Christians, either. She knew there were good ones out in the world, but she always seemed to end up with the bad apples. Especially in Shady Springs. So why had she agreed to spend an entire summer with them?

* * *

“There’s something I want to talk to you about.” Madeleine set the glasses on the tiny wooden table in the eat-in kitchen of the small house she shared with her mother, Catherine Mullins. “Aunt Clara asked me to stay with her for the summer.”

“Oh?” Madeleine’s mother didn’t lift her gaze from tossing a big Greek salad for their dinner. After that afternoon’s terrible customers, Madeleine hadn’t wanted to see another salad for a long time. But she could make an exception for her mother.

“Yeah. She has a project for me, and I figured it’s a good time, since I just finished the job for the hospital.” Madeleine paused to gauge her mother’s reaction to the news. “Plus, I could hardly tell Aunt Clara no.”

“What’s the project?” Her mom finally made eye contact as she moved the salad to the table, and the pleasant expression on her face encouraged Madeleine to continue.

“A mural.”

“For her house?”

“No, for the church.”

Catherine froze with her back turned as she reached for plates in the cupboard. Madeleine waited an eternity for her mother to face her again.

“I see.”

“Listen, I already accepted, so it would be difficult to back out now, but if you really don’t want me to do it, I don’t have to.” Madeleine chewed on her lip.

Catherine sighed. “If you already accepted, I suppose it would be rude to turn her down at this point.”

“Right. I don’t want to be rude.”

“You’re a grown woman now ... I just don’t want you to get hurt.

Again.”

Madeleine’s defensive armor melted, and she had nothing but sympathy in her heart for her mother. She was torn between obligation to her mom and affection for her aunt, not to mention her integrity as a professional who had given her word.

She gazed into the eyes of the woman who had been her only parent for over a decade. Her mom’s dark eyes and golden-brown hair were just the beginning of the similarities between

them. The same sense of loyalty and sensitivity that could land her mother in trouble or tears ran deep in Madeleine's veins. Coupled with the intense aversion to conflict they also shared, she could completely understand where this concern was coming from.

"I know, Mom. I'll be careful." She placed a hand on her mother's shoulder. "It's only a job."

"Sure, sweetie." Madeleine's mom kissed her on the forehead and sat to eat.

Madeleine's happiness at having won this particular battle faded as she realized her biggest challenges were still ahead of her, waiting in Shady Springs.

* * *

Madeleine hadn't been to Shady Springs in a while, but the four-hour drive was as beautiful as Madeleine remembered. Dense emerald forests gave way to rolling hills covered in trees stretching as far as the eye could see. A thick, sultry June air wafted through the window, heavy with the scents of rain and earth.

She exited the interstate and drove through miles of country highways bordered by bright green meadows dotted with grazing cattle, brown and black. As she came into town, Madeleine took a detour and slowed in front of Clara's church building—the last church she had ever really been a part of.

The structure had grown since she was a child, and likely the number of members had grown as well, but the same red brick and long, rectangular windows faced out toward the highway. A sign out front read, "God loves you and we do too." Madeleine barked a laugh at that. If she and her mother had been shown real love, they never would have left the church, never would have left Shady Springs. She took a deep breath and sped past the building. This was going to be harder than she thought.

Clara's house was a renovated, two-story Colonial about halfway between the church building and the high school. The house had buttercream yellow siding, bright white trim, and a bold crimson front door. Unpainted wooden shutters and cheery flower boxes overflowing with begonias framed each window. Beds of hostas and ferns ringed two tall maple trees in the front yard.

As Madeleine pulled in front of the two-car detached garage, Clara ran to meet her. The dirt stains on the knees of her aunt's capri pants and the glimmer of sweat on her brow showed she'd been working in the garden this evening. In spite of her disheveled appearance, she exuded happiness. Aunt Clara was always most beautiful in summer. Her short blonde hair bleached by the sun, her skin bronzed despite frequent applications of sunscreen, and her schedule wide open to receive guests and grow all kinds of delicious herbs and vegetables.

"Oh, I'm so happy you're here!" Clara wrapped Madeleine in a hug. "Let me get your bags."

Madeleine was swept away by her aunt's bubbly enthusiasm, which was always a little overwhelming after living with her quiet, cautious mother for so long. The two sisters were five years apart in age but light years apart in personality. Where Catherine was steady and even-keeled, Clara was spontaneous and wild. She'd calmed some over the years, especially since Uncle George passed away from cancer—it would be exactly four years and two months this week if her math was correct. In the past, Uncle George would have closely followed Aunt Clara in the race to Madeleine's car. A surrogate father to her after her own father left, Madeleine's uncle had always provided a shoulder to cry on or sound advice in times of need. Although she could quickly call to memory the exact day he died, the exact dress she wore to his funeral, sometimes she would forget he was gone, only to be reminded and feel her heart clench again at the loss.

Before Madeleine could stop her, Aunt Clara hefted one of Madeleine's heavy bags onto her shoulder, pointing to the garden as she walked. "I was just checking on my tomatoes. They're going to be gorgeous this year. I can feel it. Hopefully, you'll get to have some. I don't know how long these murals normally take to finish."

"I'll have to look at the space and figure out the design, but it will probably take a few weeks." They'd emailed back and forth about the project, but Madeleine still didn't have many details to go off of. She was itching to get to work. The quicker the better, in Madeleine's opinion. If she worked fast enough, those tomatoes would still be tiny green babies by the time she left.

"Perfect!" Clara grinned. "I'm so happy you agreed to come. It'll be nice to have you here. Do you think your mom might come for a visit?"

"Probably not." Madeleine hadn't talked about that possibility with her mother, but she was unlikely to come given her reaction to Madeleine taking the job. With her new commission, avoiding church activities and church members would be nearly impossible. "She has a really busy schedule right now." True, but not the main reason for her absence. Madeleine suspected Aunt Clara knew the real cause.

"Well, maybe we can convince her to change her mind." Clara winked.

Madeleine unpacked her bags upstairs and texted her mother to let her know she'd arrived safely. After a delicious meal of chicken kabobs and rice pilaf, Madeleine and her aunt settled down with coffee and banana pudding in the living room.

"Mmm. Mom never lets us have dessert." Madeleine closed her eyes contentedly and savored the sweet, creamy dish.

"Everything in moderation, I always say." Clara licked her spoon. "Mom hasn't listened to that advice." Madeleine frowned a little.

"She can be pretty rigid about health food."

“She can be pretty rigid about a lot of things.” Clara grimaced. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“No, you’re right.” Madeleine set her empty bowl on the side table.

“I know you and your mother are close, especially since your father left.” Aunt Clara’s eyes were kind and prompted Madeleine to continue, despite the emotional baggage surrounding the memories of her father.

“She’s my best friend. And I love her.” Madeleine paused to weigh her words carefully. “But I worry she doesn’t have enough friends her own age. She hardly ever gets out and has fun.”

“Her job at the hospital keeps her busy.”

“That’s part of it,” Madeleine said. “But she stays in on her days off or only hangs out with me. I’m worried that after ... after what happened at church ...”

“She’s too afraid to open up again?” Clara shifted, leaning forward. Madeleine nodded. She fiddled with a piece of string on the couch.

Finally, she decided to ask the question weighing on her mind. How long would it be before she had to confront Nancy Jones?

“Is she still here?” Madeleine maintained her focus on the couch, her gaze lowered.

“Who?” Clara cocked her head.

“You know ... the woman who ...” Madeleine waved her hands in the air, struggling to form the words.

“Oh! Nancy?”

Madeleine winced at the name. “Yeah.”

“She’s still here ... You know, she’s really sorry about what happened.

With your mom.”

“Did she tell you that?” Madeleine had a hard time believing such a mean-spirited woman would go out of her way to apologize.

“No, but I think she would if I asked.” Aunt Clara was always quick to believe the best in people, even if they didn’t deserve it.

“How do you know?” Madeleine threw her arms up in exasperation. “I just do.” Clara’s voice was calm, though the wrinkle between her brows deepened.

“That might be enough for you to forgive her, but it’s not good enough for me.” Madeleine rose. “Thank you for dinner. I’d better get ready for bed now.” She hated to end the evening on such a sour note, but she was afraid things would get even worse if she stuck around.

“Wait.” Aunt Clara caught her by the arm. “I made an early lunch appointment for you tomorrow with Sam.”

“Sam?”

“Our preacher. He’s really the one with the vision for this mural. I thought it’d be good for you two to meet straight away.”

“Oh, right. Thanks for setting that up.” Madeleine remembered his name from their emails. She usually preferred to arrange her own business meetings, but Aunt Clara was a couple steps ahead of her. She’d better make a good first impression at this lunch tomorrow if she was to appear at all professional.

“Good night, sweetie.” Aunt Clara’s voice was soft and full of love. “Night, Aunt Clara.” Madeleine patted her aunt on the shoulder before turning toward the hall.

Madeleine walked upstairs to the front guest room to get ready for bed. The space was light but cozy. A blue and pink floral quilt covered the small bed in the middle of the room, and matching navy drapes framed a large window. Madeleine knew from experience that the window let in a lot of light in the morning, so although the sky had shifted to a dark indigo and fireflies danced across the front yard, she closed the blinds and curtains tightly. Morning sun was lovely for drawing and painting, not so great for sleeping.

A heavy pit settled in Madeleine’s stomach. Nothing had

changed in this small town. We moved away, separated ourselves from these people, and yet I am instantly taken back to a decade ago. Years have passed, and I'm still stuck with the same old problems. What do I have to do to move past this hurt?

Well, some things had changed. For starters, Shady Springs had a new preacher. As she pulled on her pajamas, Madeleine wondered about Sam. If she'd never heard of him before Aunt Clara's email, he must be a recent transplant, and that could work in her favor. A fresh face, unjaded and ignorant of Madeleine's past might be exactly what she needed to get through this summer. Maybe tomorrow would go really well. Maybe she'd finish the job quickly and return to life as usual. She could always hope.

* * *

The last day of kindergarten was over, and Maddy sat on the curb in front of school waiting for Daddy. He'd promised to take her for an ice cream cone to celebrate summer and finishing her first year of school. As she watched her friends' parents pick them up one by one, Maddy wondered if her mother hadn't been right. Maybe he would forget to get her.

They'd argued about that after dinner the night before. Daddy insisting he would remember; Mommy worried he wouldn't. In the end, Daddy had won, asking Mommy to please give him a chance. And now Maddy sat alone on the sidewalk outside the empty school building, a manila folder full of art and worksheets in her lap.

But then, as the last of her friends left from the car rider line, Maddy's father drove up in his rickety old red sedan. He rolled by slowly, one arm resting out the driver's side window, steering the car with a few fingers, and the other waving at her to get in the car.

"Hey, Maddy-Maddy-bo-Baddy! Hop in!"

“Hey, Daddy-Daddy-bo-Baddy!” Maddy leaped from the sidewalk with her folder and pulled open the back door. She fastened the seat belt as fast as she could and waved enthusiastically to the supervising teacher who appeared rather relieved to be sending off the last child.

“You’re late, Henry.” Miss Biel frowned. “I almost had to call Catherine to come pick her up.”

Daddy flashed his toothy smile, the one that made women of every age forgive him immediately. “Sorry, Misty. I got busy with work. I know you teachers deserve a break after putting up with those snotty kids all year.” At this, he turned and winked at Maddy. She winked back, just like she’d practiced in the mirror.

“Maddy’s been talking about going to get ice cream all day. You better be good to that girl. She deserves a reward for all her hard work.” Miss Biel was less irritated this time. No one could stay mad at Daddy very long.

“Oh, we’re going to get ice cream all right. Aren’t we, Maddy?”

“Three scoops!” Maddy called out.

“With chocolate!” Daddy turned and grinned at her. “And whipped cream!” Maddy shrieked.

“And cherries!” Daddy crowed.

“All right, you get outta here.” Miss Biel smiled now. “Have a good summer, Maddy. See you later, Henry.”

Daddy waved to Miss Biel as they sped out of the elementary school parking lot and onto the residential roads that surrounded the school.

“How was your last day of kindergarten? Did you learn everything you need to know?”

“We didn’t really learn anything today. We did get an extra recess, though.

But Cody Owens wouldn’t let me play with him.”

“What? Why?” Daddy whipped his head around for a

second. “Because I’m a girl. And also, he said my freckles are dumb.”

“He said what?” Now Daddy sounded sharp, almost angry.

“I have too many freckles, and they’re dumb.” She hated repeating what Cody had told her, except Daddy would be able to make it right. He always could.

“Sweetheart, if Cody is anything like his father, he will end up bald by the time he’s in his twenties.” Daddy sighed and put the car in park. He turned to Maddy straight on. “You listen good, Madeleine Jane Mullins. You and your mother are the two most beautiful women in the world, and nothing anyone says will ever change that. It doesn’t matter what Cody Owens or anyone else thinks. You remember that, Maddy.”

Maddy nodded with as serious a face as she could muster. What Cody had said hurt her at the time, but she hadn’t cried. Cody would have made fun of her even more if she had. And she didn’t tattle. What would the teachers even do to him on the last day of school? She just did what Mommy always told her to do and found someone else who needed a friend. Samantha Brown usually played alone on the swings, so Maddy decided to swing with her for the rest of the extra recess.

“I’ll remember.”

“Good girl. Now, who wants some ice cream?” His face broke into a smile. “Me! Me, me, me! But come help me with the seatbelt!” Maddy loved Daddy’s beat-up car, but she could never push the old buckle quite hard enough to get herself out. Daddy came around to open her door and gave a sweeping, low bow.

“After you, mademoiselle.”

“Merci!” Maddy had learned a few words in Spanish and French at school and liked to sprinkle them into conversation whenever possible. It definitely made her sound more grown-up and sophisticated.

After they'd finished their ice cream, Maddy showed her dad some of her artwork she'd brought home from school.

"This one was on the wall in the hallway. It's a drawing of a flower."

"Wow, Maddy! This is really good!"

"Do you like it?" Maddy was proud of the flower, but it meant so much more that Daddy liked it. He was a real artist.

"I love it!" Daddy glanced up from the drawing and beamed at her. "I love how you used color here. The way you drew with red and yellow and orange. It makes the flower seem almost like it's alive."

"Well ... you can have it if you want it." She really loved the flower picture, but she wanted so badly to make Daddy happy.

"I do want it, Maddy, but you don't have to give it to me."

"I ... I want you to have it," Maddy said. She knew it was the right thing to do, even if it made her heart hurt a little to think about giving up the picture.

"How about this? How about I keep it for you until you get bigger? I can hang it up in my studio."

"Okay!" That was a much better idea. Then she could see the picture anytime she wanted.

They walked down the street to his photography studio. Maddy went straight to the stack of new pictures that had been printed. Some were in black and white, but Maddy's favorites had lots of color. Daddy found a frame for the picture and hung it on the wall in the front waiting area.

"Oh, I guess lots of people will see it, won't they?"

"They will. Is that okay?" Daddy raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah." The thought of lots of people seeing her flower pleased Maddy. If Daddy liked it so much, maybe other people would enjoy seeing it, too. "You know what, Daddy?"

"What, Maddy-Maddy-Bo-Baddy?"

"I think I want to be an artist. Just like you."

Daddy knelt down. His gaze met hers. “I think you would make a very good artist. Even better than me.”

“No one’s better than you, Daddy.”