

New Beginnings in Shady Springs

Shady Springs Book Four

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To Tina,

You've shown me what life can become when you let God write your story. Thank you for your endless encouragement and your unwavering love. I'm so blessed to have you as my mother-in-law.



Clara Lewis stepped into the busy hall outside her classroom. She inhaled deeply and immediately regretted it. Her stomach roiled at the sharp scent of teenage body odor mixed with cafeteria food and industrial cleaning solutions. Tucking her chin into her chest, she pulled her cardigan up to her nose. A couple of deep breaths and she was smelling white tea and citrus again.

With her planning period over, Clara had two more high school science classes to teach before the end of the day. She took another breath—not so deep this time—and checked the watch on her wrist. Right on time, a bell sounded, and a stampeding horde of teenagers flooded the hall.

“Good afternoon, Jaxon,” Clara called out to the first student who walked into her classroom. “Hello, Emma Grace. Kaylee. Hattie.” In a trickle and then a flood, twenty tenth graders walked past her post at the doorway and found their seats. Some acknowledged her presence with a smile and a wave, some said hello, but most nodded or grunted by way of greeting.

“Hey there, Micah.” The last student shuffled by without even lifting his head. How could he wander through the halls of Shady Springs High School without running into a wall? Micah Simpson

rarely looked up from the ground—and never directly into her eyes—since he transferred to Shady Springs in January, two months ago.

The only personal knowledge Clara had of Micah was from his grandparents, Ruth and Tom. The Simpsons had attended Shady Springs Church for decades before Clara moved to town. Through prayer requests and conversations over potluck suppers, she'd heard all about Micah's tragic upbringing and subsequent move to Northwest Arkansas.

Micah struggled to make friends and keep up his grades. He only spoke up when she directly called on him in class. And he hadn't turned in a homework assignment all semester.

Lord, please don't let this quiz break his spirit.

She handed out the stapled tests, some of the papers still warm from the copier. Each student took one quiz, then passed the rest on to the left.

"Please keep silent. Raise your hand if you have any questions."

For the millionth time that year, Clara said a silent prayer of thanks for the school's no-phones policy. In years past, she'd be policing students trying to sneak a peek at Google or even texting during a quiz. Now she just had to watch for old-fashioned cheating off a neighbor.

"Yes, Kaylee?" Clara stepped to the side of a student whose hand was raised. After clarifying the wording of a question in whispered tones, she resumed pacing the perimeter of the room.

Although she wasn't the one taking the test, Clara found herself fidgeting with her necklace. What if her students forgot everything they'd covered in the last few weeks? Genetics was tricky for many to understand. Had she adequately explained the subject matter?

As students brought their completed tests to her desk, Clara risked a few glances at their papers and allowed herself a smile. Not bad. Many of the answers she spotted were correct.

When a good portion of the tests were turned in, Clara began grading in earnest. She popped her head up periodically to check on her kids but devoted most of her attention to the papers in front of her. A smattering of A's. Mostly B's. One C. She could rest easy knowing they'd actually learned something this semester.

Students who finished their tests were permitted to read or work on homework for other classes at the back of the room. Throughout the class period, every student finished with ample time except for Micah. The sophomores who'd been in her class the entire year were accustomed to listening to music or talking at full volume once all tests were turned in. A few of them shot disapproving glares toward Micah. Unaware and unperturbed, he remained hunched over his paper until the bell rang.

"Have a great weekend. See you on Monday," Clara called out to her students.

"You, too, Mrs. Lewis!" A handful of her students smiled and responded, but most hightailed it out. She couldn't expect anyone to stick around on a Friday afternoon. They practically kicked up a cloud of dust with their tennis shoes while racing to get out the door and on to their last class of the day.

"Thanks, Micah." Clara accepted the packet of papers from the boy's outstretched hand. Watching the other students depart, she hadn't seen him leave his seat. "Have a good weekend."

Micah raised his gaze to hers and replied, "You too." He pulled the hood of his sweatshirt back over his head and let himself be swallowed by the swirling mass of teenagers in the hallway.

Clara stumbled backward against the doorframe. Micah Simpson made eye contact with her. That had to be a career highlight.

For the rest of the day, she coasted on the high of getting a two-word response from the least talkative child she'd ever met. That, and the thrill of a Friday afternoon. She always found herself swept up in her students' excitement, even if she didn't have anything to look forward to herself.

She caught snippets of conversation while her seventh-period AP Chemistry students were supposed to be working on an assignment.

"My sister said she'd take us to Tulsa to go shopping on Saturday. You want to come?"

"I think I bombed that math test—we're probably just ordering pizza and playing video games tonight."

"No, I have to work tonight. What about Saturday night?"

Somehow these kids found time to cram homework, part-time

jobs, and active social lives into two and a half days. Listening to them almost made Clara miss her own high school days. Almost.

But at the end of the day, when her students would race out to the parking lot to drive recklessly around town, they would take their excitement along with them. Even her colleagues, who lingered in the halls chatting every afternoon Monday through Thursday, packed up with unusual efficiency on Fridays. They called goodbyes to each other as she sat at her desk, marking up quizzes and in-class assignments with her red pen.

“Hey, Mrs. Lewis. You still here?” Mr. Hollis, the head custodian, stopped to empty Clara’s trash can.

“Oh, you know me. I’ve got to get these papers graded so I can go party hard all weekend.”

Mr. Hollis’s laugh was something between a wheeze and a cackle, and it always made her smile. “Well, I’m glad you’ve got so much grading to do, because I have something for you.” Mr. Hollis patted his pockets—left, then right, then back—before producing a small packet and walking over to her. He had a distinctive limp due to an old knee injury from his days in construction, but he was surprisingly quick.

Clara stepped out from behind her desk and took the flower seed packets from him. She brightened as she looked at the pictures. Zinnias, nasturtiums, and marigolds.

“I found these in my shed and thought you could do something with them. You’re always talking about your garden. Figured they’re better off in your hands than mine,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Hollis.” Was it appropriate to give him a hug? Clara didn’t know, but she wrapped an arm around his shoulders in a quick squeeze anyway, after which he returned to the large trash can he’d left in the hall. While he emptied her smaller wastebasket, she examined the packets more closely.

Just as she’d suspected, the seeds had been packaged for a growing season about five years ago. It was possible none of them would sprout for her. But what could it hurt to try?

At this point, Clara’s Friday night plans consisted of grading papers and starting some seeds. She’d had worse weekends.

Mr. Hollis waved goodbye, and Clara returned to the biology quizzes. Micah's was the last one in the stack. She braced herself for disappointment.

Have some grace for the kid, Clara. He's had a rough semester. A rough life, to be honest.

Question one, correct. *Phew*. Question two, correct. Clara nodded and moved her red pen down the line. Question three, correct. Four, five, six. All correct.

Her red pen hovered over the page, never making a mark. She flipped to the next page. All correct.

Surely the short essay section would get him.

Her mouth dropped open.

In tiny, scrawling handwriting, Micah answered each question with great detail and accuracy. Almost word-for-word from her lectures.

Clara let the pen drop to the desk. He had scored 100 percent on the genetics test. Why had he been hiding all semester? This quiz changed everything she thought she knew about Micah.