



Early Sunday morning, Clara pulled one of only a handful of dresses out of her closet. She held it up to her chest and stared at her reflection in the mirror. It was fine, but she wanted something brighter.

Spring was on its way, as evidenced by the daffodils in full bloom and the tulip leaves growing in front of her house. She traded out the dress for a colorful, flowing top and navy slacks. A pair of brown flats matched well enough, and a wrap would keep her from freezing while she waited for her Sunday school classroom to warm up.

Clara didn't take a full break from teaching on the weekends, just from teaching teenagers. Her second and third graders at church were sweet and cute and smelled nice, even if most of her jokes went over their heads. Sunday mornings gave her a chance to spend some time with children who still respected their parents and lost the occasional tooth. Plus, teaching a children's class saved her from having to join the Bible class for single adults. No, thank you.

Sunday mornings without George weren't the same. Even though he'd been gone for years, she ached to hold his hand during prayers, hear his slightly off-key singing voice, or share knowing looks during the sermon. And George was her favorite Bible class teacher of all

time. Teaching the elementary children helped fill the hole of his absence.

Satisfied with her outfit, Clara checked her reflection for stray hairs or smudged makeup. A glint of gold flashed under her collar. With a finger, she pulled the necklace to the front—a thick gold band on a chain. George’s wedding ring.

“What do you think, George?” She patted her short blonde hair and gave a shrug. “I guess that’s as good as it’s going to get.”

After a breakfast of oatmeal with maple syrup and a cup of French press coffee (not the watery church blend), Clara cleared the table. Something bright yellow drew her attention as she set her dishes in the sink. Forsythia branches from her backyard blossomed in a vase on her windowsill. She’d clipped the branches and put them in warm water to force them to bloom early. Their sunny color brought a hint of spring to her kitchen.

Clara paused for a beat then grabbed a glass jar from her cabinet. Beauty like this didn’t need to stay hidden away. Besides, the forsythia plant would be in full bloom any day now, and she’d be able to enjoy its yellow flowers from that very window. After brushing her teeth and grabbing her bag of teaching supplies, Clara picked up the vase and carried everything out to her car.

The church building was only a few minutes from her house, and Clara didn’t need to leave quite so early, but she liked having time before her students showed up to prepare her class materials. Like most weeks when she arrived this early, Clara’s beige sedan was one of only three cars in the church parking lot. In half an hour or so, the regular crowd would pull in to claim their spots in Bible class and fill up on coffee.

Before making her way to her classroom, Clara placed the jar of forsythia flowers in the front entrance. She stepped back to admire the way the water glowed in the early morning sun streaming through the glass doors on either side of the foyer.

“Those look nice.”

Clara turned to see Sam Sullivan, the preacher at Shady Springs Church, walking toward her. She returned his friendly smile.

“Just a little something to brighten up the place.” She shrugged, returning her gaze to the flowers.

Sam stood beside her, his shoulder inches from hers.

“Thanks for that. You always make this church better.”

Heat bloomed on Clara’s cheeks. “I can’t take credit for the flowers. That was all God’s handiwork.”

Sam bumped her arm with his. “Fair point. But I appreciate everything you do.” He flashed another grin before walking away, toward the auditorium doors.

“You too,” she called after him, then grimaced. Did that sound as stupid out loud as it did in her head?

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Fifteen minutes later, Clara was in her classroom. Her copies of the activity sheets were prepped. Coloring pages with the day’s lesson were on the tables, and her costume was on.

Today, Clara was teaching about Ruth and Naomi. And what better way to learn about Ruth than from the woman herself? Since Clara didn’t have a time machine, she dressed the part with a robe and headdress. A basket of fake grain stalks she’d found on the internet sat by the story carpet.

“Woah.” Julie, Clara’s helper for the spring quarter, did a double-take when she walked in. She laughed. “You look great.”

Clara spun around, pinching the fabric of the robe in her fingers. “This old thing?”

“What are we talking about today?” Julie never knew what their lesson would be before coming in the room. She assisted with behavior issues, bathroom breaks, and keeping the kids on task, which was plenty to keep her busy. “Wait, don’t tell me ...” She tapped a finger on her chin. “Deborah? No, we did that already. Queen Esther? No, not fancy enough for a queen.”

“Hey!” Clara objected.

Julie snapped her fingers. “Ruth.”

“Bingo.” Clapping slowly, Clara laughed. “I knew you’d get it eventually.”

As Julie set her purse on the side cabinets, a young boy walked through the doorway.

“Weston, come on in.” Clara bit her cheeks at Weston’s wide-eyed expression.

Beside her, Julie picked up their class roster and checked the box by Weston’s name. “What’s wrong, buddy? You don’t like Mrs. Clara’s dress?”

“You look old. Like old-timey.” Weston stood rooted to his spot just inside the doorway.

“Like, possibly, Bible times?” Clara raised her eyebrows, barely keeping her laughter in.

Weston’s eyes lit up. “Yeah! That’s what it is.” He nodded to himself and walked to his usual seat.

“Good morn—” Ava stopped for a beat, tilting her head to one side. “Are we having a skit today?” She skipped inside the room. “Can I dress up too?”

Clara hadn’t expected that response. “Maybe next time. I don’t have costumes for everyone.” Appeased, Ava went to her seat, where Julie waited with crayons and the coloring sheet.

Each student who came into the room was either confused or delighted by Clara’s costume, but all of them found it interesting, which was the whole point. If she could do something to make the Bible stories stick in their brains, she’d happily make herself look ridiculous every week.

“Hello,” Clara said, spotting two new faces coming to her doorway. A handsome man stood with his hands on the shoulders of a little girl. Clara couldn’t quite pin down his age. He had silvery-gray hair and warm amber eyes that sparkled. The girl’s hair was thick and brown, but her eyes matched his. They had to be related.

“Hi, this is Abby Waterson, and I’m Derek Waterson. We’re visiting this week,” the man said.

“Welcome, Abby and Derek. I’m Clara. Come on in.”

Abby’s gaze drifted up and down over Clara’s costume, but she didn’t say a word. Derek gave her a tiny push, and they both stepped forward.

“Do you mind filling out this paper? It’s just your cell phone

number, emergency information, that sort of thing.” Julie handed Derek a clipboard with a visitor information sheet.

“Sure.” Derek took the clipboard from Julie, his eyes still trained on Clara.

“Abby, do you know the story of Ruth in the Bible?” Clara shifted her focus to the little girl.

Abby shook her head slowly.

“How fun that you get to hear it for the first time today.” Clara crouched down until she was at Abby’s eye level. Her robes strained against her knees with the movement. “I’m going to be acting it out, so you’ll be able to tell all about Ruth and Boaz by the end of class. Ruth thought her story was over, but God gave her a fresh start.”

“That sounds like us.” Derek lifted one corner of his mouth in a smile. “We just moved to Shady Springs, hoping for a fresh start.”

Clara pushed back on her heels and stood slowly, so as not to tear her robes.

“Welcome.” Clara stuck out her hand. “I hope you find exactly what you need here.”

When Derek took her hand, he squeezed gently—not at all like the brisk and firm shake she was expecting. More like a soft hug. The warmth of his touch sent a shiver through her. She took her hand back as soon as he let go.

What was that?

Clearing her throat, Clara motioned to Julie. “Miss Julie is our helper and can get you settled with a coloring sheet.” Julie stepped forward and gently guided Abby to a seat.

Clara took the clipboard from Derek and stepped back. “Bible class will be over at nine-fifty. Sam Sullivan teaches one of the adult classes in the auditorium and always does a wonderful job.”

Another family approached the doorway, so Derek gave Abby a small wave before walking toward the auditorium.

“He’s cute,” Julie whispered in her ear.

Clara sucked in a breath. She’d been watching Derek leave and hadn’t noticed Julie standing right next to her. “Um, sure. I guess so.”

“Come *on*.” Julie let her voice get a little louder before greeting the children in the doorway.

The second and third graders enjoyed Clara's retelling of Ruth's story, if their wide eyes and rapt attention were an indication of their appreciation. And Clara enjoyed sharing the message of God's perfect timing and a second chance at love.

Her story hadn't worked out the way Ruth's had. But she was happy to know that God still provided for her in unexpected ways. Julie, Sam, and the others at Shady Springs Church were proof that love didn't have to be romantic to be fulfilling. She could be complete with or without a husband, and she would forever be grateful to God for her years with George. One great love was more than many people got, and that was enough for her. It had to be.