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# ONE

Darcy Damyon knew she had found her hiding place. As the air-conditioned Greyhound bus pulled into the sleepy town of Ambleside, she scanned the deserted sidewalks, empty cafe, and shuttered stores. A glance at a sign told her this was Main Street, yet even the local ice cream stand had been locked tightly against the doldrums of a hot Missouri afternoon.

The stillness was odd for a Saturday, Darcy thought. Yet a quiet, dull sort of town was just what she had prayed for—a place where she could fade away, evaporate, blend in as easily as a leaf on one of the oak trees that sheltered the town square. A place where she could be free.

The Greyhound lumbered around a corner onto Mansion Street just as the doors of a small stone chapel burst open. Women poured down the steps in a flood of blue, pink, and yellow dresses and flowered hats; men in suits, ties, and shiny shoes. Darcy craned her neck back over the cracked vinyl seat as a puff of rose petals blossomed in the air over the crowd. A bride, gowned in billowing white silk and wearing a veil of drifting tulle, fairly danced through the pink cascade with her handsome groom striding proudly beside her.

A wedding. Darcy covered her mouth with her hand and shrank down into her seat. So, the whole town had shut down for a wedding. She closed her eyes and tried to block the image of her own hasty marriage before a justice of the peace. She'd pulled on her only dress, a shapeless blue-

and-brown plaid. Bill had worn denim jeans and boots. She had been seventeen and far too innocent to suspect what lay ahead.

*Take this away, God, Darcy cried silently as she huddled in the bus. I'm not that naive, reckless girl anymore. I'm a new woman . . . new in you. Oh, Christ, hide me from my past!*

Forcing back tears that sprang from both fear and remorse, Darcy rehearsed the facts she had invented to begin her new life of freedom. She was no longer going to be known as Darcy Damyon. She was Jo Callaway, hastily named for a county she had crossed on her long bus ride from Vandalia. She was twenty-five now—that much was true. Though she had grown up on a hog farm in southern Missouri, she had decided to say she hailed from Arkansas. And that she had never been married.

The Greyhound passed a small brick library decked out in honeycomb-pleated crepe paper wedding bells. The donut shop beside it displayed a three-tiered white cake festooned with pink roses. Next door at the men's clothing shop, a formal tuxedo stood proudly in the window. Darcy shook her head, wondering whose marriage had caused such universal celebration.

"Ambleside," the bus driver intoned through his microphone as the Greyhound pulled to a stop. Darcy stood and tucked her paper bag under her arm. Making her way down the aisle past three dozing passengers, she felt a small chill slide down her spine. With a single step out of the bus and onto the sidewalk, she would sever herself forever from the last link with the past six years of her life.

She would be free.

Lifting her chin, Darcy descended into a quiet, hot world of green trees, buzzing cicadas, the scent of diesel fumes, and utter anonymity. As the doors whooshed shut behind her and the bus pulled away, she drank down a deep

breath. In Ambleside, Missouri, no one knew her. No one knew what she had done, or where she had been, or how she had lived. She was Jo Callaway, and her life was starting over.

"I hate you!" The library door down the street burst open and a golden-haired child flew down the steps. "I hate you, Montgomery Easton, and I think your friend is stupid, dumb, and retarded!"

"You take that back, Heather!" A whirlwind of red braids blew through the door and barreled down the street in hot pursuit of the blonde tormentor. "Take it back!"

The blonde, a look of triumph on her face, raced toward Darcy. Laughing, the child paused a moment and swung around. "You're stupid, too, Montgomery, even if your mommy did die!"

At that, the redhead came to a halt, her little chest heaving. Blue eyes wide with dismay, she stared as her enemy danced around the corner of the bus station and vanished. Then her lips pulled back into a snarl and she exploded into a full-tilt run.

"I'm gonna kill you, Heather!" the child shouted. "I'm gonna kill you."

The words rocketed through Darcy as the red-haired Montgomery bore down, tears of rage streaming down her cheeks. *I'm gonna kill you. . . . I'm gonna kill you.*

"No," Darcy cried, throwing her arms around the little girl. "Don't say that. Never say that." At the impact, woman and child tumbled to the sidewalk. Darcy's paper sack slid across the concrete.

"Lemme go!" The child punched Darcy on the arm. "I hate Heather. I'm gonna beat her up."

"No!" Darcy held on tight. "You can't do that. Listen to me, Little-bit; you don't want to do that."

The child bent over suddenly, clapped her small hands over her eyes, and began to sob. The anguish and

heartache that poured through the small, heated body in her arms shocked Darcy. How long since she had allowed another human this close? How long since she had seen such raw emotion? How long since she had touched a child?

Uncertain, Darcy reached out toward Montgomery. The tiny pearls of the little girl's spine formed a narrow line beneath her cotton T-shirt. Her fragile ribs heaved in sorrow. Slowly, Darcy stroked her fingers up to the child's neck, where downy red hair met soft pink skin.

"It'll be all right," Darcy whispered in a tender voice she hadn't heard in years. "You'll be okay, Little-bit."

"I'm not Little-bit. I'm Montgomery Easton." Sitting up, the girl drew back and stared at the woman. Her nose wrinkled. "Who're you?"

"I'm . . ." At the sight of the defiant, tear-filled blue eyes, the lie Darcy had prepared so carefully stuck in her throat. *Always tell the truth*, the leader of her Bible study group had taught her. *God loves the truth, and he hates lies.*

No. Darcy knew that if she told the truth, she couldn't hide. *God, forgive my sin.* "I'm Jo," she said. "Jo Callaway."

Montgomery gave a sniff. "You stink."

"I do?"

"Yeah. You smell like when Daddy forgets to take the clothes out of the washer for a week, and they get all yucky-stinko."

"Oh." Darcy swallowed and released the girl. The shield she had momentarily dropped rose again. "Well, some people stink," she said, her voice defiant. "So what?"

The girl stuck out her chin. "So, you shouldn't have stopped me, Stink-lady. It won't do any good either, because I'm still gonna beat up Heather."

Darcy stood. "If you beat her up, you know who'll be in trouble? You. And that'll mean Heather is right—you *are* stupid."

"I'm not stupid. I'm in the gifted program at school, so there." The child brushed her hand over her wet cheek and gave a loud snuffle. "Anyway, why aren't you at the wedding?"

"Why aren't you?"

"Because my dad and me are too sad to go to weddings." Montgomery crossed her arms and gazed down the street at the crowd milling around the stone chapel. "My mom and dad got married in that church. But that was before I was born and before she died."

"How did your mom die?"

"A brain tumor." She flipped a long red braid over her shoulder. "It was a long time ago. Last summer."

"So who got married today?"

"Zachary Chalmers and Elizabeth Hayes. They own that house." Montgomery pointed in the opposite direction at an imposing mansion. The large brick building with its climbing ivy and tiers of scaffolding was obviously under restoration. "They're the parents of my best friend, Nick. Heather thinks Nick's an idiot, but he's not. He's just different."

Darcy picked up her paper bag. "You're smart to see that."

"Like I told you, I'm gifted."

"Well, Miss Smarty, maybe you can tell me where to find the nearest hotel."

"There aren't any hotels in Ambleside. You'll have to go to Jefferson City. They've got plenty over there."

Darcy tried to breathe. "I'm not going to Jefferson City. I came here. There has to be a hotel."

"Nope." As she shook her head, the red braids swung. "No hotels. You're out of luck, lady."

"Montgomery!" The shout spun the little girl around on her toes. A tall, muscular man with thick brown hair had emerged from the library. "What are you doing at the bus stop, Monkey?"

"I almost caught Heather, Dad," Montgomery called. "I'd have given her a black eye if this lady hadn't knocked me down."

At those words, the man started down the sidewalk, looking for all the world like an angry bull. "Hey, there," he called, lowering his head. "Did you hit my daughter?"

"Don't worry, Daddy, I'm not hurt," Montgomery assured her father, dismissing Darcy with a backward wave of her hand. "She came to town looking for a hotel. She doesn't believe me that we don't have hotels in Ambleside."

The man reached out and took his daughter's hand. His blue eyes flicked across Darcy, assessing and then dismissing. "No hotels," he said.

"But wait!" Darcy moved after them as they started back toward the library. "What about a rooming house or a hostel or something?"

"Nope."

"Where do people stay when they come to town?"

"With friends."

"Don't strangers ever come to Ambleside?"

The man stopped and turned at the library door. Those blue eyes studied the intruder more carefully this time. A spark of interest seemed to flicker for a moment, but it was quickly veiled by glazed indifference. Perhaps even hostility.

Darcy took a step back, concerned that the odor from her musty clothes had reached the man's nose. Or maybe she was standing too close to the daughter of whom he was so protective. Or perhaps he recognized her from the pictures that had been plastered across the newspapers so many years before.

"I . . . uh . . . I just got into town," Darcy said, pushing wisps of her blonde hair into the braid that ran down her back. "On the bus, you know. I'm looking for work."

The blue eyes snapped up to her face. “We don’t get many strangers in Ambleside. What’s your name?”

“I’m . . .” The lie again. “I’m Jo Callaway.”

“Like the county up north?”

She nodded, suddenly fearful. Callaway County. The surname was a dead giveaway. Clearly fake. Couldn’t she have been more creative?

“Well, there aren’t many jobs in Ambleside, Mrs. Callaway,” the man told her.

“Miss Callaway. I’m not married. I’ve never been married. And I’m from Arkansas.”

“Arkansas, huh? How come you came in on the Chicago bus?”

“Oh.” She twisted the top of her paper bag. “Well, I was up north . . . temporarily . . . visiting. But I was born and raised in Arkansas. Northern Arkansas.”

“Anyhow, if you want a hotel, you’ll have to try Jefferson City.”

“I can’t,” she said quickly. “I mean, I . . . I came here.”

“Sorry.” He gave a shrug. “No hotels and no jobs.”

“Tough darts,” Montgomery added.

As father and daughter started back into the library, the man gave the child’s pigtail a tug. “That wasn’t nice, Monkey.”

“Well, she grabbed me when I was just about to catch Heather.”

Darcy stood outside in the baking heat and stared at the library door as it eased shut. In the large pane of glass, she could see her reflection. Dismal. Jeans that had hung on the boyish hips of a nineteen-year-old now curved far too tightly over her womanly form. The old blue T-shirt, stretched out of shape around the hem, was the mildew culprit. And hair that used to be clipped into a pixie cut had grown over the past six years into a mane of so many different lengths it was impossible to style. The thick braid



Darcy had attempted that morning had the appearance of a frayed rope, while tendrils hung around her chin like hay escaping from a bale.

She turned from her reflection and studied the little town. By now the wedding crowd had dispersed from the church grounds. Around the square, sidewalks began to fill as stores reopened for business. A group of teens gathered at the Tastee Hut. Lights came on in the donut shop and the cafe across the square.

Rolling her paper bag more tightly in her hands, Darcy tried to pray. Surely someone in this town needed help. God wouldn't have led her this far only to abandon her. When she'd started out this morning, she'd had just enough money to buy a bus ticket that would take her a hundred miles in any direction and leave enough cash for two or three nights in a cheap hotel. That was all.

As she'd purchased her ticket, Darcy had asked God to guide her. *Take me to freedom, Lord, she'd prayed. Please give me a job so I can prove I'm responsible. Give me a chance to make it as a worthy, responsible Christian woman. Just one chance. That's all I need.*

Words of rejection echoing in her head, Darcy again forced a prayer to her lips. She knew she had lied to the man and his daughter about her name and her past, but surely that sin was nothing compared to the sins of her earlier life. Would God punish her for this very small lie, even though she was trying her best to live for him?

"It certainly was a hot day for a wedding," a high-pitched voice said. Darcy broke from her trance as a stooped woman with cottony white hair and strands of pearls from her collarbone to her chin approached the library. "I cannot imagine why they waited so many months to hold the ceremony," the woman continued. "In my day, the wedding usually followed quite closely on the heels of the betrothal announcement. Why, Mr. McCann, God rest his soul,

insisted on marrying me a mere six weeks from the date of our engagement.”

Darcy reached out and opened the door for the older woman.

“Thank you, my dear. Do come inside where it’s cool.” The woman tottered in on thick-heeled white patent leather shoes, her violet dress swishing at her ankles.

Darcy followed, more grateful than she realized she’d be for the breath of cool air in the small, dark library. As her eyes adjusted, she made out the figures of several young children seated at a long oak table, where they were engrossed in listening to Montgomery read a Dr. Seuss book.

The little redhead and her father neither knew nor cared about strangers in town. But maybe this older lady would be different. Darcy approached the waist-high desk on which the woman had set her purse. Ruby McCann, the sign before her read. Librarian.

“Now then, what sort of books might I help you locate, my dear?” Mrs. McCann placed a pair of half-moon spectacles on her nose and peered through them at Darcy. “We have a very full fiction section. . . .” Pausing, she sniffed. “Young lady, you must learn to dry your clothes completely before you put them into your armoire. One can never escape the unfortunate malodor of mildew.”

“Sorry.” Darcy stepped back. “I was . . . uh . . . I was just wondering if you knew of a hotel nearby.”

“I told her we don’t have any hotels in Ambleside.” Montgomery’s father emerged from a back room as he spoke. “And no jobs either.”

The old lady jerked upright, and her spectacles slid from her nose to the desk. “Good heavens! Is that Luke Easton? You gave me quite a start, young man. What on earth were you doing in my audiovisual room? You know the general public is not permitted there.”

Darcy was pleased to see the Easton fellow squirm under the scrutiny of the tiny librarian. "I was just hanging out until you got back from the wedding, Mrs. McCann," he said.

"Hanging out?" Her narrow lips pinched together in disapproval.

"Well, you had asked me to put those books on the cart into alphabetical order, ma'am. I thought I'd work on the job while Montgomery was reading to the other kids."

"Alphabetical order, Mr. Easton?"

The man glanced at Darcy as if she might clarify things.

"A, B, C," he began, "D, E—"

"I *know* alphabetical order," Mrs. McCann snapped. "I have worked in this library for more than forty years, young man."

"Yes, ma'am. And you asked me to help out here today, remember? You wanted me to watch the kids and file your books so you and everybody else in town could go to the Chalmers wedding."

The librarian's shoulders sank. "Did I ask you to do that?" she said softly. "How odd. The memory does slip now and again, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Mrs. McCann. It does."

"Well, well, back to your alphabetizing, Mr. Easton." The librarian picked up her glasses and set them on her nose again. "And how may I help you, young lady?"

"Um . . . I was looking for a hotel," Darcy repeated, noting that Luke Easton didn't budge. "And a place to work."

"Oh, Ambleside has not had a hotel since 1943. The River Street Hotel used to stand right on the corner where Bud's Hardware is now located. The owner's son went off to fight in the war and was tragically killed. Bataan, you know. A terrible place. His father never recovered from the loss. The hotel shut down, and the building remained empty until the civil rights movement of the sixties. That's when the only

African-American family in Ambleside purchased the property. It has been in the hands of the Huffs since 1968.” She completed her recitation and beamed.

“I believe you have a very fine memory, Mrs. McCann,” Darcy said.

“Bless you. And now, how may I serve you? Were you looking for something in fiction? I can recommend several excellent novels.”

This time it was Darcy who glanced at the blue-eyed Luke Easton for assistance. He gave a shrug and shook his head. “Mrs. McCann,” he said, “there’s no place in Ambleside that takes in visitors, is there?”

“Visitors? Of course we welcome visitors to our town. Hospitality is a hallmark of the Ambleside community. In fact, many prominent visitors have taken their rest in the comfortable guesthouse that Mr. McCann and I have always maintained on our property. May I ask who has arrived in Ambleside, Mr. Easton?”

Darcy shifted from one foot to the other. “I came to town on the bus a few minutes ago.”

“You are the guest?” Small brown eyes peered at Darcy through the half-moon spectacles. “Why, certainly, you must stay with us. One moment, please, and I shall fetch the guesthouse key.”

Darcy stared in silent amazement as the elderly woman searched through her large white purse. What sort of trusting soul would give a key to a total stranger? For all Mrs. McCann knew, Darcy might strip the guesthouse bare and take off with the loot. With a false identity to protect her, she might just make it to Kansas.

And then what?

“Here you are, my dear,” the librarian said, handing Darcy a collection of keys on a large metal ring. “I’m so befuddled this afternoon that I can’t sort out which key belongs to what. Just take them all, why don’t you? I

believe this one is the guesthouse key, but it might be this. Now, here's my house key, of that I'm sure. And I feel certain this is the key to my car. It's a DeSoto, you know, and I keep it in tip-top shape. Now, these open the library doors. I must have them back before nightfall. Can you manage that?"

Darcy tried to breathe as she grasped the ring of metal keys. "Yes, I'll return them."

She would. She really would—no matter how tempting it might be to take advantage of her benefactor.

"Now look here, Mrs. McCann," Luke Easton said, lifting the keys from Darcy's palm before she could react. "You don't need to turn your guesthouse over to this woman. She's looking for a hotel."

"I beg your pardon!" The librarian snatched the keys from Easton's hand and returned them to Darcy. "I shall share my guesthouse with whomever I please, thank you very much. And you, sir, are standing behind the circulation desk, which is an area off-limits to the general public."

Easton stepped around the desk, the look of an admonished schoolboy on his face. "But, Mrs. McCann, you told me to—"

"Now then, Mr. Easton, I believe I have had quite enough of your insubordination today. I shall expect you to escort our lovely guest to my property and show her to her quarters."

"But I'm supposed to—"

"Mr. Easton!" The old woman leaned over the desk and peered up at him through her spectacles. "Honestly, the manners of the younger generation leave me in utter despair. And now look. My public is descending upon me *en masse!*"

The door had opened to a stream of parents arriving to pick up their children after the wedding reception. The library erupted in a chorus of squeals and greetings. Tiny

feet leaped up and down on the wooden floor, creating a thunderous rumble through the silent halls. Mrs. McCann clapped her hands over her ears and rushed around the circulation desk in a futile attempt to restore order.

Darcy clutched the ring of keys. "I'm out of here."

"Hold on." Easton's huge, callused hand clamped around her wrist. "Where are you going with those keys?"

"To the guesthouse." *And don't try to stop me*, she added to herself.

Luke glanced across the room at the old woman whose white hair glowed in the dim light as she tottered around trying to hush the children. Then he returned his focus to the newcomer in town. "We don't know anything about you," he said as his own little red-haired daughter joined him. "You're a stranger."

"I told you, I'm Jo Callaway, I came in on the bus, and I'm from—"

"Arkansas. Yeah, I remember."

"So, what's the problem?"

"You can't move into Mrs. McCann's place."

"Why not? She invited me." Jerking her arm free, Darcy gave her head a toss. "Look, I just need a place to stay until I can find a job."

"You're not going to find a job. There's nothing in Ambleside."

"There'll be something."

"What kind of work can you do?"

Now it was Darcy's turn for discomfort. She didn't exactly qualify for a wide range of employment options. "I can do anything," she said. "You name it; I can do it."

"Give me an example."

"Hey, buster, what is this? I'm not on trial here, you know. I've earned my GED and two whole years of college credits. More than you ever did, I'll bet. I've worked in a

laundry, and I've kept files in order, and I know how to cook."

"That's it?"

She frowned. "No, that's not it. I can take care of livestock, too. Hogs." Searching the recesses of her mind, she poured out the last of her skills. "I helped my dad build a barn once, and I can hang wallpaper and paint just about anything, and I know how to shingle. And besides that, I can split firewood."

"We don't need any firewood splitters in Ambleside."

"Tough darts." Darcy tucked her paper bag under her arm and marched out of the library. Easton and his daughter were a couple of snooty firebrands, the kind of people who could drive a woman nuts.

"Hey, you," he called out behind her. "Miss Callaway."

She paused on the sidewalk and let out a growl of frustration under her breath. "What now?" she muttered, her hands gripping the key ring.

"How can you get to Mrs. McCann's house if you don't know the way?" Montgomery, her red braids swinging, skipped up to Darcy's side. "Me and Daddy are going to show you the right way."

Darcy studied the little redhead. "Thanks, Little-bit."

"I think Daddy ought to give you a job, because he's been griping about all the painting and wallpapering that needs to be done in the mansion. My dad is a carpenter, and he got hired by Mr. Chalmers to rebuild the mansion. It was falling down with termites and rotten wood and everything. Daddy hates to paint and wallpaper, but you said you could do that. I heard you."

Darcy lifted her head as Montgomery's father came to a stop beside them. "*You* need somebody?" she asked.

"No," he said firmly. "I don't. I don't need anybody."