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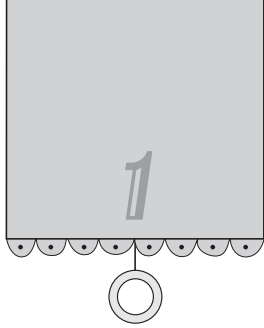
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**I rolled to my side** and punched the pillows into shape. Getting old is like sucking peanut butter through a straw. Difficult. Sleep comes in snatches, and if a body part doesn't hurt, it isn't working.

*Herb, how could you leave me to face old age alone?*

Not that I'd welcome the alternative. Sixty wasn't ancient, but since Herb died, I'd started to go downhill. It was only a matter of time until I turned sixty-five, then—Lord willing—seventy. There would be no way I could look in the mirror and tell myself, "Hey, Maude, you don't look so bad," when my mirror told me different. Short-cropped gray hair, wrinkles—and the sand in my hourglass figure had shifted to the south.

Sighing, I rolled onto my back and stared up at the slit of light dancing across the ceiling. Wind rattled the spruce outside the window and jangled the wind chime Herb had hung from its branches. Sounds I wouldn't have noticed in the light of day at night became as jarring as a calypso band at a church social. When Herb died a year ago, all I wanted to

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do was crawl into a hole and stay there. My attitude hasn't changed much since then.

My problem is acceptance. I'm having a hard time accepting my life now. I need Herb lying here beside me. I'm too conscious of the emptiness of this bed, of the loneliness. Even his snoring would be welcome.

I never wanted to live alone. Writing is the only thing that's familiar to me, and creativity has turned on me.

*Ka-bang!*

My eyes flew open and I sat up straight in bed.

Gunshots!

Gunshots? At—I squinted at the alarm clock, fumbling for my glasses—2 A.M.?

Street light streamed through the venetian blind, picking out the four posts of my bed, the ruffled muslin curtains, the robe I had tossed over the cane-bottomed rocker. A car, probably Hargus Conley's old truck, rattled down the street. Pansy Conley's boy, Morning Shade's Barney Fife, was up till all hours drinking Chocolate Cow soda and swapping tall tales with Finley Priest, a local stock-car driver.

I lay back, fighting annoyance. I'd taken two Advil PMs before going to bed and had just dozed off when—

*Ka-bam!*

Bolting upright, I tried to clear sleep from my brain.

I listened, but couldn't hear anything other than the ticking clock next to my bed. I must've dreamed the gunshot. Maybe I'd been thinking about the book I was writing: a mystery . . . with no plot. A lackluster, dull whodunit with second-rate characters even *I* didn't care about.

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I was getting nowhere with my forty-second book. Zilch. Everything I wrote was bland and totally uninspiring. The characters were wooden, and the plot was as predictable as summer road construction.

What I needed was a good, uninterrupted night's sleep. Maybe if I was fresh in the morning . . .

*A dog?* I slowly opened my eyes when I heard a low, menacing growl.

A dog.

I sat up again, clutching the end of the sheet to my chest.

*A very big, mean dog.*

Breaking out in a cold sweat, I wondered if an animal was in the house—then I wondered who had a dog that sounds like a junkyard rottweiler? Certainly not old Mrs. Post, the ninety-year-old retired postmistress. For a deacon's wife, she talks pretty tough and drives stray animals out of her yard with a rake. Maybe the dog belongs to my next-door neighbor, Victor Johnson. He's deaf in one ear and can't hear out of the other. Could be he's bought a mastiff or one of those big breeds you have to follow around with a shovel.

I thought about my mother-in-law sleeping two doors away. *If she hears the barking she'll be upset.* Herb's mother had moved in the week before, and she was uneasy with her new surroundings. Gunshots and barking dogs were not a soothing combination. Stella wasn't the type to pull the covers over her head and ignore strange noises. I'd be lucky if she didn't come barreling out with a flashlight in one hand and a poker in the other.

Having Stella in my home wasn't anything either of us

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wanted, but after Herb died, there wasn't enough money to keep her in the residential-care facility any longer. I worked myself into a blue funk over whether to bring her here to live. I finally moved Stella into the spare bedroom.

She hadn't wanted to leave the retirement home, and I hadn't wanted her to either, but finances had stripped us both of our privacy. I'd always gotten along with my mother-in-law, but getting along and living together are two different things. I knew Stella probably felt the same way. Stella was here, probably awake by now. I settled back and drew a breath of resignation.

What had happened to my sane life—the one I'd shared with Herb and a close circle of friends? I'd never realized how much death could impact the ones left behind. Losing Herb had derailed my world, and I couldn't get it back on track.

And now CeeCee had problems. Newly widowed, my thirty-one-year-old daughter had called to ask if she could come home for a while. Cee said she would only stay “until I can put my life together.” But I wasn't so sure three women with such different personalities could coexist under the same roof.

*No, I know we can't—not without inviting a bunch of trouble.*

Still, I didn't have the heart to tell my daughter she wasn't welcome. I couldn't look the other way and ignore what was happening in Stella's and Cee's lives.

*But what about my life? Has anyone thought about my needs?*

Herb sure hadn't. He never thought much beyond the end of his nose. Still, he was a decent sort—and an attentive father. He wasn't as social as I am, but maybe our differences

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balanced each other, which accounted for why we'd stayed married for thirty-two years.

Life isn't supposed to be this way: widowed at sixty, burned out on writing, short on money, and living with my mother-in-law and my widowed daughter. Herb and I were supposed to retire together. But that's not going to happen. Not now.

According to the ambulance attendant, Herb had had a freak fall, hitting his head on the side of the bathtub. A hotel maid found him the next morning when she came to clean the room. As sudden as that, my life had taken a nosedive, followed by a landslide.

Stella was supposed to have lived out her remaining years in the company of her peers, comfortable and content at Shady Acres.

Cee's husband, Jake "Touchdown" Tamaris, wasn't supposed to die from a blood clot when he was only thirty-three, and I wasn't supposed to be responsible for everyone's welfare. How did I get elected to be the strong one?

When I got my AARP card at fifty, I thought I'd reached the time when life got easier. But three months into sixty, my solitude had been disrupted by both my mother-in-law and my daughter.

I had an October deadline for my book, and my creative juices were as dry as beef jerky. In five months, I had to send off a manuscript that was currently going nowhere. In fact, I'd hardly started on the story. With all the interruptions, I'd deleted more than I'd written. I'd have to buckle down and make headway.

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I sighed and closed my eyes. *Face it, Maude, you're burned out. Fresh out of ideas.*

I thrust my fingers through my thick, gray hair. What a mess my life was. I needed regeneration and quiet, and neither was going to happen.

I scrunched my pillow beneath my cheek and willed sleep to come.

*Bam!*

My eyes popped open.

Another gunshot? What was going on?

This time I wasn't taking any chances. My fingers groped for the aluminum bat Herb had kept handy. Morning Shade wasn't New York, but we had a few teenagers who liked to keep Hargus Conley hopping.

After a moment, I eased out of bed, clutching the bat to my chest. Moving carefully, I crept downstairs into the living room. Avoiding the moonlight streaming through the front window, I moved stealthily to the side pane and looked out. The street was empty. None of the lights were on at the Peacocks'. Maury Peacock went to bed with the birds and got up with the chickens. What the man did with his time was a mystery to me.

*Bam!*

I threw myself flat on the floor—not an easy job for a woman my age. I listened for sounds of movement outside. I couldn't hear anything except that crazy Hargus roaring down the street with that silly Confederate flag waving from a pole on the bed of his truck. Maybe some transplanted Yankee was taking potshots at the flag, fighting the Civil War all over again.

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I suddenly sat straight up, slapping my hand to my forehead. *What an idiot I am!*

Rolling to my knees, I pushed up with the help of the bat.

The sound of the barking, growling dog was coming from my computer. It was my new program.

The “dog” had detected a virus. A gunshot meant the program was “killing” the unwanted or virus-laden message.

“My nerves are shot,” I told myself as I went to my office to shut the thing down.

Isn’t technology wonderful?



The next morning, Stella was rattling the paper when I walked into the kitchen, yawning. She looked as fresh as you can look at her age, which isn’t saying much. Evidently it took more than dogs and gunshots to keep her awake. Maury Peacock, my next-door neighbor, had cranked up his lawn mower at sunrise, and I couldn’t hear myself think over the sound of the blade chewing up rocks and sticks.

Stella had the paper turned to the obituary page, the section she always read first. My mother-in-law would be doing well to top the scale at a hundred and ten pounds. On her bad days she looked frail, on her good days she was as belligerent as an ill-tempered rooster, and on any day she was a threat to my sanity.

I wondered if Stella read the obits because she expected to find her own name there someday.

“Do you know Mary Grace Hodson?” she asked.

“No, I don’t.” Morning Shade is small, but I don’t know everybody.

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"She died," Stella said. "She was only seventy-nine. Eight years younger than me. Says here contributions should be sent to the American Cancer Society. Must've died of cancer."

"Must have."

I dumped Raisin Bran into my bowl and poured milk over it. I had a million things to do today: run to the post office, address the last of my publicity mailings, call my agent and ask about the status of my new proposal, get bread and milk, and then come home to write at least twenty-five hundred words.

Wouldn't it be nice if I could buy words like I bought groceries? *I'll take sixty-five hundred words, a dozen catchy phrases, and, let's see, how about two best-sellers? And throw in a blockbuster. Yes, plastic sacks are fine.*

My toast popped up, charred. "Did you change the settings?" I asked Stella.

"Yes, I can't chew tough toast. Do you know Harry Beauford?"

I switched the setting on the toaster back to where I liked it. "No Stella, I don't."

I stirred creamer into my coffee. *A roast. I'll buy a roast at the store and put it in the Crock-Pot for supper. Quick and easy. As long as Stella could chew the meat. Her dentures were bothering her. I'd found her bottom plate on the coffee table last night. When I asked her why she didn't put her teeth in the denture case, she said she'd forgotten. Forgotten? Forgotten her teeth?*

Was this my future?

"Harry was only seventy-one. Sixteen years younger than

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me. My, my, my." She shook her head. "We just never know, do we?"

I didn't mind her reading the obits, if only she wouldn't read them out loud. The ritual was depressing, and I had enough gloom in my life right now.

I knew she resented having to leave her friends. She had flourished under the camaraderie she'd found at Shady Acres Residential Care. She loved the weekly bridge and bingo games held every Saturday night in the rec room, and she went to the occasional funeral of an old friend to break the monotony. Maybe that's why she reads the obits, planning her social calendar.

That wasn't nice. I needed to get a grip. Stella had her life, and I had mine, and neither was anything to shout about, but that wasn't any reason to get snippy, even if I never said the thought out loud.

There was nothing, according to the eighty-seven-year-old, she didn't like about Shady Acres. But, in truth, I knew there wasn't much Stella was happy about—including the fact that the good Lord had overlooked her and she was still alive. With every breath, she made it clear she didn't expect to be around long enough to be a bother to me. Sometimes it sounded like she was looking forward to the trip.

"Well, it seems that I've outlived my usefulness, just like these folks. I'm not here for much longer, that's for certain."

"That's morbid, Stella. None of us knows from one day to the next how long we'll be here. We just have to be ready to go."

Stella looked at me, her eyes wide. "What? Has the doctor told you something he hasn't told me?"

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"Of course not." For someone who made a habit of predicting her own demise, she seemed startled at the thought that it might be around the corner.

I pressed a finger to my temple. It was too early in the morning to be discussing death. I wanted to slip carefully into the day, not be slapped in the face with mortality.

Stella rattled the paper, folding it in the middle, I assumed to better read the rest of the obituaries.

"My, my, my," she said. "Richard Peaks died in a wreck on the highway. Pulled in front of a truckload of fertilizer. He was eighty-three, four years younger than me." She shook the paper again. "Humph! Look at this. They have a whole article about testing old folks more closely to make sure they have all the faculties they need to drive. The way some of these young folks tear around . . ."

I felt a headache blooming. "Did you take your pill?"

"Yes," Stella said sharply. "I took my pill, for what good it does."

Stella took half a pill a day for her blood pressure and was certain the diagnosis signaled the end of her life. She was so sure she wasn't long for this earth that she refused to buy green bananas. Evidently I had irritated her by asking about her medicine. Being irritating seems to be one of the things I do best. A brand-new talent just discovered since Stella came to live with me.

"I'm going to watch my program," Stella announced, leaving the pillaged newspaper on the table for me to sort out.

Her "program" was a morning talk show that centered around two women fighting over some poor miscreant that

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I would've shot. I can't understand Stella's fascination with these kinds of programs.

Other than Herb, we had nothing in common. Stella hated crowds, and I loved to socialize. She reads the obits; I read the society pages. She hated malls, and I thrived on shopping.

Wal-Mart was my obsession. I could impulsively outspend the best of 'em. Herb had once bought me a T-shirt that read "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping." I still had it.

Stella plunked herself in front of the television, ready to spend her morning sitting in an easy chair, getting no exercise at all.

"Why don't you take a walk," I suggested. "It's a beautiful morning, and the fresh air will do you good."

"You want me out of the house," Stella announced. "Well, if that's what you want, I'll just walk down to the Citgo and drink my coffee."

"I didn't say I wanted you out of the house."

"I can take a hint. Never let it be said that Stella Diamond is a burden to anyone."

She snapped off the television, grabbed her black vinyl purse, and moments later disappeared out the back door. I got up and went to the window over the sink to watch the five-foot-two dynamo march down the sidewalk at a fairly brisk clip, her purse clutched snugly under her right arm.

I'd hurt her feelings again. She'd probably blab to everyone in the Citgo deli that her daughter-in-law was thoughtless and mean. Some of them would probably believe it. Sighing, I sat back down at the table.

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Morning Shade was a small, safe country town in Izzard County, Arkansas. There were three hundred and fifty people living here, at the most. So I didn't have to worry about Stella's safety. She could come and go as she pleased, and she enjoyed the local Citgo. Although she liked to pretend she was only going because I wanted her out of the house. I had a feeling that she was spending most of her time with the regulars at the convenience store now that she was living with me. That was okay. I was glad she had made new friends, and it kept her out of my way. Gave me time to write, not that I was making any headway there.

Twenty miles from Morning Shade sat Evening Shade. That town was once the premise of a television show starring Burt Reynolds. Nothing really noteworthy happened there either, unless you counted a building named for Reynolds and another one named for Linda Bloodworth Thomas, the show's producer.

Morning Shade had no notoriety. There was nothing here of any significance. Culver Street was the main thoroughfare and had six side streets. The Citgo Gas and Convenience Store had a small deli area with five booths, located across the aisle from the pet-food department, where locals gathered every morning for coffee and news.

In addition to the gas and convenience store was a school where CeeCee—and I—had graduated with honors. There were Methodist, Catholic, and Baptist churches. There were a mobile-home park, Shady Acres Residential Care, a one-truck fire department, two small grocery stores, a Sears appliance outlet, a car wash, a feed store, the Kut 'n' Kurl beauty shop,

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a small engine-repair shop, and the post office. Not exactly a metropolis.

There's a small park with two picnic tables set off to the side for those who wanted to brave the summer heat—mostly used by young couples letting their children play. The Fourth of July festivities were held there, and the VFW held their annual Labor Day Picnic under the covered pavilion every September.

Nothing noteworthy ever happened in Morning Shade.

I shook my head and picked up the newspaper, smoothed it carefully, reinserted the pages in the right place, and began reading. I was in no hurry to start the day or face a blinking cursor.

Stella got back in time for lunch. I had planned a nice salad, but in deference to her teeth, switched the menu to baked minute steaks with mashed potatoes and gravy.

"How was everything at the Citgo?"

"Did I tell you I ate breakfast there?" Stella said. "They've got quite a good breakfast."

"Good."

"For \$1.39 I had biscuits and gravy with sausage. Don't matter that I eat biscuits and gravy at my age. I'm not long for this world anyway."

That afternoon, when I'd procrastinated all I could, I sat down at my workstation and stared at the computer screen. I was supposed to be writing. But instead, I had pulled up a Web site listing this month's Christian best-sellers. Hmm. My recent title hadn't made it. Again.

Figures. The publisher hadn't loaded enough books into stores.

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Best-seller lists didn't use to matter to me. It used to be that just the very elation of being published was enough. I didn't need any more validation than that. But twenty-five years later, I suddenly find myself measuring my worth by twenty numbers a month. I don't want to feel like a failure, but that's what reading the best-seller list does to me.

And it isn't just fame and recognition I seek. While I once was able to write for the sheer joy of it, I now find myself desperately needing financial security too. Authors who make the best-seller list have choice positioning in the bookstores and sell even more books as a result.

I constantly prayed about my obsession to make the list. Sales were healthy, but I could never quite push over the top, never quite achieve my heart's desire.

My agent said to be patient. But I knew patience was only a small part of the writing world. Stronger marketing was the answer.

Certainly, I put out the best book I could. Why couldn't one hit the best-seller list? It seemed like a small request. Twenty authors make it every month. If the Lord loved me as much as He did those twenty, it only stood to reason that I should show up on the list some month. But I hadn't, and I was starting to resent it. Resent my house, my agent, even M.K. Diamond, my pen name. Maybe I even resented the Lord. I'd sure prayed enough over this. Why didn't He listen?

Maybe I needed to start over—take a new pen name and write a different kind of book. I could do that. I still had my mind. Although it didn't seem to be working all that well on the current book.

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I switched to the Barnes & Noble Web site, then Amazon.com, and finally Parable.com, the site for an association of small, independent stores—all with the same results. I could see that M.K. Diamond wasn't a best-seller. If my newest book, *Eyes of the Night*, didn't make it in September—well . . . I'll write another one. At least hope was renewed with each new forthcoming title, enough so to keep me writing.

Was my desire to make it on the best-seller list wrong? Was it wrong to hold that up as a measure of my worth? Had I set the right goals? Maybe God didn't want me on the best-seller list. Was He teaching me to be humble? If so, it was working.

I closed my eyes and clicked off the Internet. I needed to work, but nothing was coming. I needed a new idea, a fresh plot. There was just too much upheaval in my life. Too much stress, too many things to worry about. And there was no one to worry about it but me.

I tried not to resent that. Herb had promised to get a life insurance policy, enroll in a company 401(k) retirement plan, but he never had. Now I have to watch every penny in order to make ends meet. Sometimes it hurts to think that my husband thought so little about my future, in case anything happened to him.

Now my income is limited, and royalty checks come in sporadically. I need to finish this book and have it sell well.

*Concentrate, Maude. Write!*

But my mind wandered to CeeCee.

Now the widow of a professional football player, Cee had her own problems. Jake was great on the long pass but had proved to be short on fidelity and commitment. Cee had

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found it hard to cope with his long absences and the fame his career brought. The couple never had a vacation without his career interfering or gone to dinner without fans interrupting. Pushed aside, ignored, and sometimes neglected, Cee had withdrawn into a shell. Maybe Jake hadn't intended for it to be that way in the beginning, but it had happened.

Two months ago, Jake had a blood clot to the brain and died during a workout at the gym. Cee knew Jake had been unfaithful to her—she'd read about it in the papers, yet for some reason she'd blocked out his infidelity. She'd never been blessed with overconfidence, and maybe she thought Jake's trifling would go away.

Had it been the other way around and she'd died, Jake would've brought a date to the funeral. The thought made me angry.

Jake had made big money as a football player, but he'd spent big as well. He, like Herb, hadn't seen beyond his nose, so Cee was left with only a small insurance policy and an uncertain future. What is it with men who don't provide for their families? Do they think they are going to live forever, or are they afraid to face their own mortality? Is having a life insurance policy a sure ticket to an early grave? Like me, Cee had some important decisions to make. She was coming home to regroup.

I've learned to like my time alone. I like my own schedule, my own way of doing things. It's not that I'm set in my ways like Stella; I just need some space.

Herb had traveled through the week, and I filled my time writing. But now that had changed. Stella gets up before six

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o'clock; I sleep until at least eight. I can see right now that will be the first obstacle to overcome.

Cee would be coming home Friday. She would have her own schedule, which wouldn't mesh with either mine or Stella's. Putting three women with three different personalities and needs under the same roof could stir up more friction than a burlap bag full of tomcats. Nothing about my life was going to be the same.

The front door slammed, then opened and closed softly.

Stella. I gritted my teeth. As if closing the door softly the second time corrected the slam.

"Maude?"

"Yes, Stella. I'm in here. Working."

I concentrated on the words on the screen, trying to pick up the thread of the story from where I'd left off yesterday. If I thought reminding her it was my work time would make her go away, I sure had misjudged her capacity for driving me to distraction.

"I won't bother you. I just wanted to let you know I'm back."

"Good. Thanks."

The paragraph I'd written was flat. No life. Cardboard characters. Stupid plot. Stupid book. I should delete the whole thing and start over.

"Nothing ever happens here," Stella said, interrupting my thoughts again. "This town has died and don't know it."

"Count your blessings. A lot of people would like to wake up in a peaceful, happy place like Morning Shade."

"Be more to the point if someone would wake up Morning Shade. Anything for dessert?"

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"Baked custard."

"Same thing we've had three times already this week. I rest my case."

"Hmm." Maybe if I ignored her she'd go away.

"Guess who I met at the Citgo?"

"Can't imagine." I typed a sentence, hoping she'd take the hint. She didn't. "You'll never guess."

"Hmm."

"Maude?"

"Yes, Stella." I blew out a sigh and saved the two sentences I'd managed to revise.

"Simon Bench. You remember him. He's at Shady Acres, but in the apartments. We played bridge every week. He's seventy-six, you know. We've made plans to play bridge with Frances and Pansy, like we always did."

"Good." Maybe I'd get some peace during Stella's outings.

"We'll alternate homes. We're playing here next week."

*Good grief! Not here!* I caught my tongue before I exploded. This was Stella's home too. I couldn't deny Herb's mother a social life. But the thought of senior citizens playing cards in my living room while I tried to work gave me the hives. I kept my voice level. "Sounds like fun. Maybe you could make those lemon bars Herb liked so well."

"Why, I could, couldn't I? I'll start looking for the recipe right now."

I released a mental sigh and looked at the paragraph again. Passive. I highlighted the sentences and hit Delete.

Stella's voice came from the kitchen. "Where did we put that box that had *kitchen* written on it?"

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I drew a breath. *God, give me strength!* "Your boxes are in the closet under the stairs," I called out. *Open your eyes.*

My fingers curled on the keyboard and I set my mind on the story. *Okay, back up a bit. Relax, Maude. The story is in your mind; just let it flow onto the paper.* I sighed. The only thing flowing around here was the time I wasted sitting in front of the computer writing junk.

"Found it," Stella called from the kitchen.

"Good."

I scooted back in my chair and closed the door to my office with my foot. I didn't want to offend Stella, but I might have to if this kept up. I couldn't even write junk if this steady barrage of interruptions didn't stop.

Bob Barker's voice came from the living room. I sat up straighter and pushed the door tightly shut. I couldn't let Stella get on my nerves. I needed to plan for the future—but how, when I couldn't even handle the present?

\* \* \*

Tuesday afternoon, I shut the computer off at twelve-thirty. I'd written three coherent sentences and wasn't happy with those. I was thinking a ham sandwich might jump-start my creativity.

"Humph." Stella was in front of the blaring television, grumbling under her breath, when I came out of my office. "Thought you'd hole up in there all day," she said.

"I'm working, Stella." *Correction, trying to work.*

"Saw Hargus Conley down at the Citgo this morning. Buying a cappuccino, of all things. He's an embarrassment to

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law enforcement. 'Course nobody would ever say that in front of Pansy. It's hard on her to have a boy that useless."

"Hargus tries." He wasn't a fireball, but he looked after our small town.

I'd hoped to cut off Stella's running commentary on Hargus, but there was no getting her off the subject. "Everybody knows he's had every odd job in town, but he can't hold any of them. Heard tell he quit his job fixing flats down at the service station 'cause it was too stressful." She snorted. "Too stressful. What could be stressful about patching an inner tube?"

"Tires no longer have inner tubes, Stel."

Stella had followed me into the kitchen. "Since when?"

I slathered mustard on two pieces of bread and then added two slices of the ham I'd baked the night before. "Hargus does a fair job of protecting the town."

"What's to do? There's no crime here. Never has been. So somebody reports a dog barking or some silly boy laying a strip of rubber on Culver Street. He's got no authority for anything."

"The sheriff authorized Hargus to keep the peace in his absence."

"Peace. Never been anything but peace in this town." Stella grunted as she opened a bag of potato chips. "I know when Herb was growing up there was a problem with someone papering the trees at Janice Brown's house. 'Course all the boys were sweet on her. Too bad she moved away. She was a nice girl."

"She went to college in Springfield, Missouri," I told

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Stella. "Her mother said she's teaching in a small town outside of Springfield. She's raised two girls."

"Did Herb go to the class reunion two years ago? He should have. Johnny Moist died, you know. And Jack Hilland's as fat as a pig and going bald. Got that Dunlap disease. His belly done lapped over his belt."

I put my sandwich on a plate, grabbed a handful of chips, and thought about making a break for the office. But that would be rude.

Stella finished her lunch and sat with a glass of soda, thumbing through the mail.

"You brought in the mail?" I rather liked that chore. It gave me time to sit down and think about something other than word count.

"Uh-huh. Nothing much."

I swallowed a spurt of anger. Stella had screened the mail! She had no right! I reached for a Christian book catalog. I was determined to lay down some ground rules. The mail was to be put in the same place, every day, unopened.

I ripped open a letter from my agent and skimmed it quickly. It was a reminder that my deadline was looming and asking if I would need an extension to complete the book.

Yes, I would no doubt need an extension, probably several of them. I had too many problems to worry about deadlines, and a fresh batch of trouble was moving in Friday, along with my daughter.

I tossed the catalog on the table. "I'm going back to work."

"Well, I'll just find something to do around here. Don't mind me. I'll be quiet. I can take care of myself."

Lori Copeland

She couldn't open the childproof cap on her medication without a hammer. But that didn't matter. She was convinced she didn't need help—unless she needed help.

I heard the theme song of a talk show come on at megavolume as I closed the door to my office.

*Patience, Maude. Lord, give me patience.*

*And while You're at it, can You throw in a plot?*