



A Place to Belong

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*You can make many plans,
but the Lord's purpose will prevail.*

PROVERBS 19:21

*A*ll she wanted was a little sun.

If all the world was indeed a stage, then Mae Ames was the director, star, and propmistress. The plan for today's scene was to portray an idyllic summer setting. A striking woman, who teased the edge of pretty when she tried, could be seen reading a book on the front lawn of a charming 1920s bungalow, bettering both her mind and her tan.

She'd started with just a book and a lawn chair. But once she got the chair positioned in the front yard, she quickly realized the June sun was hot and she needed her sunglasses, a straw hat, sunscreen, her pink Japanese fan, a glass of raspberry tea, and four Milano cookies on a plate. Never mind. Bring the bag.

Mae was just settling in—realizing to be *really* comfy she should go get one of the toss pillows from the couch—when she heard a familiar clearing of the throat. She didn't have to turn toward the porch. "You grunted, Mr. Husband?"

"What are you doing out here?"

She opened her paperback. "Reading a book."

"Looks like it would be easier sitting inside. Or on the porch swing."

"Easier, perhaps. But it's a proven fact that books read better when accompanied by the proper accoutrements."

"Want me to hire a neighbor kid to fan you with a palm leaf?"

She fluttered her own fan. "No need. I have it covered." She turned around to look at him. "Care to join me?"

"Nah. I'm not sure the recliner would fit through the door and I'd want—" His eyes moved to look at a car that was driving toward them.

Mae looked too. Then she popped out of her chair—or attempted to pop, as the lawn chair objected and tipped, forcing her to straddle it or put a foot *through* the webbing. Collier was halfway down the front walk when she finally got free of it, knocking over her tea. She tossed her hat toward the house like a Frisbee. It capped a mound of black-eyed Susans. She ran toward the car. "Ringo! Soon-ja!"

Ringo parked and Collier opened the door for their daughter-in-law, while Mae made a beeline for the backseat where the love of her life was seated backwards. She got him free of the car seat, pulling him to her shoulder. "Ricky, baby. How's my sweet-ums?"

Ringo came around the front of the car and kissed her cheek. "I'm fine, Mom. How are you?"

"Oh. Sorry, son. Never work with children or animals. Scene stealers, every one."

He flipped his head to get his longish hair out of his eyes. "I'll remember that."

Mae took a deep breath, filling her nostrils with the luscious smell of baby. If only they could bottle it. She turned her attention to Soon-ja. The girl's skin always looked pale against the black of her hair, but today, there was a pallor . . . "And how are you doing, Soonie?"

Soon-ja smiled, but looked to Ringo, as if needing advice on how to answer.

And she didn't answer.

Uh-oh. Something was up.

Collier led them to the porch where Soon-ja and Mae took seats on the swing. "What brings you to town?" he asked.

Ringo and Soon-ja exchanged that look again. "Life."

Double uh-oh. Mae held Ricky even closer. "Out with it. What's wrong?"

Ringo took a position against a column at the top of the steps as if positioning himself to flee. "I've lost my job."

Mae didn't quite understand. Ringo was a roadie with a rock band so the work always *was* seasonal. "The tour's over," Mae said. "You knew that was going to happen."

"But my next gig fell through." He glanced at Soon-ja, then at his son. "And I have responsibilities now."

"And no income," Soon-ja said.

Ringo gave her a look.

She gave him one back. "It has to be said, Go-Go. Now is not the time for subtlety—or pride." She angled in the swing toward Mae. "Can we move in here?"

"Just for a little while," Ringo added.

Mae sought her husband's eyes. Poor Collie. They'd only been married eighteen months and already they'd endured one adult child come home. Just last fall, Mae's daughter, Starr, had come to live with them while she and her fiancé worked things out. Now, to have her son's family move in . . . was she pushing the toleration limit of her darling Mr. Husband?

Probably. But that had never stopped her before. "Of course, you can," she said. She nuzzled Ricky's cheek. "It will give us a chance to spoil this precious baby."

"I *will* get a job," Ringo said. "I'll start looking tomorrow."

Collier stepped forward. "I had lunch with Joe Ambrose the other day and he needs workers. Construction."

"I could do that," Ringo said.

"Of course, you could, honey," Mae said.
There. Problem solved.

• • •

"There."

Evelyn smoothed the pastel quilt on Margaret's bed. The trouble was, it wasn't Margaret's bed anymore. Margaret Jensen had just moved out, moved away from Carson Creek altogether, and Evelyn was readying the room for a new boarder at Peerbaugh Place.

Another tenant, Piper Wellington, stood in the doorway with Peppers the cat rubbing against her legs. "It's hard, isn't it?"

Evelyn collected her cleaning supplies and put them in the handled tub. "I shouldn't get so attached to the ladies."

Piper picked up Peppers, snuggling her under her chin. "I suppose it would be less painful to just pass each other in the halls, and call each other, 'hey you.'"

Not funny. Especially since Piper would also be moving out in a few weeks to be married. "I just don't understand why Margaret felt the need to move hundreds of miles away. She had a teaching job here. Her parents are in Jackson."

"But Bobby is in Jackson."

Nuf said. Margaret had broken her engagement to Bobby when she'd caught him finagling some of the inheritance she was to receive from an old mentor. But their relationship had been doomed way before that. Bobby was not a nice man. Nice men didn't make their fiancées feel inferior. That wasn't love. Margaret's parents were no better. It was best she get away and start over. Sad, but best.

Piper let Peppers go and helped Evelyn by carrying the broom downstairs. "Are you ready for the meeting of the bridesmaids this morning?" The bridal party was meeting at Catherine's Wedding Creations to choose the style and fabric for the dresses.

"I must warn you, it's been nearly three decades since I've been a bridesmaid," Evelyn said. "I'm out of practice."

"But remember, you're not just a *maid*; you're the matron of honor," Piper said.

"'Matron.' Oh, yeah, that sounds loads better."

Piper laughed. They reached the kitchen where they put the cleaning supplies in the broom closet. Evelyn arched her back with a groan, feeling every one of her five-plus decades. She had an awful thought. "We're not going to wear anything strapless, or with a big bow in the back, are we?"

"Not unless you're outvoted," Piper said as she got a drink of water. "I must say it is a challenge to find a dress that will look good on two fifty-somethings, a twenty-five-year-old, and a woman over seventy."

"You will definitely get the grand prize for the most eclectic group of attendants."

"That's why I need you along, as a calming influence between Mae's madness and Tessa's prim and proper," Piper said. "Only you and Audra have taste I trust. Besides, with Mom gone, I don't know what I'd do without you helping with *all* the wedding plans." Piper's mother, Wanda, had died eleven months before.

"I'm happy to help or negotiate, as needed," Evelyn said.

Piper put her hands on Evelyn's shoulders, her face set in mock seriousness. "Knowing this group, you may need to add *arbitrate* and *mediate* to your job description."

"Okay, but that'll cost extra."

"Whatever it takes," Piper said.

• • •

"Ladies! Ladies, please!"

The four women laughed at the sole male in their presence. Piper slipped her hand through Gregory's arm and kissed his

shoulder. "You're not used to women oohing and ahing over fabric swatches, are you?"

"Oohing and ahing I can take. But swooning?"

"What's swooning, Mommy?" Seven-year-old Summer was serving lemonade like a professional waitress.

Audra touched her back. "It's what I do whenever I see your father. Let me rephrase that. It's what I *should* do whenever I see your father."

"Uh-oh," Tessa said. "Only seventeen months married and the swoon is gone? Shame on you!"

Gregory covered his ears. "Should I be listening to this?"

Evelyn batted one hand down. "Come on, Gregory, you're a doctor. Didn't you study the physiology of swooning?"

"I must have missed that day."

There was a knock on the door to Audra's garage that served as the office-showroom-workroom for Catherine's Wedding Creations, but before Summer could run to answer it, Mae burst in—with a baby in her arms. "Greetings!"

"Aunt Mae! Where'd you get the baby?" Summer asked.

She ruffled Summer's hair. "I found him on the doorstep."

Audra spoke up. "Mae, don't tell her that."

"Actually I'm not far off."

"Is that Ringo's son?" Evelyn asked.

Mae turned the six-week-old baby so he was sitting on her arm, viewing his crowd of admirers. "Ricky Fitzpatrick, meet your public."

If Gregory was overwhelmed by oohing and aahing about fabric he had to be blown away by the oohing and aahing over the baby. Somehow Ricky ended up in Audra's arms. A blessing—and a curse.

While Mae filled them in on the news of Ringo and Soon-ja, Audra walked around the room bouncing Ricky, cooing to him. Aching for one just like him. Would it ever happen?

She was beginning to doubt it. She and Russell had been trying to get pregnant for over a year—though they hadn't started to worry about it until the last few months. Audra had gone in for tests first. She was fine. Which meant . . . Russell had been dragging his feet about making an appointment to be tested but had finally gotten one set up for next Friday. She couldn't blame his reluctance. Hearing it from a doctor was so final. And yet, until the results *were* final, Audra knew they couldn't move on to the next step.

Which was?

Audra pulled Ricky close, kissing his forehead. She had no idea what they'd do if Russell was unable to father a baby. They hadn't let themselves talk about it. In fact, lately they didn't talk about much of anything. Shouldn't trying to have a baby bring a couple closer together?

If it works. Only if it works.

The worry verse in Matthew that had been her mantra popped to mind: *"Don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today."*

Easier said than done. As far as she could tell, Russell was handling it far better than she—which added to the distance she felt. It wasn't that he didn't want a child of his own. He did. Although he'd adopted Summer, she knew he yearned for a baby that was theirs, together. As did she. She just wished it would happen so things could get back to normal.

Mae called to her. "Bring my grandbaby back here, Audra, and let's get down to the second reason I'm here—the first being to show off Mr. Ricky."

"The second being you can't drive past more than two cars in any driveway?" Gregory said.

She swatted his shoulder. "Watch it, mister. You're new to this Sister Circle, and we can have you expelled to some manly man gathering across town if you don't behave."

"Promise?" he said.

Piper slipped her hand through his arm. "He goes, I go!"

Mae rolled her eyes. "Ah, young love."

"I'm hardly young," Piper said. "I'm thirty-five."

"A chicklet." Mae bounced Ricky, then looked over the table of fabrics and drawings of dresses. "So, what are our choices here?"

"Hold up a minute," Gregory said. "I just had a scary thought: I don't need to have all my groomsmen together to choose the tuxes, do I?"

The women laughed. "Not necessary," Mae said. "We're very willing to pick those out too."

Evelyn turned to Audra. "Are you making a mother-of-the-groom dress for Gregory's mother?"

Audra felt a swell of panic. She really didn't have time . . . "I don't think so." She turned to the happy couple. "Am I?"

Piper looked at Gregory. "Uh . . . we don't know what she's wearing."

Audra picked up a fabric swatch. "Would she like a sample of the bridesmaid fabric after we decide?" She watched as Piper and Gregory had a discussion with their eyes.

"Uh-oh," Mae said. "What aren't you telling us?"

Gregory interlocked his fingers through Piper's. "Piper hasn't met Mother yet. We're going to dinner at her house in a couple weeks. She lives in Springfield."

"Ninety minutes. That's not far," Tessa said. "Or is it not far enough?"

Mae didn't let them answer. "What I want to know is *why* haven't you met? You've been engaged for months."

"It's complicated," Gregory said.

Mae pulled up a chair. "Out with it. All of it."

Gregory took a fresh breath. "As Piper probably told you, I grew up without any religious training. Dad was an Italian Catho-

lic and Mother was a Polish Jew. When they married their families disowned them. So instead of having me benefit from both cultures, they left them behind. I lived a pretty homogenized life."

"Skim or whole milk?" Mae asked.

Gregory laughed. "Skim, definitely skim."

Audra wasn't seeing the connection. "That's all very interesting but doesn't explain why Piper hasn't met your mother."

Gregory stood, put his hands in his pockets, and moved to look out the window in the door. "My mother and I have been estranged since Dad died five years ago. She blames me for his death."

"Why?" Evelyn asked.

"Because I'm a heart surgeon and he died of heart problems. If I couldn't save my own father what good am I?"

"Were you his surgeon?"

"No, no. I would never do that. But he had the best. It was no one's fault."

Piper added, "Just like it wasn't anyone's fault that Mom died."

That explained some of it to Audra, but still . . . "I'm sorry about your dad," she said, "but surely your mom's happy that you've found the love of your life."

When he turned to look at Piper Audra could see the love in his eyes. But then his face clouded. "There's another complication. In the past year, as I was discovering Jesus, Mother was rediscovering her Jewish roots."

"Uh-oh," Mae said.

"Double uh-oh. When I called to tell her I had become engaged, her first question was 'Is she a nice Jewish girl?' I had to tell her no, and that I wasn't a Jewish boy either. Ethnically maybe, but not in regard to my faith." He shook his head. "You don't want to know what she said next."

Piper got up and hugged him from behind. They looked so perfect together. So unified. So . . .

"Are you nervous about the dinner?" Tessa asked.

Gregory pulled Piper's arms tighter. "We're trying not to be."

"Expect the worst and accept the best!" Mae said.

"That's not very helpful," Evelyn said.

"But it's the truth."

Piper let go and led Gregory back to the table. "I just want us to get along and find a level of mutual respect."

"Surely you can do that," Audra said.

Gregory snickered. "You don't know my mother."

There was a knock on the workroom door. Audra saw a flash of brown. It was Simon, the UPS man. "Excuse me a moment."

She got the door and Simon flashed her a smile. "Morning. I have three rolls and a box for you today." He peeked past her at all the people. "Oops. Having an important meeting?"

Mae waved him in. "Always room for one more, handsome."

Tessa flashed her a look. "Mae. Behave."

"Don't mind them, Simon. Come on in."

He brought the rolls in, then returned to his truck for the box. Audra was glad the ladies resumed their chatting. She liked Simon and actually looked forward to his near-daily deliveries. Like Mae said, he *was* handsome in a hometown-boy kind of way. And nice. And single. He'd just broken up with a girlfriend a month ago, and Audra had been teasing him about hooking him up with one of her single friends. Not that he would need anyone's help . . .

He put the box against the wall and held the clipboard toward her. "There you go. Lines nine through twelve."

Audra signed on the diagonal line he'd made. "Thanks, Simon. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"I wouldn't miss it." On his way out, he did a double take. "Dr. Baladino?"

Gregory turned to look at him. "Hey . . . Simon. I'm sorry, I'm up to my eyebrows in swatches. I didn't see it was you. How's your dad doing?"

"Fine, thanks to you." Simon took a step toward the table. "All this is for your wedding?"

Gregory let out an exaggerated sigh and picked up a sample board. "Yes, sir. And I'm having a terrible time choosing between periwinkle and cornflower. What do you suggest?"

Simon stroked his chin. "Periwinkle, definitely periwinkle."

"Good choice, handsome," Mae said with a clap.

Simon tipped an imaginary cap. "I aim to please." He seemed to remember he was on duty. "I'd better go. Nice talking with you." He nodded to Audra. "Bye, Aud."

"Bye." She let him out and returned to the table. All eyes were on her. "What?"

"Aud? My, my, you two seem to have hit it off," Mae said.

Audra felt herself blush and hated herself for it. She wasn't sure what to say.

Evelyn said it for her. "Enough of that, Mae. That's my daughter-in-law you're talking about."

Tessa shook her head. "You shouldn't imply such things about a happily married woman."

Piper joined in. "That *was* tacky, Mae."

"Fine, fine." Mae raised her hands in surrender. "Point taken. I was out of line." She swept a by-your-leave hand at Audra.

"Sorry, sister. Simon's charm and dashing smile got the better of me." She paused. "But he is single, isn't he? I didn't see a ring."

"Yes, he's single."

"Perfect." Mae clasped her hands on the table and leaned forward confidentially. "We can't let a looker like Simon go to waste, ladies. I'm sure if we put our heads together we can think of a single sister in need of that smile, that red hair, and those blue eyes."

They laughed and got back to work.
None too soon.

• • •

Evelyn turned the flank steak in the marinade, put the cover back on the container, and put it back in the refrigerator. The smell of ginger, garlic, and soy sauce made her hungry. But it was hours until dinner.

But not hours before her newest tenant would arrive. Valerie Raines, budding author. She looked at the clock. Five minutes to two. Five minutes before the entire tone of Peerbaugh Place would change. Again. In truth, Evelyn was getting better at accepting the change that came with each new tenant. Yet after two and a half years it still surprised her that she was a landlord at all. The situation had been brought on by the death of her husband, Aaron, in a car accident and his lack of foresight in having any life insurance beyond funds to cover his funeral. She'd been a fifty-six-year-old widow in need of immediate income.

Whenever God closes a door, He opens a window. . . .

The door had been closed on her being a compliant, rather weak, doormat of a wife, and had opened for her to become a confident businesswoman with an ever-widening circle of friends. Of the original tenants, Mae, Audra, Summer, and Tessa were still around. Audra's wedding-business partner, the newly married Heddy Wainsworth Mannersmith, had been in the second group. And of the third? Margaret had just moved out and Piper was getting married in two months. Only Lucinda Van Horn was sticking around.

As if on cue, Lucinda came into the kitchen, carrying her "toolbox." It wasn't just any metal toolbox, but had been decoupage with the faces of models and cutouts of makeup products. Inside were the tools of Lucinda's trade. Lucinda was a pro at all

things cosmetic—she knew a zillion beauty tips. And a few pitfalls. As an ex-model and longtime divorcée who’d previously found her worth in her looks, Lucinda had gone under the knife a few too many times. Her current features were pulled and too tight, and when she’d come to Peerbaugh Place she’d brought to mind the aging star in *Sunset Boulevard*, her face a contorted mask of her youth. “*All right, Mr. DeMille, I’m ready for my close-up.*” Only through the tough love of the other tenants had Lucinda found that less was more. At age fifty-nine, she looked nice now, though the aftereffects of all the surgeries were ever present.

“My, my, that smells wonderful,” Lucinda said, setting her toolbox on the kitchen table.

Evelyn touched the top of the red-hots Jell-O salad, checking its progress. Her finger left an impression. She licked it off. “How many women are going to be at your workshop today?”

“Five have signed up. But there are always a few who stop by as they wander through the shelter. Pastor Enoch says my makeover sessions are creating the prettiest down-and-outers in a three-state area. I kidded him that we should have a Ms. Second Chance contest.”

Evelyn was going to mention that Lucinda had received her own second chance through working at the shelter, but didn’t. To go from a wealthy background, with her face gracing the pages of fashion magazines, to giving makeup tips to homeless women was a hard trip. “Are you going to be back for dinner?”

“Sure. I might even drag Enoch along—if that’s all right,” Lucinda said.

Evelyn grinned. “Of course.” Lucinda and Pastor Enoch made a cute couple. He was a teddy bear of a man. Even his personality was cuddly.

Lucinda wagged a finger at her. “Don’t give me that look. We’re just dear friends. No romance involved.”

"But he is cute, in a slightly balding, slightly overweight, slightly frumpy sort of way."

"What scares me is that your description is apt, and I agree with you completely." Lucinda opened the freezer and removed a half dozen makeup pencils and put them in her toolbox. Before Lucinda, Evelyn had never heard of such a thing, but apparently the pencils sharpened better when frozen. Lucinda continued, "Please keep in mind that I have finally found a purpose beyond being on the arm of a man, and I like it. Don't push, Evelyn."

Evelyn was taken aback. She'd just assumed . . . "Sorry. I'm glad you're so . . . fulfilled."

"Me too."

The doorbell rang and Evelyn was brought back to her landlord duties. "Can you wait just a few minutes? I'd like you to meet the new tenant."

"I suppose, but actually there's something else I wanted to talk with you about—"

"Fine. But later please." Evelyn fluffed her hair, then opened the door. "Valerie! Welcome."

Valerie handed Evelyn one suitcase while she carried in another. She was wearing a pale yellow turban and a one-piece belted shorts outfit that reminded Evelyn of the forties. She couldn't think what to call it: a romper? a jumpsuit? It was flattering, and looked fabulous on Valerie's model-thin frame, but also a bit disconcerting. With only a hint of her black hair showing, she looked severe and of another time—a lot like Wallis Simpson, the chic divorcée who made a British king abdicate his throne back in the thirties.

Lucinda joined them in the foyer. "Goodness. Where *did* you find that outfit?"

Valerie pulled out the shorts, which were nearly as wide as a skirt. "At the Nearly New shop in Jackson. New fashions are so gauche. I much prefer vintage."

Before Lucinda could say something less than flattering, Evelyn intervened. "Valerie Raines, this is Lucinda Van Horn. Lucinda, Valerie."

They shook hands. "Charmed, I'm sure," Valerie said.

"Lucinda used to be a fashion model. In magazines."

Valerie's look of shock was not kind. "Really."

"That was a long time ago," Lucinda said. "What do you do?"

Valerie lifted her chin and made a pronouncement: "I am an author."

Evelyn checked Lucinda's reaction, but only received one raised eyebrow. "Valerie is writing a novel. Since we all like to read I thought she'd be a nice addition to Peerbaugh—"

"Those who read rule the world. What novels are you ladies reading now?" Valerie asked.

Oh dear. This is what Evelyn got for exaggerating. The only thing she'd ever seen Lucinda read was *Vogue*. And as for herself? She did love to read, but was suddenly afraid her book choices would not be up to Valerie's standards for worthy fiction.

Lucinda grabbed her keys from the table in the foyer. "Excuse me, I really have to get going. Welcome, Valerie."

And she was gone. Leaving Evelyn to sink or swim. But luckily Valerie left her question behind and looked up the stairs. "Is my room ready?"

Phew.



Evelyn sat on the window seat in Valerie's new room and ran a hand along the pink-and-green floral cushion. "When Summer and Audra had this room, Summer used to love to play with her dolls here."

Valerie leaned over the seat, parted the lace curtains, and

looked at the backyard. "Actually, this seat gets in the way. I'd rather it be an empty nook where I could place a desk."

What could Evelyn say? "I'm . . . sorry."

Valerie flipped a hand and let the curtain fall. She turned toward the room, placing her hands on her hips. "Could you help me move the bed, please?"

"Excuse me?"

Valerie pointed at the window-seat wall. "I need to move the bed against this wall so I have room for a desk over there." She pointed to the wall that contained a dresser and the door to the bathroom she shared with Lucinda.

Evelyn eyeballed the spaces. "But if you move the bed, it will overlap half the window seat."

"It can't be helped," Valerie said. "I must have a proper space to create."

Oh dear. "So you have a desk? Is someone bringing one over later?"

"No, no," Valerie said, pacing the room as if she was making mental calculations. "That desk you have in the parlor will work just fine."

"What?"

Valerie stopped pacing. "You did say this was a furnished room."

"Yes, but—"

"And you did say that you would do everything in your power to make me feel at home, make this room work for me."

She *had* said those things.

"When I first came to see the room and you showed me around, I noticed that walnut desk in the parlor. And since you have too much furniture in that room anyway, I thought it would work nicely in here."

I suppose I could move it. I could find another place to pay my bills and—

No! Evelyn was both shocked by the adamant thought and fueled by it. The old Evelyn would have given in, acquiesced to this ridiculous, rude suggestion. But the new Evelyn . . . "I'm sorry, Valerie. That's not possible. I use that desk nearly every day. It's the only desk I have in the entire house. It's not available."

Valerie's head snapped back as if she'd been slapped.

Evelyn felt a surge of power and liked it way too much. She took a step toward the hall. "However, I do believe there's an old library table up in the attic. You're welcome to use that, if you'd like. And I'm sure there's even an extra chair up there."

Valerie put a hand to her chest. "A dusty old table?"

"I'll get the Pledge."

Evelyn had herself a giggle as she went downstairs to get the cleaning supplies. But as she grabbed a dusting cloth, her satisfaction turned to trepidation. She'd won a battle. But was there going to be a war?



"Shh! Lower your voice," Evelyn told Piper in the kitchen before dinner.

Piper moved shoulder to shoulder as they cut French bread and buttered it. "She actually wanted you to give up your desk?"

"*Expected* me to. That's a key difference," Evelyn said.

"The gall."

"The gall."

"But you told her no."

"I did."

Piper put an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. "Your Aaron would be so proud."

Evelyn shook her head adamantly. "Actually, he wouldn't. He'd be appalled at the new me."

"Well, I'm proud of you."

"But there was a cost to all this assertiveness." Evelyn bent down and revealed a cut on her knee. "Wounds from the battle with the library table. It resisted coming down the attic ladder."

"You should have waited until I got home. Or called my dad. Or I could have gotten Gregory to help."

"It wasn't heavy, just unwieldy. We managed."

"So Valerie *did* help?"

"She had no choice."

"I love the part about you getting the Pledge for her."

"Actually . . . I *was* the one to dust it off."

"You pushover, you."

Evelyn shrugged. Her hard-nosed number went only so far.

Piper looked toward the kitchen door leading to the foyer. "Is she coming down for dinner?"

"She said yes. Lucinda called and should be here any minute. Pastor Enoch's not coming."

Piper checked on the steak broiling in the oven. "We could have used a man to help eat up this meat. You have tons."

Evelyn got an idea. "Why don't you call your father? I know it's short notice, but—"

Piper winked at her. "He does love your cooking." She went to the phone and within a short minute hung up. "He's on his way, says he can hardly wait to be in your presence."

"He did not say that."

Piper shrugged. "But he means it." She began to set the table for five. "How are things going on the love front?"

"Your father and I are not in love. We are in . . . in *like*."

"I'm his daughter and your best friend, and you have my approval, so I don't know what you're waiting for."

Evelyn checked on the meat. She wanted to say, "I don't either," but didn't dare. If Piper knew how much Evelyn loved Wayne Wellington, she'd say something to him, nudge him, even

push him into making a commitment to her. And Evelyn didn't want a pushed man. She wanted Wayne to fall in love with her of his own free will.

But she did wish he'd get on with it. They weren't getting any younger.

She heard the front door open. Lucinda came in. "Hello, ladies. I'm starved."

"Five minutes," Evelyn said. "Wayne's on his way over. So sorry Pastor Enoch couldn't come."

"The life of running a shelter is ever changing. He had a whole family come in just as I was leaving."

"That's so sad."

"I know." Lucinda filled the glasses with iced tea. "Every time I go there I end up wanting to do more, help more." She stopped pouring. "Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about, Evelyn. This morning, when Valerie came I was going to tell you that—"

Valerie came into the kitchen just then and Evelyn moved to greet her. "Valerie! Good timing. Dinner's almost ready."

Evelyn heard the front door open again. Wayne appeared. "I have arrived! Bring on the food." He kissed Piper on the cheek and winked at Evelyn. Then, "Hello, Lucinda." He noticed Valerie for the first time. "And this must be the writer." He extended a hand. "Hi, I'm Wayne Wellington, Piper's dad."

Evelyn was disappointed he couldn't add, "and Evelyn's boyfriend."

Valerie shook his hand. "Author. And it's nice to meet you." A tuft of black hair had escaped the back of her yellow turban.

It was Piper's turn. "And I'm Piper Wellington."

"Soon to be Piper Baladino," Evelyn said.

Lucinda nodded. "She's marrying a doctor six weeks from today."

"Congratulations," Valerie said. But she didn't seem thrilled.

"Let's sit, people," Evelyn said. Once they were settled, they took each other's hands for grace. Valerie hesitated but let her hands be joined. Wayne gave a blessing and dinner was served.

"So, Valerie," Wayne said after all the food had been passed, "you're an author. What do you write?"

"I'm currently writing a novel."

"What's it about?" Piper asked.

"I'd rather not say," she said.

Movement stopped, then resumed. "A secret novel," Lucinda said. "Isn't that going to make publishing a bit difficult?"

"Many authors don't care to share the inner workings of their plot lines with neophytes."

What-a-phytes?

Valerie's eyes made the rounds. "No offense."

Tons taken.

Piper cleared her throat. "How far along are you?"

"Nearly done."

"What else have you published?" Lucinda asked.

There was a moment's hesitation. "This is my second novel. The first one is complete and is being looked at by a publisher."

"I bet it's hard getting published," Wayne said.

"It can be, but it won't be. Not for me."

Evelyn dropped her fork. She picked it up and asked, "So you have an inside connection or something?"

"No," Valerie said, cutting a piece of meat. "I just have a feeling."

So do I. Evelyn hated the negative feelings she was having about her newest tenant.

"Well then," Lucinda said.

Wayne changed the subject. "So how's the makeover queen doing?"

"I'm doing fine. In fact—" Lucinda set her fork down and looked in Evelyn's direction— "I've tried to say this twice but

have been interrupted. Things are going so well at the shelter that I plan to work there more hours. Which makes the forty-minute drive from Carson Creek to Jackson seem a bit ridiculous."

Evelyn's stomach tightened. *No. No. No.*

"Which means I'm moving out. I'm moving to Jackson to be closer to my work."

Evelyn let Piper and Wayne do the exclaiming. She found herself incapable of making a sound. First Margaret moved out, soon Piper, and now Lucinda? Peerbaugh Place would be empty.

She glanced at Valerie, who was eating as if nothing was going on. Empty except for this egotistical . . . neophyte.

"Excuse me." Evelyn needed air. She went out onto the front porch, taking up residence on the swing. This couldn't be happening. Though she was doing a pretty good job at being a proper landlord, she was tired of the changeovers. She wanted people to come and stay. A long time. What was with people, anyway? She and Aaron had lived in this house for decades. Why did everyone else in the world seem content to move every few months?

She heard the screen door open but didn't look. She didn't want to talk to Lucinda. She needed time to adjust. She needed—

"Lucinda feels bad."

Evelyn looked up to see Wayne.

He motioned to the place beside her. "May I?"

She nodded. He sat and after a few moments the swing settled into a common rhythm. "Lucinda wanted to come out."

"I'm glad she didn't. I'm mad."

"She's not deserting you, Evelyn. She's moving on, living out the calling that you helped her discover."

"But Piper's moving out too."

"She has a good excuse."

They swung up and back a few times in silence. "Everyone leaves me. Everyone moves on without me. They use me, use my

house, then discard it all as if it means nothing to them. I'm tired of it."

He angled to look at her. "My, my. Let your bitterness out, woman."

Evelyn felt silly. She hadn't meant to say so much—and worse, she didn't even know if she truly believed what she'd said. She leaned her head against the swing's chain. "Forget all that. I love having people here. And I don't begrudge them their new lives. But I do get tired of the finding-new-tenants part. Getting to know them. Adjusting."

He nodded once, paused, then said. "Are you happy with Valerie?"

She shook her head and shrugged at the same time. "I thought it would be inspiring to have a writer in the house."

"Author."

"Hmm. I always figured an author was someone who'd published something."

"According to Valerie, her break will come any day now."

"She certainly doesn't lack confidence." Evelyn sighed and looked out over the band of gladiolas that lined the porch. "She makes me feel inferior."

"Never, ever feel that, Evelyn. I'll help you find new tenants. And God will provide. You know that. He hasn't failed you yet, has He?"

"He certainly keeps me guessing."

"I think it's part of His job."

They watched Tommy Dillon roller-blade past them on the sidewalk. He waved and they waved back.

"Shall we go finish dinner?" Wayne asked.

Might as well.



*We make our plans,
but the Lord determines our steps.*

PROVERBS 16:9

I'm old.

Evelyn pulled the dead geranium from its pot with extra vengeance. Out with the old, in with the new. She filled its place with a new, younger, prettier one and patted the soil around its roots. The new flower stood tall, strong on its stem, vibrant and very much alive. She gave it a *poing*, making it lose three red petals.

So there.

Evelyn set the newly planted pot on the porch railing, kicked a few sprinkles of dirt off the floor into the flower bed, took off her gardening gloves, and sat on the swing with an audible “Oomph.”

This was pitiful. Couldn't she even bend down to pot a silly plant without having her muscles ache?

Obviously not. Especially not today when she was suddenly older than yesterday. She would never be fifty-eight again. *I'm being silly. I'm one day older than I was yesterday, not an entire year.*

Semantics.

She got the swing in motion and suddenly felt very alone. At