

*Doesn't She Look Natural?*



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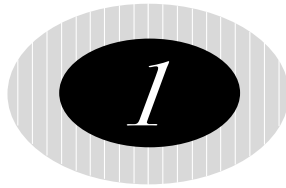
*“There’s no great loss without some gain.”*

—PROVERB

Death gives life its fullest reality

—ANTHONY DALLA VILLA





A grieving woman, I've decided, is like a crème brûlée: she begins in a liquid state, endures a period of searing heat, and eventually develops a scablike crust.

By the time we sell the house I am pretty much crusted over, so I'm honestly surprised when the real estate agent slides a check toward me and tears blur my vision.

Ms. Nichols doesn't seem to notice my streaming eyes. "That's a tidy little profit, even if it is only half the proceeds," she says, eyeing the bank draft as if she can't bear to let it slip away. "If you're in the market for another property—"

"I'm sure we'll be renting for a while." I lower my gaze lest she read the rest of the story in my tight expression: *This money is all we have.*

Apparently oblivious to the rough edges in my voice, the Realtor babbles on. "Our agents also handle rental properties. If you're interested, I have a nice listing inside the Beltway—"

"Anything I could afford near the District wouldn't be big enough for me and my boys."

Ms. Nichols frowns, probably wondering how a woman who's just been handed forty thousand dollars could be so miserly; then she shrugs. "I'm in the yellow pages if you want to take a look. I'm here to serve." She stands and thrusts her hand into the space above the desk. "A pleasure to work with you, Mrs. Graham."

I stifle a grimace. Do I still have the right to be called Mrs.? The title fits about as well as my wedding band, now two sizes too big and consigned to a box at the bottom of my underwear drawer. Stress has whittled flesh from my fingers and added years to my face. My boys haven't noticed, but my mother certainly has. Before we turn out the lights tonight, I can count on a lecture ranging from "Why You Shouldn't Have Married that Louse" to "What Will Become of My Poor Grandsons without a Father to Play Ball with Them?"

I can't deny the truth any longer. I am now not only divorced but homeless as well.

Good thing I've developed that crust.

I stand and accept the real estate agent's outstretched hand. "If the new owners have any questions, they can reach me at my mother's house. We'll be there until we find a place to rent."

Ms. Nichols laughs. "Oh, we don't encourage interaction with buyers after the sale. If one of their pipes bursts next week, you don't want to be around. Walk away and don't look back—that's the best thing for everyone."

Easier said than done. I give the woman a stiff smile and leave the office. I'd love to stride into the future without looking back, but it's not easy to ride away from sixteen years of marriage without at least glancing in the rearview mirror.

I reach the van and catch my reflection in the driver's window. At this point some women might be tempted to throw themselves a pity party, but I'm not in the mood for pity *or* parties. I'm ticked at my husband for forcing us to sell our house, and I'm tired of living at my mother's.

To be completely honest, I'm feeling a little irritated with God. Why did he endow perfectly nice men with hormones that create an insatiable yearning for sports cars and nymphets about the time they spy their first gray hair?

I meet my mirrored gaze and order up a lecture in the same non-nonsense vein I'd use with one of my boys: "Look forward, not back. You'll find someplace to live; you'll find another job. Thomas will get through this midlife crisis and come back to his senses. Until he does, you can depend on your mother."

Oh yeah, I've come a long way, baby—from chief of staff for a respected U.S. senator to a woman who goes around talking to her reflection.

I lift my chin, unlock the door, and toss the check for forty thousand into my aging minivan.



My youngest, Bradley “Bugs” Graham, is playing fetch with our Jack Russell terrier when I pull into the driveway. My son turns his head long enough to recognize the minivan; then he plops his fanny onto the front porch step, props his elbows on his blue-jeaned knees, and plants his round cheeks in his hands. Even at five, he knows that little-boy-dejected pose is guaranteed to wring my heart.

Bugs doesn't budge as I shut off the engine and step out of the van, though I do catch him shooting a curious glance in my direction. As I walk toward him, though, his gaze remains fixed on the brick step under his feet. Skeeter pops out from beneath a bush and scampers to greet me, his favorite red ball in his mouth.

I take the spit-slimed ball, give it a toss, and look at my son as the dog darts away. “Hey, kiddo.” My purse slides from my shoulder as I stoop to his level. “Got a hug for your mama?”

His blue eyes roll toward his coppery bangs, but he doesn't move. “Something wrong?”

He nods, so intent upon maintaining his hands-on-cheeks posture that his elbows rise from his knees with each up-and-down motion.

I sink to the step. We sit together, two melancholy souls staring at the yawning emptiness of the sky. A pair of birds flies by—ducks or something—and I wonder if they've mated for life.

“The redheads are in there.” Bugs's voice startles me.

“The redheads?”

“You know, those ladies. They're all actin' silly.”

His meaning eludes me until I remember why the street is glutted with cars—my mother is hosting a meeting of the Fairfax chapter of the Red Hat Society, a group of over-fifty ladies who vow to have fun

in their golden years. I've never actually witnessed what they call a get-together, but I've seen Mom gussied up in her red hat and purple feather boa.

And she thought my teen years were bizarre.

I'm sure the Hatters inside are lovely women, but right now I'm not in the mood to face a faction of females who are bound to be curious about why my kids and I have moved in with Mom.

Skeeter rushes off to chase a squirrel as I slip my arm around my son's narrow shoulders. "Are the Red Hats in the living room?"

He nods.

"Then we'll go in through the kitchen, okay?"

Like cat burglars we sneak into the garage and creep down the narrow aisle between a wall of storage boxes and the side of my mother's Buick. When we reach the door that leads to the kitchen, I turn and press my index finger to my lips. Bugs's eyes are shining, and I'm so grateful for this evidence of happiness that my voice wavers. "Ready, Fred?"

"Ready, Ted."

I open the door and slip into the kitchen. Bugs tiptoes behind me. The dining room table, visible over the kitchen bar to our right, bears the remains of finger sandwiches, cookies, and a variety of congealed salads.

When I turn to check on Bugs, I see that my coconspirator's eyes have drifted toward the delectable detritus. "Hungry?"

He presses his lips together as his gaze lingers on a mound of sausage balls.

"Tell you what, kiddo—I'll cover you if you want to sneak in there and grab a couple of goodies."

I understand why he hesitates. Mother's friends seem to think the good Lord dropped me and my kids at her house so she can enjoy unlimited time with her grandchildren and they can sneak hugs and kisses.

Bugs focuses on me. "I'll be quick."

"Okay, sport. Make a run for it."

He's off with a squeak of his sneakers, but the laughing ladies in the living room don't seem to hear this evidence of our trespassing.

After a moment, my mother's voice commands their attention. "Do you agree to handle growing more mature with humor and to take your silliness seriously?"

Someone giggles in answer.

"In the spirit of friendship and sisterhood, do you join your Red-Hatted sisters as we sassily go forth, bonded affectionately by the common thread of 'been there, done that,' and with real enthusiasm for whatever comes next?"

A hushed voice: "I do."

"Do you promise to learn to spit and not be afraid to sit on the sidewalk if you get tired?"

"I do."

"Do you pledge to never, *ever* wear nylons with open-toed sandals?"

"I do."

"Then place your right hand on your hat and repeat after me. I do lightheartedly swear on my hat to do my best to uphold the spirit of the Red Hat Society. This I pledge with a Red Hattitude. . . ."

Alarmed that Bugs might have accidentally violated the sanctity of the initiation ceremony, I peek over the kitchen bar. My son's pockets are bulging, presumably with sausage balls, and he's heading for a plate of chocolate chip cookies.

"Bugs!" I whisper as loud as I dare. "You'd better hurry!"

He grabs a cookie, takes a bite, and stuffs the eclipsed remainder in his shirt pocket. He's eyeing a bowl of red M&M'S when the relative calm of the living room erupts into a babble of voices.

I hiss a command to my offspring. "Move it, boy!"

Like the hero of every B movie, Bugs reaches for one treasure too many. His fingers have just invaded the crystal candy bowl when the tide turns and the sea of Red Hatters swells toward the dining room.

Mother sings out above the bedlam, "Bugs Graham! You'll spoil your appetite—"

But a crush of swirling compliments drowns out her reproach.

"What an adorable child!"

"Let the boy eat what he wants."

"Oh, you sweet darling! Come give me some sugar."



I gesture to Bugs, but he's caught in the riptide.

One woman pinches his face while another bends and wraps her arms around him. My little eel squirms, though, so when the latter Red Hatter attempts to kiss his cheek, her lips smack his ear instead.

Too late, I realize that I am also exposed to Mother's guests. I paste on a polite smile as the ladies approach with open arms and cries of welcome.

"Jennifer, sweetheart, how are you doing?"

"Your little boy is *such* a delight. You also have a daughter, right?"

I extend my hand to Bugs, who is threading his way through the milling Hatters. "No, ma'am, I have another son."

"So sorry to hear about your trouble. But I know Queen Snippy loves having you here."

I blink. "Who?"

"Her Royal Highness. Your mother."

How could I forget? The Hatters bestow royal names on one another, and my mom rules this particular chapter with a red velvet glove.

"We're enjoying the queen's hospitality," I say, addressing as many Hatters as I can. "But if you all will excuse me, I think my little boy could use an appointment with the royal bathtub."

I smile and pull Bugs toward the hallway, and at one point I glimpse the queen smiling by the front door. Because she's wearing her hostess face, I doubt any of her guests know how hard these last few days have been for her . . . for all of us.

Mother loves me and my kids, but she's not accustomed to having two young boys and a spring-loaded terrier underfoot. And as grateful as I am for her support, I don't want her to spend her slender retirement income on us. Neither do I want her to become a full-time babysitter.

"If you ladies will excuse me . . ." I tighten my grip on Bugs's hand and push him out of the kitchen. Skeeter, who has let himself in through the doggy door, dances at my son's side.

When we enter the quiet hallway that leads to the bedrooms, Bugs grins up at me. "We got busted!"

"And whose fault was that? You didn't have to take some of every-

thing on the table.” I sigh as some still-functioning part of my brain raises a mandatory maternal warning. “You shouldn’t eat so many sweets before dinner. You’ll ruin your appetite.”

“I won’t.”

“You will. And you need a bath.”

“Can’t I wait until after dinner?”

I lean against the wall and close my eyes. It’d be so easy to give in—seems like the thing I do best these days is surrender to the men in my life.

I look down at him. “All right, but you have to wash your hands before you eat those snacks. And you head into the tub first thing after dinner without arguing. Okay?”

“Kay.”

Bugs and Skeeter scamper away and turn into the first doorway on the right—Mother’s sewing room, now serving as a bedroom for Bugs and Clay. Since quiet reigns in this hallway, I know Clay is either shooting hoops at the park or riding his bike. At thirteen, he’s smart enough to leave as soon as he spots a red hat.

I grip my purse and trudge toward Mother’s guest room. The flowered, lace-trimmed bedspread isn’t my taste nor are the decoupage doilies on the walls. Mom said I could hang some of my pictures, but as long as I don’t unpack our furnishings, I can believe this situation is only temporary.

I sink to the edge of the bed and kick off my shoes, then pull my purse toward me. The real estate agent’s check now lies in the fold of my wallet, so I take it out and stare at the number in the box: forty thousand dollars.

I can’t help feeling like a contestant on some kind of cheesy game show. If offered the choice of a luxury car, the down payment on a town house, or a year in a nice apartment complex, which should I choose? All three are decent prizes, but none of them come with a guarantee.

A cackle creeps down the hall and slides beneath my closed door; one of the Red Hatters is chortling her way into the hallway bathroom. I close my eyes against the sound and topple sideways onto my pillow.

I need a relaxing hour in the tub, but I don't dare commandeer the bathroom until the last Hatter has gathered her leftovers and gone. I need a good soak and a good night's sleep, because tomorrow I have to get up, get dressed, and go out to look for a job. Again.

Finding new employment would be easier if I hadn't been married to Captain Gregarious. Thomas, a legislative assistant for Virginia's *other* senator, is known and liked by almost everyone on Capitol Hill. The notion of hiring his ex-wife is proving to be about as popular as New Coke.

While I'm out suffering through perfunctory interviews, the boys and Skeeter will stay with Mom. Though she insists she doesn't mind watching them this summer, I know better. Clay is at that awkward age, and Bugs's dramatics would try the patience of a plow horse. Mom loves my little guys, but she hasn't been a full-time parent since I left home more than twenty years ago. Come to think of it, *I* haven't been a full-time mom since I came off maternity leave after Bugs was born.

I snort at the irony: if I hadn't been so particular as I screened potential nannies, my family might still be complete.

My thoughts keep whirling as my body relaxes into numbness. By the time I'm fifty, my boys will be sixteen and twenty-four. Old enough to have survived whatever trauma their father and I have inflicted upon them. Old enough, I hope, to forgive us our mistakes.

Maybe by then I'll be able to put on a red hat and take my silliness seriously.

## *About the Author*

Christy Award winner Angela Hunt writes books for readers who have learned to expect the unexpected. With over three million copies of her books sold worldwide, she is the best-selling author of *The Tale of Three Trees*, *The Note*, *Unspoken*, and more than 100 other titles.

She and her youth pastor husband make their home in Florida with mastiffs. One of their dogs was featured on *Live with Regis and Kelly* as the second-largest canine in America.

Readers may visit her Web site at [www.angelahuntbooks.com](http://www.angelahuntbooks.com).

## *Discussion Questions*

1. *Doesn't She Look Natural?* is the first of three novels featuring Jennifer Graham and the Fairlawn Funeral Home. Where do you think the author will take Jennifer and her family in subsequent books?
2. What are some of the major themes of this novel? Does the author use any symbols to illustrate those themes?
3. At one point, Jennifer says, "Only a stupid dog would run away from a boy who loved him, and only a selfish animal would stay away while we were all worried sick about him." Whom do you think she is really talking about in this passage?
4. In the first sentence, Jennifer tells us that she's developed a "crème brûlée" crust. How does this metaphor describe Jennifer as a person?
5. Is there anything in this story to which you can personally relate? Did you find yourself identifying with any of the characters?

6. What spiritual truth do you think the author meant to convey in this novel? Was that developed with the same care and attention as the characters and the plot?
7. Most of this story is told from Jennifer's viewpoint. How would it have been different if Joella or Gerald had been telling the story?
8. How important is the setting to this novel? Would it have worked as well if it had been set in a metropolitan area?
9. How does this book compare to others you've read by Angela Hunt? Do you see any similar themes or character traits?
10. At several points in the novel, Jennifer mentions surrender. How does this theme apply to the story? How does it apply in your life?
11. Have you ever been called to sacrifice a cherished dream? How painful was the experience, and what convinced you to do it?

## *In or Out of Season Strawberry Muffins*

### Ingredients:

- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup vegetable oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup milk
- 1 egg
- 2 teaspoon baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup sugar
- 1  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup chopped strawberries, fresh or frozen

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Oil a muffin tin or use paper liners.

In a small bowl combine oil, milk, and egg. Beat lightly. In a large bowl mix flour, salt, baking powder, and sugar. Toss in chopped strawberries and stir to coat with flour. Pour in milk mixture and stir all together.

Fill muffin cups. Bake at 375 degrees for 25 minutes or until the tops bounce back from the touch. Cool 10 minutes and remove from pans.

Should make 8 muffins.

## References

No novelist writes alone, and I owe a debt of gratitude to the following people and sources:

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One final note: Mt. Dora is a real city in Lake County, Florida. If you have an opportunity to visit that lovely town, you will discover that many of the buildings, landmarks, and streets described in this novel actually exist. Others, however, do not. So please don't blame the city council if the Fairlawn Funeral Home is not where you think it should be.