

SHARON SROCK



*Meet the*

Women of Valley View

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Sharon Srock

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## **Women of Valley View**

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Callie dressed for the evening in silence. Her anger at Benton over their argument last night still smoldered, but it wasn't enough to cast a pall over this occasion. She smoothed the lines of her pale blue dress, slid her arms into the matching jacket, and tried to refocus her thoughts on this evening's activities.

Tonight their pastors, Anthony and Elizabeth Gordon, would celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary by renewing their vows. Their eldest son, Benjamin, would perform the ceremony. Their daughter, Hannah, would walk down the aisle in front of her mother as matron of honor. Aaron, their third child, would stand for his father as best man; and their baby Jacob, thirty-three-years old and six foot three, would give away the bride. Callie grinned into the mirror. *Nice how that worked out.* She looked up at a noise in the doorway.

"Are you about ready to go?" Benton asked.

Callie nodded, unwilling to break the silence that continued to stretch between them. She fastened her earring and sailed passed her husband without a word. His neatly trimmed beard brushed the top of her head as she scooted through the doorway.

He followed her down the hall. "You look nice tonight."

She gathered her bag. "Thanks." Callie heard the ice in her voice; apparently, Benton did as well. He ushered her out the door without further attempt at conversation.

The drive to the church was equally quiet. Benton's eyes on the road, Callie still stewing over last

night's *discussion* about their vacation. Months ago, they'd agreed on an Alaskan cruise to celebrate their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary. *I thought*. Last night's announcement that he'd leased a beach side cottage in Cozumel still made her teeth clench. He said he'd mentioned it to her; she was quite sure he hadn't. But the non-refundable deposit had been paid. *Men!*

Callie stepped into the vestibule of Valley View Church ahead of her husband and gravitated to a corner where her three best friends and co-planners of this event, Karla Black, Pam Lake, and Terri Hayes were gathered, waiting for the ceremony to start.

Terri shifted to make room and reached out to touch the beadwork surrounding the neck of Callie's jacket. "What a wonderful dress. Where did you find it?"

Callie put an arm around the youngest of her three friends. "At the mall a couple of months ago. It was a *just in case* purchase, too dressy for work or church, but perfect for an occasion like this." She studied the other ladies. Karla looked wonderful, her short, plump figure draped in a flattering black pantsuit, her silver hair shining in the in the low lighting. Pam had chosen purple for the evening. No surprise there since purple was her favorite color and always complimented her dark hair and brown eyes. Terri's choice of a clingy silver fabric accented her slender *I've never had kids* figure and even went well with her shaggy, finger combed, hair style. "I'd say we're all looking pretty good tonight."

"Yep," Karla agreed. She nodded to where their husbands were standing in their own little segregated knot. "I had to fight to get Mitchell to buy a new suit, but he liked it once the battle was over. Harrison and

Benton clean up nice too.”

Callie rolled her eyes and angled her back more firmly to the men.

“Uh oh,” Pam said. “That wasn’t a happy look. Benton’s in the doghouse. What did he do?”

Callie shook her head. “Oh nothing. He’s...he’s just such a...man.

Karla tipped her chin down and looked at Callie over her glasses. “You’ve been married for almost thirty-five years. You’re just now figuring that out?”

Callie ignored Karla’s question and turned to Terri instead. “Stay single, sweetheart. You don’t know how truly blessed you are not to have to mess with a man in your life.”

Terri put an arm around Callie’s waist. “Ah, you don’t mean that. You and Benton have one of the best relationships I’ve ever seen.”

She laid her head on Terri’s shoulder. “No, I don’t. But sometimes he frustrates me so much.”

“What did he do?” Pam asked again.

“Booked a trip to Cozumel for our anniversary.”

Terri took a step back. “And you have a problem with this, how?”

Callie shrugged. *How can I make this sound less petty?* “I had my heart set on that Alaskan cruise. We talked about an Alaskan cruise. He knew that’s what I wanted to do.”

Three pair of raise eyebrows met her response.

“Come on, girls. I’ve been to Cozumel four times—”

“All without Benton,” Pam reminded her.

“And each time you’ve complained that he wouldn’t go with you,” Terri chimed in.

Karla motioned to Terri and Pam. “What they said

and a question. How many times have we all heard you say there were things on the Island you wished you could show him?"

"You're right," Callie admitted. She chewed her lip, looking for a way to make them understand. "I wanted this trip to be special. Thirty-five years of marriage is a landmark, I wanted it to be a fresh adventure for both of us. I wanted the opportunity to experience new things together." She waved her hand in dismissal. "Never mind. I guess it's just me."

"Well, I think it's sweet," Terri told her. "Not just that he's finally going somewhere you've wanted to take him, but that he surprised you with it."

"I don't think he intended it as a surprise. He swears he mentioned it to me days ago. When I had no clue what he was talking about, *he* was the one who was surprised."

"Callie," Karla began. "You've been awfully pre-occupied putting this together for Bro. and Sis. Gordon. We all have. Are you sure he didn't mention it to you? Could it have gotten lost in the madness of organizing this ceremony, start to finish, in less than four weeks?"

"I'm sure," Callie answered. She glared over her shoulder with narrowed eyes. "There's no way I would have missed that."

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Benton ran a finger around the collar of his new shirt, trying for just a centimeter of extra space between his neck and the starched fabric. He looked up when Mitch gave a low whistle.

"That was ugly."

"Hmm?" Benton frowned.

"You better be glad you're facing this way, bud.

Callie just served you a look hot enough to toast your soul."

"Crispy," Harrison Lake agreed. "So what did you do this time?"

Benton shook his head. His response more than a little confused. "I booked a vacation for our anniversary."

"And for this you're getting *the look*?" Mitch asked, sounding almost as puzzled as his friend. "I thought that particular female weapon was reserved for when we *forgot* special dates."

"Yeah well, apparently it has multiple uses," Benton cautioned them. "You know how our wives always tell us we don't pay attention to what they say?"

The other two men nodded.

"This time I'm in trouble for listening."

"Do tell," Mitch encouraged.

"Where is Callie's favorite vacation spot?"

"Cozumel," Harrison and Mitch answered in unison.

Benton held his hands out in surrender. "See, even you guys know that. A few days ago, one of my customers was complaining that they'd put a deposit on a Cozumel vacation. Two weeks on the beach. They were upset because their plans suddenly changed and now they were out the non-refundable thousand dollar deposit."

The lines around Harrison's eyes deepened in a frown. "Ouch."

"That was my first thought. Then I remembered all the times Callie has begged me to take this trip with her. I told the guy I might be interested in bailing him out." Benton shrugged. "I'll admit she did have

fourteen lists scattered on the table in front of her when I mentioned Cozumel, and we had discussed an Alaskan cruise. But in my defense—”

Harrison laughed out loud.

“You’re a lawyer, pay attention. In my defense,” Benton continued, “she looked at me and I know she heard me. I thought she agreed.”

Harrison shook his head. “You thought? You booked a vacation, different from the one you’d already discussed on a *thought*? Without Callie’s direct consent?” He clapped Benton on the shoulder. “You better pray for an all-male jury.”

Benton hung his head and shuffled through the auditorium doors to join the women. He wasn’t sure, at this point, which was worse, wives or friends.

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The scent of roses perfumed the air. The flickering light from the candles softened the familiar lines of the sanctuary, rendering it intimate and romantic. No one would have guessed today was the result of less than a month of non-stop activity for Callie and her friends.

Sister Gordon had mentioned, in passing, that she’d never had the chance to enjoy the sort of traditional wedding she’d dreamed of as a young girl. That was all Callie had needed to hear. Seven quick phone calls later, three to her friends and four to Elizabeth’s children, and the wedding plans had begun.

Callie chewed her lip and considered Karla’s question. Was it possible that Benton had mentioned Cozumel when her mind had been on other things?

The music started. From his place at the front of the stage, Benjamin motioned for everyone to stand. Hannah proceeded up the aisle on the arm of her

bother, Aaron. Once they reached the front, they separated, Aaron to the left, taking his place next to his father, Hannah to the right. The music changed and Elizabeth started up the aisle on the arm of her beaming son. The dress she'd called frivolous and unnecessary shimmered in the shifting candle light. She held her bouquet of pastel colored roses at her waist like a shield. At seventy-three, she was still a lovely woman. Tonight she was a radiant bride. Callie stole a look at the groom, and her eyes filled at the expression of love on his weathered face. Obviously fifty years together hadn't dimmed the emotions that burned between these two precious people.

Callie's attention shifted to the aggravating man at her side. She compared the sandy Cozumel beach and fourteen lazy days with Benton to the crowd and rushed itinerary of a cruise. There were things she wanted to show him. The view from the lighthouse on the south end of the island, the turquoise blue waves throwing themselves against the shoreline, and snorkeling. Maybe they could take the ferry across to the mainland one day and spend a few hours at Xel-Ha. Then there was the shopping. The town square across from the ferry pier always amazed her with its color and variety. Maybe Benton hadn't been hasty after all.

"I do."

The words drew Callie's attention back to the flower strewn stage where Jacob had just given his mother to his father. She watched as he kissed her on the cheek, placed her hand in the groom's, and stepped aside.

Callie wiped her eyes and reached for Benton's hand. "I love you."

## CALLIE

# 1

Callie circled her Sunday school classroom. Her students worked, most of them quietly and independently, on their lesson papers. She stopped here and there to help with one of the more difficult questions or puzzles. The occasional giggle from the girls or elbow jabbing contest between the boys marred the silence, but that was life with a group of sixth graders. Too young to be teens, too old to be kids.

The first bell, a five minute warning, sounded in the hall. Callie's hand slipped into the pocket of her jacket. She fingered the weapon concealed there. Her eyes cut to young mister Brian who would get his just reward for last week's horseplay in just a few minutes. What she had planned might seem drastic, but sometimes that's all that worked with a cheeky, not quite teenaged, boy. Some lessons were best taught by the laws of cause and effect.

"Time's almost up. Let's get everything put away. We need to take some prayer requests before we leave. Anyone have something they want the class to pray about this week?"

Justin's hand shot up. "My little brother was sick last night. Man, he spewed chunks. It was gross, he—"

Callie cleared her throat. "Thanks, Justin. We get the idea. Anyone else?"

Hailey wiggled her fingers for attention. "There's a

girl in my homeroom at school. She broke her leg.”

Chase raised his hand. “Remember my dad. He got orders back to the desert.”

Callie saw the manly attempt the boy made to control his emotions in front of the other kids.

“He deploys in sixty days.”

Callie nodded and scribbled a note to herself. She’d have Benton plan a few guy activities for him and Chase while Dad was gone. Nothing could take the place of Dad, but as the lone male in a household of Mom and four younger sisters, every little bit of male influence helped Chase get through these deployments with his sanity intact.

“Is that all?” she asked.

The final bell rang. Callie crossed to the closed classroom door. “OK guys, I’ll say a prayer. You remember to pray this week too.” She opened the door and stood aside as the eight members of her class filed into the hall.

Brian walked past her and she hooked an arm around his shoulders and led him back to his seat.

“What?”

Callie held a finger to her lips, closed the door, and leaned back against it.

“Your goose is cooked, bud.”

He giggled, obviously needing no further explanation. “I’m sorry, Miss Callie. I didn’t mean to catch you in the cross fire last week. Trevor had the spray bottle again...”

Callie shook her head. “I’ll deal with Trevor, but for now...” She pulled the weapon from her pocket and watched with satisfaction when Brian’s eyes grew round at the sight.

“You wouldn’t”

“Oh, I would. I had to go home between services last week and change into dry clothes because of you.” She lifted the gun and pulled the trigger, discharging the entire contents into the heart of her captive student. When the gun refused to squirt another drop, she pulled the plug and shook the rest of the water into Brian’s hair. Water ran down the boy’s face in little rivers.

“I give, I give,” Brian sputtered.

Callie left him dripping where he sat as she reached under her desk and retrieved the small paper bag Brian’s mother had dropped off before class started. She tossed it to the youngster. “Consider us even. There’s a dry shirt and a towel in there. Go get cleaned up and go on to church.”

Brian clutched the bag and prepared to depart.

“Brian?”

“Yes, Ma’am?”

“No more water pistols in class. Are we clear?”

Water dotted the floor as Brian shook his head. “Yes, Ma’am.” He repeated.

Callie smiled as she watched him go. Her thoughts turned to Trevor and his upcoming lesson.

## 2

The last fingers of twilight reached their glowing red fire in the gathering darkness. Callie stood on the balcony of the rented beach cabana and savored the sunset. She and Benton were scheduled to fly home tomorrow morning. She needed to pack, but couldn't seem to find the motivation. The last two weeks in Cozumel had been as close to perfect as a vacation could be.

They had snorkeled reefs, prowled through stalls in the market places, ridden horses through the surf on the beach, explored ancient ruins, and enjoyed more Mexican food than they ate in two years at home.

Callie leaned her elbows on the porch rail, and stared at the surf, determined to stay right here 'til darkness leached all the blue out of the water. The sliding door behind her opened. She didn't turn, knowing it could be only one person.

Benton stepped to her side and mirrored her pose. "Am I going to have to hogtie you to get you on the plane in the morning?"

She took in a deep breath of ocean air and leaned against him. "Possibly."

He slipped an arm around her and dropped a kiss on her head. "Thanks."

Callie tilted her head just enough to look into her husband's eyes. "For...?"

"For keeping after me 'til I took this trip with you. It's been amazing."

"I'd tell you I told you so, but I don't want to ruin our last night."

He laughed, straightened, and took her hand. "Take a walk with me. I'll help you pack when we get back."

Callie stepped out of her sandals and allowed her husband to draw her down the five steps to the sand. *Yep, just about perfect.*

## TERRI

# 1

*Is that the look he was hoping for?* Terri shook her head and chuckled to herself as a pale young man sporting a purple mohawk and pants three sizes too big passed her bench. She blew her dark bangs out of her face. Young people of every generation had their own fads and trends. Her parents had worn bell bottomed jeans and maxi dresses. She'd owned her share of stirrup pants, slouchy socks, and leg warmers. Turning slightly she watched him walk away, one hand gripped tightly in the waist band of his pants. At least her clothes had fit.

She popped the last bite of cheesy pretzel in her mouth and chased it down with a final slurp of soda. This new mall was huge. Partly enclosed, partly open to the air, the food court had the standard table and chairs, but there were also benches arranged around an artificial waterfall, flowing into a landscaped fountain. A lovely place to indulge in a snack while taking a break from a strenuous morning of shopping. *Shopping?* Well, trolling, in her case. After three hours Terri still traveled light, waiting for that one perfect item.

For Terri, shopping was more pleasure than necessity. She referred to it as retail therapy and considered it her favorite hobby. Combining a set of

skills learned from her mother's bargain hunting and her father's bass fishing, she could troll the mall all afternoon on a lazy Saturday, walking from store to store with no real goal in mind, nothing specific on her want list, just looking, waiting for that one special buy to speak to her. It might be the item she saw in the first store she entered, but she never bought anything until she'd looked at everything. And here, she diverged from her father. There was no catch and release in her world. Where was the fun in spending the day engaged in your favorite thing only to come home empty handed? She collected her trash, refreshed by her snack and ready to tackle the remaining half of the mall.

"Throw them in, Lizzie."

Terri looked towards the voice. A young woman stood in front of the fountain, a baby cradled in her arms, a little girl at her side.

The youngster, dressed in pastel striped overalls, outfit completed with ruffled socks and matching shirt, watched the waterfall, eyes wide, mouth drawn into a pink bow. "Oh...pretty, Mama."

"Very pretty, Lizzie. Toss them in so we can go."

The little girl opened her fist. Terri saw several new pennies clutched in the child's hand. The lights from the fountain glinted off the shiny copper, almost the same color as the toddler's curls.

"My money, Mama."

The young mother's laughter brought a small ache to Terri's heart. She looked up and reminded God. *I want a curly headed baby girl just like Lizzie.* She shook off the sadness. Someday God would send Mr. Right her way. Until then, she'd continue to love the kids that came to Tiny Tikes every day. She was blessed. Her

daycare business was the most sought after in Garfield. The children she cared for, hers by default.

“Lizzie, I’ll give you some more money.” The mother’s tone remained patient. “Those are special pennies, for wishing not for spending.” She stooped down and kissed her little girl’s fist. “Hurry now. Make your wish and throw them in the water.”

Terri looked on as Lizzie closed her eyes and scrunched up her face. Her lips moved as her wish was made, then the pennies were hurled into the water.

“Like that?”

“Exactly like that, sweetheart.” Mom held out her free hand. “Let’s go.”

Terri watched them head for the exit. She stood with a sigh, looking back up to the ceiling, adding a post script to her earlier prayer. *Maybe twins.*

Terri continued her shopping, eventually scoring a new pair of shoes. Shoes didn’t fall into the see now, buy later category. Shoes were trophy fish, netted and added to her collection. The final store in the last leg of the sprawling complex was a Bridal shop. Terri stopped, her breath trapped in her throat. The sidewalk-to-roof display window held a collection of wedding dresses on headless mannequins. As Terri walked, she could see herself and the dresses reflected in the windows, almost like she was wearing them. A glance at the sign over the door brought a smile to her face. *Princess for a Day Bridal.*

She leaned her purse and the shopping bag against the window and studied the selection of dresses, moving from one to the other, arranging her pose to match the displayed gowns. “That one,” Terri murmured. *Don’t be goofy.* Terri scolded herself. *What*

*would you do with a wedding dress?* Invisible hands pulled Terri into the store.

A clerk appeared from behind a rack of dresses. "Welcome to Princess for a Day. Can I help you find something?"

Terri shook her head and felt her cheeks flush with warmth. *What made me come in here?* "No, I'm just...looking."

The clerk put on a perky smile and rocked on her toes. "Oh, we like lookers. Have you set a date? We have the racks arranged in seasonal selections. If you can tell me when you're getting married, I can show you a selection of suitable gowns."

"We haven't decided yet," Terri mumbled. She turned to leave and felt her feet freeze to the floor. *That's it.* The dress drew Terri's attention like a magnet. Off the shoulder, beaded bodice, layers of tissue thin white and silver lace cascading down the full skirt. A separate train attached to the back with a bow. Her hand trembled as she brushed her fingers across the lace.

"Would you like to try it on?"

"I really shouldn't."

"Sure you should. It'll look beautiful on you."

Terri lifted it from the rack and held it in front of her. Tears stung her eyes when she turned to the mirror. The reflection staring back at her was the one she'd envisioned her whole life. She looked at the price tag and bit her lip. *I couldn't afford this if I was getting married.*

The clerk must have seen her hesitation. "Everything in the store is thirty percent off during the grand opening."

Terri swallowed, unable to find her voice. She

turned to look at the mirror again. She needed a groom, at least a steady boyfriend first. Didn't she? "I'll take it."

Thirty minutes later Terri found herself back in front of the fountain on her way out of the mall. The garment bag was heavy over her arm, and she still couldn't believe what she'd done. She closed her eyes and saw the dress again. A girl was allowed to dream, wasn't she? Her hand slipped into the pocket of her jeans and drew out a fist full of change. She tossed the coins in the water, closing her eyes as they plopped into the water. *Someday, Jesus, some day.*

## 2

Terri stepped out onto her back porch as she snuggled a fuzzy purple throw around her shoulders with one hand and lifted a steaming mug of hot chocolate to her lips with the other. Forty degrees and four in the morning, at least it was Saturday. When she got to heaven, Terri planned to ask God about His timing. She looked up at the night sky. Stars glowed in the moonless, cloudless expanse like diamonds against velvet. Velvet shaded somewhere between black and navy. A perfect night for a celestial show. Light and movement caught her eye. *There!* A single meteor streaked to earth, disappearing below the tree line.

Her eyes drifted shut and she found herself transported to a time twenty years in her past.

Daddy had pulled her out of bed with a finger to his lips. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

"What..."

"You'll see. Don't wake Mom."

Now, he knelt beside her on the sofa—*Mom would have a fit if she saw their knees in the cushions*—as hundreds of lights streaked the sky outside the big picture window in a display bigger than any summer fireworks show.

"It looks like a space movie. What are they?" Terri asked.

"Meteors." Dad must have found her puzzled look at the unfamiliar word funny. Terri remembered his

rich laugh, and his arm around her waist. "Little pieces of space junk. Rocks mostly, that get caught in earth's gravity and burn up in the atmosphere. I heard on the news earlier that tonight's shower promised to be spectacular. I wanted to share it with my best girl."

A cold breeze lifted the hair from her neck and stirred Terri from her memories. *Oh, Daddy I miss you.* She sat in her deck chair and leaned it back as far as it would go. The show picked up speed as she tucked the throw around her legs. Terri raised her mug to the sky in a silent salute, her sigh echoed in the darkness.

"I heard on the news that tonight's show promised to be a good one. I wanted to share it with my favorite guy."

## KARLA

# 1

Callie raised her hand to knock on the door of the sprawling white house. The sound of breaking glass and stifled grunts propelled her through the door ahead of the intended courtesy. "Karla?"

"Back here." Karla's muffled voice answered from somewhere deep inside the house.

Callie hurried through the small living area and down a long hallway. Her eyes skimmed over the total disarray of the rooms as she passed, but the continued odd grunts and whispers filtering down the hall kept her focus on finding Karla. After a short search, Callie found her friend in the smallest of the house's three bedrooms. Relieved that her friend wasn't lying, broken and bleeding, on the floor, Callie leaned on the door frame and tried to make sense of what she saw.

Karla Black was on her hands and knees, head half under the bed, denim clad back end sticking up in the air, breath coming in short gasps as she swept the space under the bed with the broom handle. Pieces of a broken lamp were scattered across the floor.

"Come out from under there, you little beast." The broom made another wide swipe. "Mitch is *so* going to pay for this."

"What on earth are you doing?"

Karla sat back on her heels with a deep sigh. Dust

bunnies, from her foray under the bed, dotted her silver hair. "Ida's stupid cat, Reddy," she answered, brown eyes dark with frustration. "He must have a sixth sense about today and knows he's on borrowed time. He's got himself backed up under there, all the way to the farthest corner, and won't come out. Every time I reach for him he hisses and bats at me." She inspected her hands. "Thank God Ida had him declawed when he was a kitten or I'd be a bloody mess by now."

Callie hefted the bag she carried. "Leave him be for now. I brought lunch. Maybe the smell of burgers will draw him out."

Karla pushed herself to her feet, using the bed for leverage. Her fifty-nine-year old knees popped in protest. "Bless you. My blood sugar bottomed out thirty minutes ago." She motioned to the open pet carrier in the corner of the room. "I wanted to get him caged and out of the way so we wouldn't have to clean around him. There's enough cat hair in this place to build two more just like him."

"Did you find a home for him?"

"Meagan wants him."

"Pam's Meagan?"

"Yeah, apparently she's been angling for a pet ever since Jeremy got his lizard. More power to her. I like cats but this furry little demon and I have never gotten along." She dusted her hands together. "Looks like he won this round."

Callie followed Karla to the small kitchen and looked for a clean spot to set out their lunch.

"Hang on a minute," Karla went to the sink and wet a handful of paper towels. "Let me clean off the table." She bent to the task, stacking dirty dishes and

unopened mail on the cabinet behind her. "I know what you're thinking, but there's just so much you can do when they're determined to live by themselves." Her wave took in the whole house. "Ida dismissed every housekeeper we sent over here and refused to allow me to clean for her. She insisted she could manage just fine on her own." Karla dried the table off and pulled out a chair, motioning for Callie to do the same. "Breaking her hip last week was the last straw."

Callie shook her head. "This was like, what...her third trip to the ER in as many months? I only hope I have half her stamina when I'm her age. Was she really trying to weed-eat the back yard?"

Karla unwrapped her hamburger. "Yep. That yard is her pride and joy. She said the kid that gave the lawn its final fall trim a couple of weeks ago missed some spots. I don't know why she didn't just call Mitch."

"Bless her heart. She's used to doing for herself. This has to be very difficult for her."

"I know, Callie, but she's ninety-three years old." Karla took a bite of her burger, obviously taking some time to regroup. "She's been blessed with such good health. It's only been the last couple of years that she's been forced to slow down. We had this conversation with her the last time she tried to use the weed eater. She dropped it, and then lost her balance when she stooped to pick it up. She had to crawl to a tree to help herself up off the ground." Karla rested her chin on her fist hand. "I swear the Blacks have an extra marker in their DNA for stubbornness. Thank God, Ida had her panic button around her neck when she stepped into that hole last week."

"Mitch is really beating himself up over the whole thing, especially this nursing home decision. He'd like

to move her in with us, but with all the bedrooms on the second floor, it's just too dangerous. All we need is for her to take a header down the stairs. I can just see DHS stepping in and taking all the decisions out of our hands. I'm just glad we found a home that could take her on such short notice."

"Is it nice?"

"Callie, it's perfect. God really worked it out for us, and her. She'll have a private room in the assisted living wing. We'll be moving her own bedroom furniture over there. The room has a sliding patio door that goes out to a fenced courtyard. She can sit outside as often as she likes, and once she's back on her feet, she can still have the plants she loves so much."

"Well, at least she's settled for now."

"I wish. All she talks about is coming back home. Mitch has tried to tell her that she won't be moving back in here. She won't even discuss it with him. As heavy as she is, she's looking at months of therapy before she can walk again. There's just no way she can live by herself anymore."

Callie sipped her milkshake, the remnants of the treat rattled in her straw. "Don't make yourself sick over it, Karla. She's Mitch's mother. He's going to have to do the convincing."

"I know. All things considered, cleaning up this place and sorting through fifty years of Ida's life is probably the easier job. Thanks, by the way."

"Not a problem. I don't mind helping."

Karla grinned. "You say that now, but I don't think you get it. Ida has lived in this house for fifty years. I don't think she's thrown a single thing away in all those years."

Callie crumpled up her trash and stuffed it in the

bag. "Better get to it, then."

Karla followed suit and tossed the balled up sack towards the trash can. She missed. "Leave it." She stood, wiped her hands, and picked up a stray fry from the table. "Maybe this will entice the little beast out from under the bed." Armed for the battle she headed back down the hall.

Laughter urged Callie to follow. She found her friend sitting on the bed, tears of mirth rolling down her face.

"What?"

Karla pointed to the carrier. Reddy lay in the corner, curled into a tight ball of fur, sound asleep.

Karla wiped her eyes. "Maybe there's hope for this whole situation, after all."

## 2

Muffled giggles had Karla's eyes popping open bright and early Thanksgiving morning. The bedroom door creaked and she heard a soft "*Shhh.*" The noise gave her just enough time to roll over in the king sized bed and make some room before eight-year-old Kathy and her five-year-old sister Heather abandoned all attempts at stealth and bounced into the bed between Karla and Mitch. The mattress trembled with the aftershock of their landing.

Mitch rolled over with a mock groan. "We've been invaded."

"What's 'vaded?" Heather asked.

Mitch rolled over on top of her, pinned her to the sheet, and rubbed his overnight stubble against her soft cheek. Shrieks of little girl laughter filled the room as he turned his attention to the older girl. "Attacked, overrun, plagued, *pestered.*" He rolled back over and settled the younger of the two children in the crook of his arm. "Morning puddin' two."

"Morning, Grandpa."

He looked at Kathy. "Morning puddin' one."

"You're the silliest grandpa," Kathy told him as she snuggled in next to Karla. She handed her grandma a book. "We're ready for our story, Nana."

"Just the two of you?" Karla asked. "Don't we need to wait for Matt?"

Kathy shook her head. "He says he's too old for Dr. Seuss."

“He’s a dufus,” Heather added with five-year-old sincerity.

Karla felt her heart crack a little at the inevitable changes of time. No doubt Matt’s decision to miss their Thanksgiving morning tradition was only one of the changes occurring since the kids’ last visit six months ago. They were growing up faster than the four or five yearly visits could keep up with.

Karla and Mitch’s daughter Cheryl, her husband Austin, and the three children had arrived from Kansas City late last night.

Their son Lucas, his wife Michelle and their two children, twelve-year-old Mark and six-year-old Holly, lived outside of Tulsa and would arrive by mid-morning. Their youngest son Jonathan, his wife Amber, along with their two kids, ten-year-old Aiden and seven-year-old Renee, lived in the opposite direction, just across the Texas line in Gainesville. They would be here by noon. The eldest of their four children, Nicholas, would spend the holidays deployed. Karla sighed. With almost twenty years in the Air Force Nick and had spent his share of holidays overseas. She’d never gotten used to his empty place at the table.

Thanksgiving dinner was scheduled for two o’clock. The men and boys would turn the living room into a rowdy man cave, cheering their favorite football teams to victory, swilling sodas, and ruining their appetites with snacks. The women would seek the quieter sanctuary of the kitchen to catch up on each other’s lives while they prepared a meal that would be properly appreciated only in memory.

She glanced at Mitch. Almost forty years together and their family was healthy and whole, and growing.

They had much to be grateful for.

Kathy patted Karla's face, pulling her back to the present. "Nana, we're ready."

Mitch scooted a little closer, just as eager as Karla to share in these quiet moments with their grandchildren. "Yeah Nana, what are we reading this morning? I'm not too old to enjoy it."

Karla laughed at the three of them and looked at the book in her hands. "*Yertle the Turtle*. One of my favorites." She opened the book and began to read.

"On the far away island of Sala-ma-sond, Yertle the Turtle was king of the pond."

PAM

# 1

The noise of the crowded mall faded as Pam and the kids circled the large tree. She studied the ornaments carefully, nodding, tapping her pursed lips with her fingertips.

"How many this year, Mom?" her son, Jeremy asked.

"An even dozen, I think," she answered. Three for each member of her more-than-blessed family. Finally, after two full circuits around the tree, Pam and her children began plucking white cardboard angels off the branches like a farmer picking apples. Once they had their harvest, the family retreated to the food court for lunch.

They claimed the single empty table and spread out food and angels. Pam dug a notebook from her bag and prepared to make their shopping list.

Megan picked up the first angel from the stack. "Andy, age twelve. He wants a skate board."

Pam nodded as she made notes. "We'll put him on Harrison's list. Who's next?"

"Cassie, age three. Awww, it says a winter coat. Awww, Can we get a baby doll, too?"

"Perfect," Pam agreed. "We'll put miss Cassie on your list."

Jeremy swallowed a french fry and plucked up the next cutout. "JoAnne, age ten, skates." Pam made a

note to add helmets and knee pads to both Andy and JoAnne's package. The list-making continued.

Hannah, age three, Elmo doll.

Derrick, age five, football. Pam grinned as she wrote. *How about a ball and bat too, buddy?*

Ronnie, age fourteen, Batman video game.

Crystal, age twelve, this request consisted of a long list of books. Pam smiled, *a girl after my own heart. I'll hook you up.*

Mollie, age seven, a new sweater for my mama. Pam's eyes swam with tears as she added the seven-year-old to her own list. *Will do, baby, along with a matching one for you and a stuffed animal.*

"Ahh, Mom?" Jeremy waved one of the remaining angels with a worried look.

"Whatcha got, bud?"

"Hank," her son replied. "He's eight and he wants a puppy."

She sipped her soda and smiled at the sturdy picture the name alone drew in her mind. "Oh, Hank," she whispered. "A dog?" With her chin propped on her fist, she pondered Hank's request. Santa would need to be extra careful with this one. Pam wrote Hank's name at the top of her list and circled it for special attention. *Maybe one of those robotic ones.*

Megan continued to read. "Andrew, age eight, Legos. Elizabeth, age five..." She looked up at her mom. "A horsey."

Pam rubbed her face. *Another animal?* At least this wish was easier to work with than the dog. She'd seen some stuffed rocking horses earlier in the month. Complete with bridle and galloping sounds when you rocked. *Too cute!*

Pam reached for the final angel. She smiled.

Twins. Shelly and Kelly, age four, tricycles. "We have a baker's dozen."

"A what?" Jeremy asked

"Thirteen instead of twelve. A little extra blessing for all." Pam scribbled a note to give Callie a call. This list would require a pickup, and Benton would get a kick out of playing Santa along with Harrison.

She looked at her list and did some mental math. A winter coat for all thirteen, stocking caps and gloves for all, along with a toy, requested or not. Thirteen stockings stuffed with candy and fruit. At roughly one hundred dollars per child, thirteen hundred dollars would stretch The Christmas Angel budget pretty thin, but God had blessed their firm with a good year and Pam didn't mind spreading it around.

Chair legs screeched on the concrete floor. They had quite a list. Better get busy.

## 2

How did you lose a four-foot reptile? Pam shook her head as she restacked the Christmas gifts under the tree. "Jeremy, he's not hiding under the tree."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll keep looking."

"Yeah, do that." Goosebumps marched across the bare flesh of Pam's arms. There was a slithering creature loose in her house. She shuddered. It could be worse, they could have agreed to Jeremy's plea for a snake. Pam took a deep breath. OK, *not* a snake, thank God, an iguana. A cold, scaly, beady eyed, bad tempered snake with legs.

Her son reappeared, dropping small pieces of romaine lettuce on the carpet in a trail from the kitchen to the empty terrarium in the corner of the enclosed back porch. Lizard central due to the direct sunlight the room received. Jeremy looked up and intercepted his mother's frown. "Bait. Spot has to be hungry by now. Maybe I can lure him back to his cage."

"You think he's just going to climb back in?"

"He climbed out."

"I live in a zoo," she muttered. Two dogs in the back yard, a newly acquired cat, an FFA project in the form of a goat, and a lizard. The animals outnumbered the people, especially if you counted the dozen or so fish swimming in the aquarium. *Were fish animals?* How had this happened?

Pam faced her son with her sternest face. "I'm going to bed. You *will* find that creature before you

come upstairs. When Harrison gets home tomorrow night we'll discuss Spot's living arrangements."

Jeremy crossed his arms and jutted his chin. "Yes Ma'am."

She ran her fingers through her hair as she climbed the stairs. Pam knocked on Meagan's door before heading to her own room. "Megan?"

"Second."

Pam heard the sound of something heavy sliding on the carpet behind the door. Said door opened just an inch. "What?"

"You barricaded the door?"

"Yes. And stuffed towels under the crack in the door. After a careful and thorough search, I can report that Jeremy's missing beast is not in here, and I intend to keep it that way. Reddy and I want nothing to do with the slimy little nuisance."

"He's not slimy, just scaly." Pam corrected.

"Whatever."

"OK." Pam kissed her finger and touched it to her daughter's nose. "Sleep well." The door closed without further word and she laughed when she heard dragging noises again. "I really don't think he would have climbed the stairs."

She turned to her own room. The thought of spending another night alone made her shoulders slump, and it had nothing to do with the missing lizard. Harrison was hunting and Pam missed her husband. She changed into a sleep shirt, turned out the lights, and crossed the dark room. She pulled down the comforter and slid between the cool sheets. The nest of pillows at the top of the bed scattered as she tossed to make herself comfortable. Her out-flung arm came into contact with cold scales. "Jeremy!"

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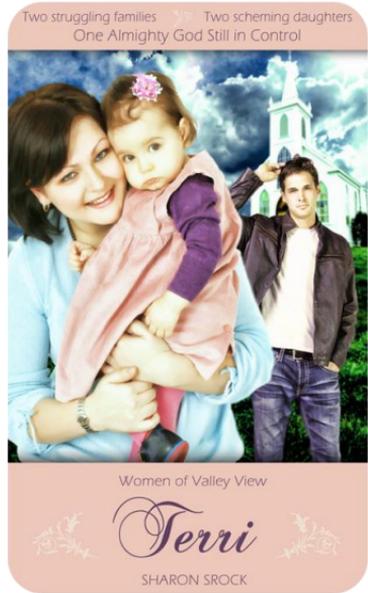
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