

Ponder This...



LINDA WIDRICK



*Whatever is
Just*

*To
Complicate
Matters*

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Linda Widrick

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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Publishing History
Prism Edition, 2020
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9878-3
Published in the United States of America

Titles in the Ponder This Series

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Charlotte's Dilemma by Susan Karsten

Buttonholed by Anita Klumpers

A Field of Forget-me-nots by Rachel A. James

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Dedication

With love, to my Angelica and to all the other
Angelicas out there. This one's for you!

1

Custard oozed down Angelica's shirt, bypassing her apron all together. She tried to rise up from the pool of the concoction where she had fallen but slid back down in a heap.

Angelica couldn't believe this was happening. Not here. Not now.

Not again.

"What do you think you're doing?" Brianna's words coursed through the air a decibel above the chaos of the breakfast crowd. A round of applause erupted as line cooks paused, flapjacks midair, in the bustling kitchen.

"What do you *think* I'm doing?" Angelica rolled her eyes in a desperate attempt to save-face. "I guarantee the world has never experienced the sight of anyone wearing custard cream like this before," she demonstrated with model-like fashion. "Besides, whoever thought to store this stuff in five-gallon tubs never tried to manhandle it from a kitchen shelf."

"Here, take my hand, dear-heart." Brie rushed toward her and tried to grip her arm, but the lack of skin to skin traction only made matters worse, and soon Angelica and her bestie were in a heap together.

The familiar click of a cellphone camera sounded

and the light flashed simultaneously as co-workers gathered around. "We're live now, as Westcoast View's guest baker shows us how she really gets into her work," Chicken Boy mimicked a broadcaster's announcement. "Our own Angelica Dunn is going nationwide on My Foodie International. Stay tuned as details become available."

"It's obvious you're jealous neither show chose *you* to grace their set," Angelica teased.

She still couldn't figure out how she acquired the role of spokesperson for the infamous restaurant, her place of employ, in the first place. Twice she interviewed on site in the thick of her work as she baked pies for the holidays, and twice she was invited to Westcoast View's studio to demonstrate various baking techniques and to promote the restaurant. It was rumored that an off-the-street taping was loosely slated for the next month or two, and she would likely be chosen for that segment. To top it off, a host and camera crew from My Foodie International followed her around for a good half a day last month. The series premier hadn't aired on national TV yet.

"Let me help you, feebles," a voice boomed from across the restaurant counter nearby.

"Who is *that*?" Angelica mouthed to Brie.

Before her friend responded, strong arms drew both ladies up and out of the mess covering the tile floor.

"Thanks, Thadd." Brie handed Angelica a couple of wet cloths. "And for the record, we are not feebles, bro. By the way, this is Angelica. She and I are rooming together. Angelica, this is my brother, who's visiting from DC, Thaddeus Wright."

"So nice to meet you, Angelica." Thaddeus smiled.

“And of course you’re not feebles—I’m only kidding. I think you’ll clean up all right, sis, but as for your friend here, I suspect we’re going to need larger rags.”

“Larger rags? Thanks a lot!” Angelica laughed sheepishly. “But it’s good to meet you too, and I appreciate the rescue.” Angelica was relieved that the creamy goodness concealed the heat of her face. She pushed the sides of her hands across her frame in an attempt to squeegee off the remains that clung to her, arms, legs, and everything in between.

When she glanced up, she caught Thadd watching her. If the darkness of his eyes was measured on a scale of milk chocolate to dark cocoa, his would definitely be in the ninety percent cocoa range.

With a touch of cayenne.

He reached toward her and pushed back the tousled hair poking from her required net cap, saturated as well.

“You’re a mess. Word’s out there’s a carwash next door.”

“You’re comparing me to a vehicle?” Angelica laughed.

“Well, not in so many words.”

“Did you hurt yourself?” The kitchen manager rushed over, flipped a sheet on her clipboard, and began the questioning phase Angelica was all too familiar with.

“I’m perfectly fine. Let me take a minute to clean myself up.”

“Why don’t you go home, shower, and come back tomorrow morning.”

“I would, but Brie dropped me off early today, and her shift isn’t over yet. My car is in the shop, so I’m stuck.”

"I'll be happy to take her home," Thaddeus offered to Angelica's boss, "as long as you can supply some garbage bags to cover my seats." He turned and winked at her.

Angelica was mortified. Brie mentioned her brother briefly, but she'd never seen a photo. He towered above her with dark, wavy hair and ruggedly handsome features and eyes that pierced right through her. The only thing she knew of him was that he traveled a lot and therefore was never in town for a long time. She had hoped to meet him one day, but certainly not like this.

Still, she forced a smile and brushed the angst aside. "Thank you. I'll grab my things."

"Great. I'll pay my bill and meet you outside. I'm in the black jag."

Of course he was.

Uneasiness crept up Angelica's spine.

"You can hang out at the house if you like, Thaddeus," Brie offered. "I'll be home sometime after two. Maybe we can finally go catch a movie."

"Sounds good, providing Angelica is not opposed to me hanging around."

"That's fine," Angelica replied. A man with his good looks and charm hanging out at the house for a couple of hours—where was the downside to that?

"Great. We'll catch up when you get home, Brie." Thaddeus turned to Angelica. "And I'll meet you outside."

Ang nodded and hurried to the locker lounge to gather her things.

"Sign here, please." The kitchen manager followed her.

Dutifully, Angelica complied.

“You understand this is your third incident in the month?”

“True, that. But are you also aware each incident could’ve been prevented if someone else did their job right in the first place?” Why must she always bear the brunt of all things happenstance?

A couple of weeks ago a co-worker tossed a sharp knife into a pool of suds in the bottom of the sink. Who did such a thing? A bottle of peroxide and two tourniquets later, she survived. Amazing how fast one could heal from knife wounds.

Last week, Salad Chick dropped a takeout container of their signature dressing on the floor, seconds prior to Angelica transporting two banana cream pies to the pickup window. That didn’t end up well either.

“Until tomorrow, Angelica,” her manager called to her as she walked out the door toward the waiting car.

“You all set, Slick?”

Angelica did a double take at the familiarity with which her ride spoke.

“Slick?”

“Well, yes. You were a little difficult to latch onto.” Thaddeus secured a second trash bag to his seat and extended his arm to help her to climb in.

“I’ll take that as a compliment, one of my better traits actually.”

“Touché.”

Despite the overpowering Crème de la Crème clinging to her, she caught a whiff of him as she held her chin confidently and moved around him to slide into the front seat. If she thought she could escape the distinctive blend of woods and spice within the confines of his car, she was mistaken.

He dropped down into the seat beside her.

"Tell me where I'm going?"

"Oh, I thought you knew. Forty-eight South Phillipi Street. Right before Colossal Boulevard."

Thaddeus pulled out into traffic. "Great. I think I can find it. My intention has been to come over and visit Brie while I'm here, but there hasn't been time yet."

"I'm sure you're busy getting situated. Brie tells me you bought a house here."

"Yes, I did. I still live in DC. Not sure what my future plans are, but I wanted a place to invest in here. Besides, maybe I'll sell one day when prices skyrocket again. But for now, I want to keep it in my back pocket. I mean, what's not to like about Florida's west coast?"

"What do you do for a living?"

"I'm in technology."

"Going for the job security, are we? Technology will be around forever."

"Agreed."

Angelica was glad they were nearing her street. The abrupt silence seemed unsettling, and for whatever reason, it didn't appear he wanted to talk about his work.

She could relate.

Once she punched out from the pie room, she didn't want to talk about pie.

Didn't even want to see a pie unless it was one of her own concoctions that she hoped would provide her with the recognition she needed to gain respect in the industry.

"We're here." Angelica broke the silence, and Thaddeus pulled into the driveway.

"Perfect." He turned off the engine and stepped

from the car.

She opened up her door, surprised when he came around to help her out.

“Chivalry is—”

“Not dead?”

She laughed. “You’re a sentence finisher.”

“I can be. When the ending is clear to me. And you’re right; chivalry is not dead. I also wanted to pick up the trash bags before the whole car smells like a cream torte.” He reached for them.

“Of course.” Angelica swallowed her pride and took the soiled bags from him. She dropped them into the garbage can at the side of the garage and pulled out her keys as they walked up the path to the front door.

“You do smell lovely, though.”

She turned toward him. “It’s cream. I smell like cream.”

He laughed.

She unlocked the door and turned off the alarm. “Come on in and make yourself at home.”

As for her, she best get into the shower, before she said anything more that would humiliate her entirely.

2

Thaddeus peered out into the backyard as he waited in the living room. All month long while in Florida, Brie nudged him to come by and check out her new place. Up until now, there wasn't a minute to spare. When he finished setting up his latest project at his house, a sense of relief washed over him. Nothing more was pressing until his trip back later in the week.

His sister said she needed help with a few things around here. Didn't she say she tacked a list to the refrigerator door?

He sauntered into the kitchen when he heard the sound of the water turn off from what he assumed to be the master side of the house.

All evidence of the sweet-smelling deliciousness, likely now a thing of the past.

The list.

He focused back to his hunt amidst a conglomerate of notes on the refrigerator door.

Call Kason... It was signed Brie.

Who was Kason?

He found the list and read through the tasks.

Fix smoke detector. Repair the screen on the gazebo. Install the propane tank on the grill. Bathroom sink has a leak. Garage door won't open.

From all appearances, Brie saved stuff for him to do to keep him here.

His eyes fell to a photo of Brie and a friend, arms encircled, faces beaming. Her friend looked familiar, yet he couldn't pinpoint why.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Angelica called out.

Thaddeus turned his head, and his breath caught in his throat. "Who are you, and what have you done with Slick?"

He couldn't help but be drawn to her laugh. Nor to the dimple on her cheek that starred center stage.

"You look...different."

She laughed out loud. "Different good or different bad? Please tell me, because if shampoo is slathered all over my head or something, I'm going to pack up and start over in another state somewhere."

Thaddeus forced himself to move. "Different good. You're all good."

She appeared comfy in her grey sweats, and her white t-shirt was as casual as t-shirts came.

But the length of caramel, sun-kissed locks that shimmered around her shoulders and down her back captured his breath.

He'd no idea the length of splendor that had been wrapped up in the institutional hair cap she was forced to wear at work. Why did an employer delegate such harsh regulations, masking one's true identity?

On the other hand, perhaps it kept other eligible men from noticing her.

Angelica slipped past him and reached into the cabinet to retrieve a couple of glasses. "So, you didn't answer me. Would you like something to drink?"

"Um...yes. Whatever you're having."

"Then ginger ale and orange juice is what's in store for you." She pulled the bottles from the refrigerator and poured the concoction. She handed him the glass. "Anything to eat?"

"No, thanks. My breakfast filled me enough."

"Oh yeah, right. Well, I'm famished, so if you don't mind, I'll make something for myself."

"Please go right ahead," Thaddeus answered as Angelica moved into action and reached for a pan from an overhead rack. Next, she untwisted the tie on a loaf of bread, and placed a couple of slices on a clean paper towel.

"Mind handing me a utility knife?" she asked as she moved toward the refrigerator.

"Of course not." Thaddeus scanned the counter he leaned against. A knife block was within reach.

He perused the wooden block and glanced back at her. Her back was turned to him as she rummaged around in a drawer of the refrigerator.

"Which one would you like?" he asked.

"There should only be one utility knife there."

Four black handles rested securely atop the block, and there were three empty slots as well. With zero experience in culinary knives, he picked one.

"Sure you don't want anything? I can make two as easy as one." She piled a few ingredients in a mound on the counter.

Sharing a meal with her might provide him with a bit more insight about her. He could call it a date in her home, without going anywhere. Who said the prerogative of changing one's mind belonged only to women?

"Maybe I will take you up on your offer."

"You got it." Angelica lined up the ingredients on

the counter and reached for two more slices of bread. She opened a package of cheddar cheese and reached for the knife he handed her. "Ah, you've no idea what a utility knife is, do you?"

Thaddeus didn't budge as she reached around him.

He took in her scent as she pulled a medium knife from the block and presented it with a wave of her hand, feigning demonstration. "This, my friend, is a utility knife."

She could reach around him all day, and he'd not grow weary of her.

"The blade is typically six-to-eight-inches long. You will note the weight compared to a paring knife, which I suspect doesn't fit in your vocabulary either. "

"Cutting Edge 101."

She seemed oblivious to him while she peeled the outer layers of an onion, washed it, and positioned it on a thin cutting board. He couldn't help but notice how fast her hands moved as she chopped the chunks into perfect, tiny squares, then tossed the symmetrical heap into a frying pan. A tantalizing aroma enveloped the kitchen.

"You're not measuring anything."

"No need to. I toss in a little of this and a little of that until it seems right."

He took in her every movement as she sliced the cheddar and plunked a dollop of raspberry jam on the inside of the bread. Within minutes, two very interesting looking sandwiches were assembled—stuffed with cheese, onions, and coarsely chopped walnuts—and situated atop sizzling butter in a pan to fry.

"What in the world is this called?"

“Fancy Pants Grilled Cheese. At least that’s what I call it. Sandwich plates are in the cabinet above your head. Mind getting two down?”

It was his pleasure entirely.

He laughed at her ease and handed them to her. She used a flipper to drop the lightly browned creation atop the plates.

In swift motion, she spooned a few teaspoons of raspberry jam into a couple of bowls. “Here you are.” She handed a plate to him. Thadd followed her into the living room where she plopped down on the sofa.

She bowed her head and whispered a quick prayer. He followed suit.

Suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to curl up next to her and never leave her side again.

He could only imagine how glamorous she would be, dressed up and accompanying him to the quarterly gala in DC in a few days.

Where was his head?

He was in Florida, not DC.

“Bon appétit!”

He pushed aside his thoughts of this weekend’s dreaded schmooze-fest and took a bite.

The perfect marriage of cheddar, onions, nuts and the hint of jam wouldn’t have crossed his mind in a hundred years. His taste buds experienced a new level of awareness.

Perhaps symbolic?

She a pie-baker. He a—

“So?” she interrupted his thoughts. “How do you like it?”

“Truly amazing.”

Angelica smiled. “Good. I’m glad it meets your approval.”

His eyes caught a most unique doodling at the edge of a sketchpad atop the coffee table. It appeared to be a ladybug design scrolled around the insect, although not complete, and the beginning stages of the letter "A" were visible.

"You're a doodler?" he asked in between bites.

"What do you mean?"

"Your swirley-gig looks like a calligraphied ladybug."

She laughed. "I doodle in my spare time."

"You're quite talented. Brie told me you two have worked together for a while now. Did you meet at work?"

"In a weird sort of way, yes." Angelica brushed a napkin over her mouth. "We were both interviewing as set designers for a local TV station last fall. We met in the waiting area and connected right off. Neither of us got the job, but we're both OK with it. We became friends. A couple of openings came up at Yodeler's, so we opted to jump on it while we wait for our dream jobs. It's a great opportunity for both of us."

"What's your dream job?"

She thought for a minute as she finished a bite.

"I'd probably create a set design for a new cooking show that I will produce, which, incidentally, I will also star in. The urban, upbeat twist will generate a following second to none." Her catchy laugh escaped her lips, her dimples starring center stage.

"A little competition for those food network divas, huh? Think you'll ever achieve this dream?"

"One can only hope. For now, I'm staying content, and enjoying my current role."

"Whatsoever state you're in?" he asked.

Recognition appeared in her eyes at the familiar

verse, and she nodded. “Therewith to be content. I presume you’re a Christian.”

“I am. And you, too?” Thadd remembered Brie telling him that her roommate shared their faith, yet he wanted to know for himself.

“I sure am. That’s one thing I find so strange. In today’s day and age, people think of that as a weakness—in particular the millennials, which I am, so not to be judgmental. Even if they go to church, the shallowness seems so evident. Nothing is new under the sun, but I’m more aware now than ever before that people, both young and old, appear to be more interested in social clubs than in the condition of their heart. I’m blessed to be a part of a solid church with a good, core group of friends who don’t take their spiritual walks lightly.”

He furrowed his brow at her explanation, and something resonated with him. Is this the piece of life he was missing? For a long time he sensed change was coming. In his mind’s eye, he could see it around the bend. But even more so, he hadn’t been able to articulate the convictions that tugged at his heart for the last several months.

“I do believe you’ve perfectly summed up my thoughts. The complacency is troublesome to me too. I couldn’t pinpoint it until now.”

“I’m glad that helped.” Angelica laughed.

When he first started attending church in his neighboring town, he loved it. It seemed he fit right in, even amidst the nearly thousand members. There was something for everybody to plug into. Yet he felt distant, even stagnant, these days. The groups he was in were much more interested in sports and politics than in the condition of their spiritual journeys. Most

often, he felt like an outcast.

“Brie tells me you lead worship at your church.”

“I do,” Ang answered.

“Maybe I’ll try to get to one of the services while I’m here.”

“That’d be super cool. Tell me about your dream job. Do you like what you’re doing?”

Thaddeus took a swallow of the ale-juice concoction. “I like what I do. I help people, and that’s rewarding to me.”

“I didn’t realize technology lent itself to anything quite so dramatic.”

Thaddeus’s eyebrows lifted.

“I’m sorry—was that my outside voice?”

“Affirmative.” He laughed.

“I meant; it sounds like you like to help people. Save the world, you know. Fiddling with a couple of USB ports and fixing people’s computers doesn’t paint a picture of humanitarian aid. Unless I’m missing something.”

He never said he fixed computers.

Better he didn’t correct her.

“Do you always say what you think? I mean, I might not be drilling wells to provide clean water to the impoverished, but I’d like to think that what I do for a living matters.”

“Oh goodness, yes, of course! One thing you’ll learn about me if you’re here any length of time is that if my mouth isn’t closed, two feet typically fit in quite easily at the same time.”

“Thanks for the warning. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Angelica produced her open palm to high-five him. “Pact?”

She was adorable.

He lifted a hand to high-five her but caught her hand in his and brought it to his chest instead, just as he heard the sound of keys rustling at the front door.

Brie's voice sounded as she walked inside.

"Pact." He released Angelica's hand as if nothing happened.

But in his heart, he was certain Slick had found a way inside.